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# **"PERILOUS MOVEMENT":**

# **DECONSTRUCTION AND THE DISCOURSE OF CONFLICT**

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# THIS THESIS IS SUBMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY OF DUBLIN, TRINITY COLLEGE, IN FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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#### SUMMARY

This thesis examines the relationship between the discourses of the university and the public press through an analysis of the work and career of Jacques Derrida. The conflictual nature of the reception of deconstruction, both in the public press and in the academy, has had an acute effect on Derrida to the extent that much of his work is by way of response to what he sees as misreadings of his thought. Where it deals with Derrida's work, therefore, the thesis is concerned with his reaction to those he believes to be bad readers.

I explore the history of the concept of academic freedom by analysing the documents which established it as a central tenet of the twentieth century North American university. This analysis demonstrates that such declarations of independence both rely on and rebuff elements such as the 'public' or the 'public press' which are thus externalised. To the extent that Derrida works 'within' the university, his work too exhibits elements which contribute to the expropriation, not of the public press as such, but of the kind of discourse associated with the public press.

Positive and negative reactions to deconstruction were sufficiently vehement for it to become a scapegoat in the 'culture wars' of the American academy in the 1980s, when changes within the university became a subject of interest to the public press. An examination of the active and passive role of deconstruction during that time reinforces the difficulties experienced when misinterpretation becomes the accepted interpretation.

The interview, a form of publication usually associated with the public press, has long been a mark of the standing of an intellectual. Derrida's interviews in academic and nonacademic publications are an important element in relaying his reaction to criticism of deconstruction and give him the opportunity to draw attention to the effect the medium has on any discourse. They appear to have the potential to act as common ground between academic discourse and that of the public press. My chapter on Derrida's interviews demonstrates that this is not necessarily the case.

The discovery of Paul de Man's anti-Semitic wartime journalism in 1987 gave the impetus to critics of deconstruction to renew their challenges to Derrida's work, especially the texts in which he addresses what was for him a personal and intellectual crisis. The extrapolation of de Man's early writings to deconstruction and thus to Derrida by critics, galvanised Derrida into defending deconstruction, the word to which and for which he is responsible. In the example of the de Man controversy, the difficulties between the university and the public press and between deconstruction and its critics become crystallised. Derrida's response is a measure of the cognisance he takes of the public press as a medium which conveys perceptions of his work. He defends his own interpretation of de Man's actions and attacks those who, in his eyes, use the 'affair' to settle old scores. Moreover, in the wake of these events he has turned his attention to more explicitly political and ethical issues.

The thesis analyses a specific set of events: the 'culture wars,' the Paul de Man 'affair,' the role of the word 'deconstruction' in them and Derrida's response to them. The part played by Derrida's critics and the medium in which their criticism is published have influenced and effected his work to an extent not sufficiently acknowledged to date.

# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I wish to thank my supervisor, Dr. John Nash, for his thorough reading and constructive comments. Thanks also to my husband, Michael Ward, for supportive texts. This thesis is dedicated to my father, *in memoriam*, and to my mother.

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### INTRODUCTION

What happened to deconstruction? What happens when a word is both amplified and simplified to such an extent that it becomes a watchword for controversy in the pages of academic journals and the public press? How do the diverse meanings which attach themselves to that word impinge on the work of its 'author,' Jacques Derrida? This thesis charts the 'movement' of deconstruction in the context of the controversies in which it had both an active and a passive rôle. The focus is on the impasse encountered between the discourse of the academy and that of the public press when the subject in question is deconstruction.

Deconstruction can be described as a perilous movement in that it disrupts the status quo, running the dual risk of expulsion from, and absorption into, the academy. However, calling deconstruction a movement is in itself a perilous move because Derrida has said on numerous occasions that it should not be described in such terms. That he has had to say this so often, however, is an indication both of the norms of reception and the difficulty in articulating that reception without using the terms he rejects such as 'school' or 'movement.' Deconstruction has long been portrayed as a movement, a dangerous one at that, which has set about destroying notions such as 'truth' and 'reason.'

Meanwhile, in Derrida's work, the peril takes the form of a constant, and counterintuitive, dislocation. Conscious of the risks involved in what he does, Derrida has referred to himself as a "trapeze artist" but, although this admits the notion of peril, it is not sufficient because it also allows for the possibility of a programmable rhythm which can be practised and perfected.<sup>1</sup> This self-characterisation does, however, succeed in describing the quality of suspense which is a core aspect of Derrida's work, and is something I will return to in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Telepathy' Oxford Literary Review 10 (1988): 7.

conclusion when considering his appeal for the temporary suspension of axioms, to allow the work of deconstruction to take place.

Can what Derrida does be characterised as dangerous? If so, at whom or what is the threat directed? While some commentators would not accord it the gravity which goes with danger. deconstruction has been characterised as being 'difficult.' (This, as we will see, is something Derrida has difficulty with.) Dangerous and difficult are two terms which are often coupled, and certain critics (usually in the course of explaining how 'difficult' deconstruction is to understand) have found it necessary to warn readers about the threat it poses to the literary canon, or to the correspondence of truth to reality, or the possibility of pinning down meaning. Such representations of deconstruction have also proved dangerous for Derrida himself as they effectively reduce his work to a pre-digested form. There is a risk involved whether one is exploring 'intuitive' concepts such as the priority granted to speech over writing or presence over absence, or producing 'unreadable' books such as Glas.<sup>2</sup> Derrida's own perilous movement is more appropriately likened to a tightrope walker than a trapeze artist as he teeters between the poles of literature and philosophy, the academy and its outside, France and the United States, all markers which define his career, a career spent in causing such supports to be displaced. Above all, it is *necessary* that Derrida teeter; as the best tightrope walkers are those who wobble in slow motion but do not fall, the quality of Derrida's work could be measured by the pace he sets himself and the manner in which he comes so close to the tradition he wishes to transform.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986; First pubd. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1974). Richard Rorty distinguishes 'Envois,' the first part of *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987), from *Glas* by virtue of its being "readable" ('From ironist theory to private allusions: Derrida,' *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 126.

Derrida issued his own warnings about his work early in his career. In the opening pages of *Of Grammatology*, he describes the scope of his project and acknowledges the necessity for traditional critical concepts.

Since these concepts are indispensable for unsettling the heritage to which they belong, we should be even less prone to renounce them. Within the closure, by an oblique and always *perilous movement*, constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed, it is necessary to surround the critical concepts with a careful and thorough discourse... and, in the same process designate the crevice through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed.<sup>3</sup>

The notions of risk, care and thoroughness are perennial in Derrida's work as is the 'glimpse' of what is made possible by it, not as a result of the rejection of existing concepts but as a result of working through and beyond them. 'Beyond' (rather than 'after,' 'before,' 'with' or 'against') is the preposition which orients Derrida's work. It indicates his 'position' with regard to what comes before him in an idiomatic relationship which is neither fully concurrent nor fully oppositional. 'Beyond' also carries the possibility of an 'ideal' deconstruction at its peril. This early warning, in *Of Grammatology*, that his is not a project of renunciation, is one he has had to repeat ever since; the regularity of these reminders is a measure of both the success and failure of deconstruction.

This success and failure is traced by following deconstruction through the conflicts in which it was named in the United States during the 1980s and into the 1990s. The scale is such that only certain aspects of the story can be considered. Those under scrutiny are the representations of deconstruction in the public press during two periods of conflict: the 'cultural wars' and the Paul de Man 'affair' of the 1980s. It could be argued that in neither case was there justification for the inclusion of deconstruction, yet in both instances it was drafted in and became the focus of attack. That, as we will see, may even have been the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 14; emphasis added.

purpose of calling it up in the first place. Derrida's work is invoked here in both instances but it is clear that he became more directly involved in the so-called Paul de Man 'affair' than in the earlier 'cultural wars.' It was in the course of the 'cultural wars' (which must play a major rôle in any account of the American university of the 1980s) that deconstruction became widely known as a form of 'critical theory.' This had implications in the later controversy surrounding Paul de Man's wartime writings as the groundwork for misreading had already been carried out during the earlier debates. This leads to an exploration of Derrida's relationship with the word which has been instrumental in shaping his career to the point where he is called "the world's most famous philosopher" in *The New York Times*.<sup>4</sup> Deconstruction has been found in the most unlikely places and the effect of this displacement on Derrida's work should not be underestimated.

The terms 'academic' and 'public' require clarification from the outset. Normally employed as a distinction between institutions, in this context of conflict a discursive rather than an institutional approach to defining them is more appropriate. Some of the material cited is drawn from sources which are broadly referred to as 'the public press.' This includes publications such as the *New York Times, Newsweek*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Also included in the public domain are journals which have a more specifically literary remit such as the *New York Review of Books (NYRB)*, the pages of which have featured debates over Derrida's work and to which he has had occasion to write. A third form of non-academic publication are books aimed at a wider audience than that of the academy. These books – such as Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* – are published by non-academic presses and although they may be written by academics, the tone,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Dinitia Smith, 'Philosopher Gamely in Defense of His Ideas,' *New York Times* 30 May 1998: B. 7. Mitchell Stephens, opens an earlier profile in the *Los Angeles Times* by referring to Derrida as "[t]he world's most controversial living philosopher." 'Deconstructing Jacques Derrida,' *Los Angeles Times Magazine* 21 July 1991:12.

content, title and design indicate that their target market is the non-specialist reader.<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that the specialist reader will not make up a substantial portion of the market for such a book. In fact, it is part of the argument of this thesis that many of the misunderstandings which surround deconstruction in the academy can be traced back to its treatment in these books and accounts in newspapers and journals which unquestioningly pass on the myths which surround it. Allan Bloom characterises deconstruction as a "fad," "the last, predictable, stage in the suppression of reason and the denial of the possibility of truth in the name of philosophy," and its interpreters as saying "that there is both no text and no reality to which the texts refer" (*The Closing of the American Mind* 379). The pernicious character of 'misreadings' such as this (because a *lack* of reading can constitute a *mis*reading) will be considered in chapters two and four.

The content of non-academic journals and books reflects the *possibility* that they may be read by non-specialist readers who might lack background knowledge which academic writers and readers take for granted. While this is no doubt the case, the extent and the effect of this reading is difficult to measure. One of the characteristics of the 'public' is that it is, by and large, a silent consumer. Jürgen Habermas believes that the public sphere has been emptied of its original function as "a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion."<sup>6</sup> Such public opinion, ideally, would form itself around rational and informed discourse. However, this ideal public has become a mass which receives rather than expresses opinion

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987). Referred to as *The Closing of the American Mind*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992; Original German, 1962) 25. Referred to as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

and has no forum where such expression could take place independently of institutions such as the public press.

In the academic controversies under consideration, it is evident that the participants address themselves to their opponents and colleagues via the detour of the public. Conducting disputes in 'public' is an effect of both the imperative entailed in the social contract between the university and its outside, and the impulse of conviction which impels protagonists to publish their views to a wider audience. The necessity to explain a specific event in the university (such as the effect on it of a mode of thought called deconstruction) acts as an alibi to conduct an academic controversy 'out' in public, that is, on the pages of the journals and in books such as Allan Bloom's. This, as Derrida has frequently pointed out, gives professorjournalists an opportunity to make unsupported and unreasoned statements. Although the medium in which much of the conflict over deconstruction was played out was 'public' in the sense of being published in the 'public press,' the public as readers, addressees or contributors drop out of the equation. In this sense, the relevance of the 'public' or even 'public opinion' to these conflicts is diminished. However, it cannot be entirely discounted and the effect of 'bad press' cannot be ignored. It brings to the fore a desire to be heard and vindicated. Being a victim of bad press has prompted Derrida's interest in the discourse of the press. In light of his experiences the opinion he has formed is unfavourable. However, his criticism is confined to individual instances and publications rather than to the press in general which he maintains is a vital, possibly the most vital, element in a democracy.

The pages of the 'public press' are not open to a limitless mass called the 'public' but are filled by professional journalists, experts, a coterie of letter-writers and professor-journalists. These make up a "literary" public sphere which Habermas describes as being constituted "by private people putting reason to use" (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* xviii). Habermas is referring to Kant's public\private distinction which the latter employs to categorise what gets said in the public sphere and the constraints or freedoms applicable to

such discourse. In Kant's terminology, private discourse is constrained by external authorities such as the church or the monarch whereas public discourse is, paradoxically, the unrestrained, yet reasoned, 'private' or personal opinion of the public servant. The academic press with its home in the academy, itself populated by 'the public,' would seem to be sheltered from the commercial public sphere yet it is not private as such. Academic publications therefore appear to be, perversely, more 'public' than the public press if one takes this definition into account, because here there is at least the potential for the "full" use of reason whereas the public press is more constrained by commercial, material, and discursive considerations and is therefore more 'private' in this sense. However, Habermas reminds his readers that "'Private' designate[s] the exclusion from the sphere of the state apparatus" (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* 11), yet the university, as we will see in chapter one, *has* a necessary, albeit complex, relationship with the state apparatus.

There is a slippage emerging here between private, academic and public which may be further elucidated if not completely resolved by turning to Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties* and Derrida's reading of it in 'Mochlos.'<sup>7</sup> This reading allows us to rethink the distinction between academic and public discourse along the lines of legal and illegal conflict rather than according to the more traditional institutional definitions. Once this is taken into account 'public' and 'academic' discourses are no longer a function of their situation within a specific institution but are identified according to their contribution to, and participation in, legal or illegal conflict.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Mochlos; or The Conflict of the Faculties,' trans. Richard Rand and Amy Wygant, *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). Referred to as 'Mochlos.' Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992; First pubd. 1798). Referred to as *Conflict of the Faculties*.

Derrida's reading of Kant demonstrates that the distinction between the public press and the academic press is less to do with who is authorised to write in them, than with the kind of writing and standard of debate that is characteristic of each. Derrida associates 'academic' writing (which not all academics practice) with the properties of care, rigor, reflection and complexity, and 'journalistic' writing (which is not necessarily confined to journalists nor do all journalists write in this way) with disingenuous clarity, negligence, immediacy and, especially, haste. The borders between the public press and the academy become deconstructed in the course of Derrida's ongoing critique of this discourse which, he has repeatedly asserted, can be produced as easily in the academy as in the public press. It should be noted, however, that the retention of terms such as 'academic' and 'journalistic' inevitably evokes a remainder or reserve of institutional borders which cannot be effaced, and contributes to the discursive impasse between them.

According to Derrida, then, criticism of deconstruction is less a function of the medium – although it can be that – than of the motivation of the writer, the institutional stakes involved and pre-interpretation. The authority bestowed on the writer who is a member of the institution authorised to seek and produce knowledge brings about a situation whereby an opinion may be read as fact. Derrida believes that there is little opportunity (and, in certain instances, little inclination) in the public press for nuanced or careful work – his statements to this effect are examined in chapter three. His practice is to refer to the context from which he is addressing his readers, alerting them to the mediated transference of the media and reminding them of their own expectations when they engage with a specific genre. What Derrida is doing is asking if our varying expectations with regard to different forms of publication such as articles in newspapers, interviews in magazines or papers delivered at colloquia, lead us to accept not only differences in form, tone or subject matter but differences in the level of seriousness with which both writers and readers approach the text. The extent of generic expectations is such that Derrida insists on drawing his readers' attention to their

assumptions by explicitly referring to the form of publication in which his texts will initially appear.

The use of constative statements in reportage has the effect of making the medium appear neutral – not politically neutral, in the sense of recognising whether a newspaper is liberal or conservative, but discursively neutral. Derrida reminds readers that they are not passive consumers when they read; they are engaged in an activity where the capacity for critique has either not been realised or has been reduced through habit. Alerting his readers to the fact that what they are reading is mediated is Derrida's effort of resistance against the portrayal of the 'public' as passive consumers of the products of the public press.

In 'Mochlos,' Derrida reads Kant's 1798 piece, *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Kant first divides the university from its outside by deciding what is proper to it, and, as Derrida says, "wants the power to exclude [any possible parasites] – legitimately, legally" ('Mochlos' 15). This is not feasible, according to Derrida because the "force of parasiting inhabits natural language beforehand, and is common to both the university and its outside" ('Mochlos' 19). Not only that, but the "pure concept of the university is constructed by Kant on the possibility and necessity of a language purely theoretical, inspired solely by an interest in truth, with a structure that one today would call purely constative" ('Mochlos' 9-20). In other words, Kant tries to exclude performativity from the discourse of the university in the course of an essay that is itself performative.

According to Kant, the essence of the university is to be found in the faculty of philosophy. As one cannot assume that the government will always act from a consideration for reason and truth, there arise inevitable conflicts between the university and its outside and, within the university, between the faculties (of medicine, law and theology) which are closer to the government, and the faculty of philosophy which is at some remove from it. A conflict is "illegal... if one of the parties relied, not on objective grounds directed to his adversary's reason, but on subjective grounds, trying to determine his judgement through his inclinations and so to gain his assent by fraud (including bribery) or force (threats)" (Conflict of the Faculties 47). In other words, Kant is saying that what makes a scholarly argument illegal is the mutation of the scholar into an unenlightened member of the public. A scholar in an illegal dispute will be convinced, not by reasoned argument, but by his natural inclinations. "The people," according to Kant, "naturally adhere most to doctrines which demand the least self-exertion and the least use of their own reason, and which can best accommodate their duties to their inclinations" (Conflict of the Faculties 51). Derrida paraphrases this description in 'Mochlos' echoing as it does his ongoing criticism of those who "adhere most to doctrines which demand the least self-exertion" such as the doctrine which allows one to state that it follows from deconstruction "that there is both no text and no reality to which the texts refer" (The Closing of the American Mind 379). According to Derrida's reading of Kant, the illegal conflict puts "individual inclination and particular interests into play, it is pre-rational, quasinatural, and extra-institutional. It is not properly a university conflict, whatever its gravity may be" ('Mochlos' 27). Derrida reserves his own severity for what he calls 'professorjournalists' who exhibit similar characteristics to those who partake in illegal conflicts.

Unlike Kant who envisages a 'lower' faculty of philosophy segregated from outside influences and in which legal conflict can take place, Derrida draws attention to the difficulties accompanying such strict demarcations and how they might be enforced (for instance, by excluding performative language or the 'category' of literature). It is his concern for the efficacy of delimitations such as these that place Derrida further out on the 'edge' of the institution than those who believe they know what can be called truly philosophical. This means that he cannot fully accept Kant's distinction between legal and illegal conflict. In the context of the conflicts which surround deconstruction and in which it, in the form of Derrida's work, takes part, the categories to which the terms 'legal' and 'illegal' are applied consequently become modified. reason, but on subjective grounds, trying to determine his judgement through his inclinations and so to gain his assent by fraud (including bribery) or force (threats)" (Conflict of the Faculties 47). In other words, Kant is saying that what makes a scholarly argument illegal is the mutation of the scholar into an unenlightened member of the public. A scholar in an illegal dispute will be convinced, not by reasoned argument, but by his natural inclinations. "The people," according to Kant, "naturally adhere most to doctrines which demand the least self-exertion and the least use of their own reason, and which can best accommodate their duties to their inclinations" (Conflict of the Faculties 51). Derrida paraphrases this description in 'Mochlos' echoing as it does his ongoing criticism of those who "adhere most to doctrines which demand the least self-exertion" such as the doctrine which allows one to state that it follows from deconstruction "that there is both no text and no reality to which the texts refer" (The Closing of the American Mind 379). According to Derrida's reading of Kant, the illegal conflict puts "individual inclination and particular interests into play, it is pre-rational, quasinatural, and extra-institutional. It is not properly a university conflict, whatever its gravity may be" ('Mochlos' 27). Derrida reserves his own severity for what he calls 'professorjournalists' who exhibit similar characteristics to those who partake in illegal conflicts.

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The conflicts under consideration include the 'cultural wars' and the Paul de Man controversy, examined in chapters two and four respectively. These conflicts display all the characteristics attributed to an illegal conflict which "merely sets into opposition, and in public, various opinions, feelings, and particular inclinations" ('Mochlos' 27). The so-called 'Cambridge affair,' which is included in chapter three, is an example of a controversy which, in Kant's schema, should have been a 'legal' one as it was concerned with intra-academic affairs between philosophers. Derrida's view of its 'illegality' is based not only on the arena in which it was played out – the public press – but on the lack of scholarly standards displayed by the philosophers who objected to him and his work. He has long believed that those who criticise deconstruction do not have a sustainable argument because they react with

an illegitimate misunderstanding and distaste. Such critics do not read but respond according to their inclinations.

Deconstruction is divided from the outset between the "almost empty motif" which Derrida wants to maintain and all that grows up around it (method, school, movement, theory).<sup>8</sup> Alluding to Richard Rorty's definition of deconstruction, Derrida has said, "if you want to 'do deconstruction' – 'you know, the kind of thing Derrida does' – then you have to perform something new."<sup>9</sup> Although Derrida suggests that it is possible for others to "do" deconstruction, the resulting discourse must go by a different name. One should "perform something new," that is, one should not do deconstruction. *He*, however, cannot "do something new" if the kind of thing he does is always deconstruction. As I will argue in the final chapter, Derrida cannot leave deconstruction which awakens ire and imitation, as it has with his almost idealised, "almost empty motif."

Derrida restricts his responses in disputes to attacks which focus on his writing and on something called 'deconstruction.' He does not answer for other authors, other proper names, but he does answer for deconstruction even when it is not what he recognises as deconstruction but is called that by his critics. This allows him to speak about more than one form of deconstruction while maintaining the singularity of his own writing. As he points out, there is no one deconstruction. In the course of its iteration, contextualisation, criticism or rejection, a word takes on diverse meanings and implications. He cannot speak on behalf of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism' in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism* (London: Routledge, 1996) 85.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, '*As if* I were Dead,' *Applying: To Derrida*, eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) 217-18. Derrida is referring here to Rorty's 'Derrida and the Philosophical Tradition,' *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 338.

*all* deconstructions but acknowledges that there is such a phenomenon. Therefore, it is not simply a question of substituting 'deconstructions' for deconstruction because each form of 'deconstruction' enacts its own movement with Derrida's work.<sup>10</sup> This goes as much for the 'deconstructionists' who interpret Derrida's work, as for those critics who attack deconstruction on foot of their own anxieties and deductions rather than as a result of any reading.

The 'field' is vast, populated by works of, and on, deconstruction to such an extent that it has long been out of the question to keep up with it all. The difficulty in calling it a 'field' and subsequently subdividing it into more manageable 'areas' called 'philosophical deconstruction,' 'literary deconstruction' or even 'deconstructive deconstruction' raises further issues, issues which Derrida and others have long foregrounded. In order to circumvent these entanglements, I focus on areas of Derrida's work as it pertains to the academic institution but also as it relates to the more extreme negative reactions to deconstruction and the conflicts that have ensued. This allows me to approach Derrida's work as a marker for what happened to deconstruction. One aspect of Derrida's texts which has been overshadowed is the trace they bear of the course of his career and the controversies which have surrounded it. While most writers on deconstruction or on Derrida's work have acknowledged its controversial status none have yet related this status to certain elements intrinsic to his work. For example, what does Derrida's portrayal in the *New York Times* say about the discursive differences between the 'academy' and the 'public'? How does it effect his 'standing' within the university? What effect does the fact that many of his articles are

<sup>10</sup> Simon Critchley, in a 1992 article, acknowledges a criticism of his use of the word 'deconstruction' "in the singular" in his book, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, saying, "On reflection, I too think it would be more appropriate to speak of 'deconstructions' in the plural" ('The Ethics of Deconstruction: An Attempt at Self-Criticism,' *Responsibilities of Deconstruction, PLI Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 6 (Summer 1997) 101). What Critchley does not acknowledge is that such a substitution would irrevocably change the argument of the book. It is not a question of replacing every 'deconstruction' with 'deconstructions' and continuing on as before. delivered orally have on those articles – beyond simply bearing the traces of their oral delivery which is what the obligatory footnote says? Why has that significant body of work, Derrida's interviews, been overlooked *qua* interviews? Looking at the phenomenon of deconstruction means looking at the more 'public' elements of Derrida's career and how that relates to more traditional demarcations between academic and 'public' discourse most notably in the arena of conflict.

Derrida has shown that representations of the movement of history and of philosophy are inherently and fundamentally compromised by an assumption of a trajectory from *arché* to *telos*. In this he indicates, and thus creates, the difference between the movement of what happens and what is happening. What happens are the events on which one can hang the history of a phenomenon, the chronology of a word such as deconstruction. Such a chronology would take as its starting point the year (1966), and the place (Baltimore), and work from there picking out various stop off points along the way.<sup>11</sup> Yet alongside or beneath

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' Writing and Difference trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). Many accounts of the rise of deconstruction and of Derrida take this essay and the conference at which it was delivered as the point of 'origin' for deconstruction. From Gayatri Spivak's wistful, "I missed the first flush of Deconstruction in America (1966)" ('At the Planchette of Deconstruction is\in America,' Deconstruction is\in America: A New Sense of the Political, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: New York University Press, 1995) 237), to Art Berman's description of Derrida as someone "whose celebrity grew rapidly following his appearance at the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference" (From the New Criticism to Deconstruction: The Reception of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988) 223), and Vincent Leitch's characterisation of the essay as a "notorious critique of structuralism in 1966" (Deconstructive Criticism: An Advanced Introduction (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983) 32), there is a general consensus that both paper and event are influential. The paper was quoted in early articles of Critical Inquiry and Jonathan Culler points out in Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida, ed. John Sturrock (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), that "[b]y the accidents of publication ['Structure, Sign, and Play'], written for a conference at The Johns Hopkins University in 1966 and translated into English for the proceedings of that conference, was for a time the work by which Derrida was principally known in the English-speaking world" (158).

those events is a movement which is manifested at a different rhythm which might not be recognisable as a rhythm at all. It is a movement which might not actually go anywhere and Derrida has spoken about his "feeling not just of continuity but of a sort of immobility, a movement *sur place*."<sup>12</sup> Things have happened to deconstruction and to Derrida which were absolutely and fundamentally unpredictable which is why in his brief but important reference to the 1966 Johns Hopkins conference he has this to say.

I don't know what happened there . . . What is certain is that if something happened there which would have the value of a theoretical event, or of an event within theory, or more likely the value of the advent of a new theoretico-institutional sense of "theory" – of what has been called "theory" in this country for more than twenty years – this something only came to light afterwards... nobody, either among the participants or close to them, had any thematic awareness of the event.<sup>13</sup>

More than twenty years and many honours and accolades later, Derrida looks back at his first conference in America (when, as Maria Ruegg reminds us, he was "relatively unknown"<sup>14</sup>) from his place at a colloquium entitled 'The States of "Theory" in the University of California on the occasion of the foundation of a Critical Theory Institute. If deconstruction "happens," as Derrida says, then it must in turn be radically open to what happens, or has

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) 46. Referred to as *Secret*.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Some Statements and Truisms About Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms,' trans. Anne Tomiche, *The States of "Theory": History, Art and Critical Discourse*, ed. David Carroll (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990) 80. Referred to as 'Truisms.'

<sup>14</sup> Maria Ruegg, 'The End(s) of French Style: Structuralism and Post-Structuralism in the American Context,' *Criticism* 31. 3 (Summer 1979): 193. Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich and Wallace Martin confirm this in their introduction to *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), as if it is has become necessary to remind their readers that there was a time when Derrida's name was 'unknown.' They describe Derrida and de Man as being "among the least-known participants" at the symposium (xix).

happened to it.<sup>15</sup> It is not an applied instrument which brings about an event. It too is worked upon. When we look at Derrida's career from the vantage point of knowing that something happened, which for convenience is traced back to 1966, it is necessary to keep in mind that it too has moved alongside deconstruction though not always parallel to it and not always to the same rhythm. Deconstruction might have happened to Derrida, events might have occurred, words written, translations made, invitations issued, but his responses – and he has consistently responded – have maintained their own activity even as they acknowledged the call of others.

He who responds positively to so many invitations cannot be held answerable for everything even if deconstruction (a word for which he still accepts a certain amount of responsibility) always begins as an answer and is, as Derrida said in an early interview, a vocation.

[D]econstruction is, in itself, a positive response to an alterity which necessarily calls, summons, or motivates it. Deconstruction is therefore vocation -a response to a call.<sup>16</sup>

The point, of course, is that alterity must always be there, it must remain. It is the catalyst for deconstruction. The remainder is what Derrida's work has always been about, the denial of adequation in one's response, the insistence that there must be difference for exchange to occur, and that therefore all communication, interpretation, translation and event must remain opened out. For there to be an exchange there must be a medium, a certain opacity which must be traversed and which can never be elided if communication is to be maintained.

[T]here is a certain 'I hope not everyone understands everything about this text,' because if such a transparency of intelligibility were ensured it would destroy the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> "Deconstruction happens (*ça arrive*) and it already happened in Plato's discourse in another form, with other words perhaps, but there was already an inadequation, a certain inability to close itself off, to form, to formalize itself which was of a deconstructive order." Jacques Derrida, 'Politics and 'Friendship: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,' *The Althusserian Legacy*, eds. E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1993) 226.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Interview in *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, ed. Richard Kearney (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 118.

text, it would show that the text has no future [*avenir*], that it does not overflow the present, that it is consumed immediately. Consequently a certain zone of disacquaintance, of not-understanding, is also a reserve and an excessive chance – a chance for excess to have a future, and consequently to engender new contexts. (*Secret* 30)

Those who invite Derrida to answer questions will be disappointed if they expect everything to be clarified in a burst of illumination which will absolve them from further work or reading. Although he responds, his practice is by way of detour rather than shortcut. His texts spend time with other texts but not for the purposes of clarifying and surpassing.

Derrida's career has flourished within an institution which, as chapter one explores, is founded on a particular type of freedom but this does not imply that he can say anything without an *a priori* inkling of how it might be received, in other words, without a sense of responsibility. As he has repeatedly shown in his responses and in his acceptance of responsibility, he may be surprised by the reception or misunderstanding of his work (although from certain quarters it might be predictable enough) but this does not imply that he would unsay it. If surprise at one's reception and an acknowledgement that one cannot be responsible for other people's reading is a sign of a certain irresponsibility, Derrida is willing to accept responsibility for that irresponsibility too. In other words, if his readers persist in misrepresenting his thought and he believes that he has been sufficiently responsive and consistent in dealing with such misreading, he reserves the right to continue to surprise them as much as their response surprises him. He thus reserves the right to a certain amount of irresponsibility. This has motivated him to answer questions, accept invitations, although never quite giving what is expected of him. Unsolicited invitations to Derrida to speak or to write prompt a response that can sometimes seem inadequate even in its abundance - nobody could ever accuse him of being sparing in his responses.

Derrida makes much of the unprogrammable incalculability of the 'to come' (*l'avenir*). What this amounts to is an irregular, unrecognisable movement, which cannot, however, do without

a chronological sequence acting as its handrail. "Deconstruction," says Derrida, "is what happens, what is happening today in what they call society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality, and so on and so forth" ('Truisms' 85). If one takes this idea of what deconstruction 'is' and runs it alongside the deconstruction to which certain things happened, one can begin to make out the place in which some more work on deconstruction is called for. Events happen to it, it endures chronologism which is an anachronism and placement which is a displacement. Those who attempt to insert deconstruction into a timeline and a curriculum both miss the point of it and ensure that the point gets made. It becomes both condensed and amplified as it undergoes and refuses canonisation.

Keeping the course of Derrida's career in mind, I examine, in chapter one, the American Association of University Professors' '1915 Declaration of Principles' which expressly mentioned how "sensational newspapers have quoted and garbled [classroom] remarks" as a contributory factor in its justification for making the university an "inviolable refuge" ('1915 Declaration' 171, 167). This is linked to the demand by deconstructive thought for the space and time created by academic freedom, where the opportunity is granted to question beliefs in the possibility of an inviolable refuge. The chapter explores the vital rôle played by the ideal of academic freedom in the development of the American university in such a way that a parallel impulse which drives academic freedom and deconstruction can be discerned. The standards of rigour, integrity and scholarship anchor academic freedom and legitimise the work conducted under its auspices. These are the values which Derrida has persistently invoked when speaking about his own work. At the same time, the privilege of academic freedom ensures that the work done in the university is at liberty to go where it will and Derrida has used this privilege to the hilt. He exploits his freedom to ask potentially disturbing and unwelcome questions about the academic institution, its borders and its future, and to warn against programmatic research that knows in advance where it is going thereby restricting the possibilities of that future. He has constantly couched deconstructive work in

terms of academic freedom, the foundations of which as we shall see are as frail and 'fictional' as those of deconstruction.

The second chapter examines how this presumed refuge was 'violated' in the course of the canonical wars of the 1980s by misrepresentations both in the press and in academic accounts, which for their own purposes, invoked and "garbled" much of what Derrida and others were writing. It looks at how deconstruction became a phenomenon included in the canon of objectionable developments within the academy as described in the public press. The word 'deconstruction' was taken and used in different contexts and with different motives. I examine how deconstruction was included in the 'culture' or 'PC' wars of the American academy alongside other, more explicitly political terms such as affirmative action and\or feminism. The chapter analyses the use of the word by both sides of a dispute which was as much about the rôle of the university in society as about whether Shakespeare was still being taught to freshmen. This brings us to Derrida's own ideas about the academic institution and his own place within it; his acceptance and promotion of the concept of institutional regulations coupled with a critique of how such institutions limit themselves in a futile delimitation of what is proper to them.

The third and fourth chapters comprise Derrida's response to what happened to deconstruction. The third chapter examines his interviews as a form of discourse that allows him the opportunity of telling his side of the story, and asks what it is about the interview that opens up the promise of the 'full' story, but ultimately reveals itself to be lacking. This failing on the part of the genre of the interview should not, however, be used as a reason to overlook their rôle in his oeuvre. Therefore, the chapter examines the interview as a genre in its own right. All Derrida's texts feed off and echo each other but his interviews form a prosthesis of their own and deserve to be considered as an element which is both part of, and separate from,

the body of his work.<sup>17</sup> They are the most explicit showcase for Derrida's response to his reception and they also act as a form of discourse which has its roots in journalism but has been adapted for the academy. They are thus a point of contact between the two institutions which have been instrumental in constructing the word 'deconstruction' – the academy and the public press – and are therefore vital in this context. In the knowledge that what he says will come back to him, Derrida never forgets to include in his papers and his interviews the conditions under which he is working. This has the effect of drawing attention to the norms of discourse. It also means that he has to work harder, taking into account what readers will pick up, as he improvises and condenses what he has to say into the straitjacket of a spool of tape. On the other hand, if Derrida did not think that there was *some* benefit to be had in giving interviews he would have curtailed their frequency.

Derrida has been interviewed by many people, from journalists on an assignment to colleagues with a thorough knowledge of his work. It is in the interviews and at the roundtables that he most explicitly mentions deconstruction as opposed to his texts in other genres where it may not be named at all, where, in fact, it does not have to be named because the interviews and commentaries are already in place. In early essays deconstruction is just one of many terms used and Derrida has said that he accorded it no special priority. Certain later texts also use it sparingly but only because of what has happened in between. A word used in conjunction with others has become the basis on which Derrida's texts are interpreted. This is something he has acceded to and struggled with.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> There are ninety-three interviews listed in William R. Schultz and Lewis L. B. Fried, eds., *Jacques Derrida: An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1992). Peggy Kamuf, at a conference on interviews, 'Thinking in Dialogue' at the University of Nottingham in June 2002, said that Derrida estimates that he has taken part in approximately one hundred interviews. This must be a very conservative estimate. The vague nature of these estimates, together with the problem of defining an interview, will be discussed in Chapter 3.

The fourth and final chapter considers the controversy over the anti-Semitism exhibited in Paul de Man's early journalism and how the discovery of his war-time articles in 1987 led to a perception of deconstruction as a mode of thought with undesirable political implications. This is used as a pivot to explore Derrida's relationship with his overburdened word. Longstanding opponents of deconstruction took the opportunity of the revelations to promulgate unfounded allegations of a logical connection between the opinions of de Man in the 1940s and the deconstruction of the 1980s. It was believed by some that Derrida had to answer charges on this account. Reading his articles on the matter we see that Derrida is in no way unwavering in his support for de Man, although his reaction is complicated by their friendship and de Man's death. He sees nothing to be gained by an outright condemnation of de Man and uses this revelation to explore attitudes towards history, the archive and mourning. In the course of this controversy Derrida reiterates his commitment to the word 'deconstruction' in the face of gross misunderstandings of it in the press. The chapter concludes with an overview of Derrida's relationship with the word that has shaped his career in light of the criticism it has engendered. Each chapter considers the academy and the public press and how they interact with each other in the context of the difficulties surrounding deconstruction.

In the course of examining the controversies, two 'deconstructions,' emerge: the one bandied about during the conflicts, and the one that Derrida strives to both maintain and develop in the face of what he sees are misrepresentations of his work. This is the standard dialectical movement which Derrida goes along with up to a point but overcomes in a characteristic gesture which ensures that while he accepts and even defends the norms of academic discourse, his arguments may not be recognisable according to those norms. It is this which gives rise to the misunderstanding in the first place. Borrowing terms from *Specters of Marx*, one might distinguish these two forms of deconstruction by bringing into play the figures of

'spectre' and 'spirit.'<sup>18</sup> The spectre of deconstruction is the form that is most often seen on the fields of conflict during the 'wars' outlined in chapters two and four here. This is the deconstruction which critics have associated with nihilism, relativism and amorality. They have also associated it with the subversion and destruction of the canon of 'great' literature and the values that pertain to it, values associated with 'Western civilisation.' This is a caricature of Derrida's work. It is not its direct opposite; the spectre is a skewed version alongside which can be posited the 'spirit' of deconstruction. "The apparition form, the phenomenal body of the spirit, that is the definition of the specter. The ghost is the phenomenon of the spirit" (Specters 135). The phenomenal body of deconstruction (which Derrida has always striven to keep empty, not to allow to exist as such in a simple recognisably ontological form) is apparent in the form of 'anti'-deconstructive texts, and in those texts of Derrida's where the word itself is most in evidence. In this context the *spirit* of deconstruction is least in evidence, caused "to disappear by appearing in the phenomenon of its phantasm" (Specters 110). Taking the necessity of the spectre into account means that any argument which would posit that a 'true' or more pure form of deconstruction can only be found in those texts of Derrida which do not talk about deconstruction is questionable. Speaking about Marxism, Derrida describes the spirit which is against the spectre yet the two "remain indiscernible and finally synonymous . . . because, in Marx's own view, the specter will first have been necessary, one might say even vital to the historical unfolding of spirit" (Specters 107). Derrida associates deconstruction with the spirit of Marxism and notes that the "contamination of spirit (geist) by specter (gespenst)" is "essential" (Specters 113).

The ghost is, of course, not unrelated to the monster and, closing his 1966 paper, Derrida speaks of the advent of a monster, monstrous because unnamed. He acknowledges that he is exploiting the metaphor of childbirth and at the end of this thesis I will return to the troubled

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>18</sup>Jacques Derrida, Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994). Referred to as Specters.

paternal relationship Derrida has with his word, deconstruction. For now, it is to the concluding words of a paper that was to launch what became deconstruction that we turn as Derrida announces "a birth in the offing . . . in the terrifying form of monstrosity."<sup>19</sup> As the subsequent history of deconstruction has demonstrated, the monster can become even more monstrous when it is too easily named, as if to name is to understand.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play,' *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 293.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### THE "INTELLECTUAL EXPERIMENT STATION"

#### i. Introduction

This chapter examines the intersection between deconstruction and the North American university. It considers how deconstruction unfolds into an institution and that institution becomes in its turn deconstructed. Deconstruction has been subjected to narratives which corral it along with other methodologies whose time comes and goes. An indication of this process is its inclusion in tables of contents of anthologies of literary theory. Yet if we wish to form a more definitive picture of what the work of deconstruction might mean, it is necessary to take into account Derrida's writing on the academic institution. How can deconstruction find a place in an institution whose defining principles it would question but whose legitimating imprimatur is so vital to its work? The idea of 'finding a place' is essential to an understanding of deconstruction 'itself' and of its interaction with the university in the United States. It is frequently associated with departments of literature and portrayed as a method with which to read texts. In this chapter, however, deconstruction is approached from a different angle, as Derrida's writings on the university are examined together with the declarations on academic freedom produced by the Association of American University Professors (AAUP) on which the singularity of the United States university rests and from which it derives its legitimacy.<sup>1</sup> If academic freedom rests on the foundation stone of the pursuit of truth and if deconstruction questions dichotomies such as true\false what happens to the deconstructed university?

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Throughout this thesis and especially in this chapter, I refer to the United States university or academy. It is not, of course, a monolithic body and a number of different forms are included under these broadly descriptive terms. What unites them, and justifies the use of these terms, is their identification in terms of a demand for academic freedom.

It is necessary to situate deconstruction in order to speak about it, if only momentarily and if only to show that it cannot be situated. Any description of where deconstruction occurs is liable to fall into a topography that reflects those commonly used when talking about the university. We see in this chapter descriptions of deconstruction which place it 'out' on the borders or working its way 'between the boundaries of the university and its outside' as opposed to the deconstruction that is 'in' the heart of the department of literature and being used as a new method of reading. It is difficult to evade the conventional figures of the university which 'contains' departments and schools in ever decreasing levels until a point of precision and specialisation is reached within a specific 'field.' The alternative is to 'step back' and look at the university 'overall' and 'in general.' This stepping in and out manoeuvre does not adequately describe how deconstruction has been carried out since it was adopted and adapted by the universities in the United States but it goes some way to describe the difficulties which attend any attempt to focus simultaneously on a detail and on the bigger picture. Working with deconstruction involves zooming in and out from the vista to the panorama while attempting to be faithful to the deconstructive demand that one cannot assume any connection between the two. When one begins to ask 'what is the connection between deconstructing Melville and deconstructing the university or Western metaphysics?' it is too easy to fall into issues of relative importance or size. Is it the same deconstruction in all cases? Is it a relationship of extrapolation, or analogy? These questions do more than ask about what (or where) deconstruction is. They are the kinds of questions which in similar if not identical fashion shape perceptions of the university as it relates to the wider community.

The figure of the university within society is one of an institution that is both transparent and obscure depending on which function is being observed. In order to fulfil its educational and research remit the university demands the privilege of academic freedom. In return, it will produce educated people qualified to work in the world, and experts and analysts who contribute to the various spheres which constitute society: judicial, educational, political and so on. It will also produce knowledge which will benefit the nation and empower it as it

competes with other nations. However, academic freedom attempts to guarantee an area where the professor can work undisturbed, conducting research into questions certain sections of society, for whatever reasons, might want to be left unasked. This work consumes time and might not produce recognisable results but, the professors insist, such work should be exempt from the generally accepted criteria of the economics of waste and value. Universities are under increasing pressure to become more accountable and this has led to a change in perceptions of professors and the work they do. Derrida has experienced all these difficulties. In one sense deconstruction merely becomes one of many tools in the hands of the student or professor educated in critical and perceptive reading. In another, it takes upon itself the task of questioning the institution of the institution, its origins and foundation, issues that many people ignore in order to 'get on with their work.' Deconstruction, especially in its incarnation in the work of Derrida, demands time and does not guarantee results. It is therefore vulnerable to demands of accountability and 'added value' which the university faces. Yet Derrida insists that the work deconstruction does is necessary and is not without effect even if that effect is not immediately or transparently obvious.

The first part of this chapter describes academic freedom in the United States as it is represented in two of the declarations of the AAUP, together with a consideration of the relationship between the university and the wider social sphere. The second part examines the divided character of the aims of research, the influence of German ideas about research on the American university, and Derrida's views on the possibility of distinguishing between fundamental and end-oriented research. This highlights implicit questions about the purpose of deconstruction while pointing to its rôle in raising issues such as judgements about whether certain forms of research are worthwhile or not. An example of Derrida's work on the institution, his inaugural address as Andrew Dickson White professor-at-large at Cornell, is then examined as he claims his place within the establishment while insisting on critiquing it. The fourth section of the chapter is concerned with positioning deconstruction both within a temporal narrative and within a departmental space, while attempting to remain vigilant about

the concept of positioning. Each part shows how the university defines itself and is defined as an institution apart from society but embedded within it. Deconstruction is used to both sharpen the image and redefine the relation of the university to the state and to society.

The paradigm of rise and fall; birth, maturity and death; arrival on the scene of radical new thought, followed by assimilation and the process of supercession, was played out by many of the early proponents of deconstruction. They are criticised here not for 'thinking too small,' or for being parochial, or for using deconstruction to analyse this or that text, but for failing to take deconstruction at its word, for keeping their distance from uncomfortable foundational or fundamental questions. If opponents of deconstruction were overanxious in their predictions of its negative effects, proponents were not anxious enough as they welcomed this new method. Early references to Derrida's writing are in the context of articles about novels or poems where deconstruction is mentioned as a new, possibly exciting, way of reading.<sup>2</sup> The point is not to show how some readers of Derrida's writing somehow got it wrong or put it to a use for which it was never 'intended.' Although one could indeed show that where Derrida looks at the history of Western metaphysics and questions how such history is written, these writers 'reduce' his project, both in its methodology (by making a methodology out of it) and in its scope. They describe a new reading method which can be conveniently used to read the literary canon. Criticising these critics implies that they are focussing too narrowly, blind to the 'larger' issues being opened up by Derrida's work, and begs the question because it accepts the institutional notions of broad and narrow fields, generalisation and specialisation. It is not necessarily a case of choosing between them or of dictating where deconstruction should be: deep in the heart of the humanities department analysing romantic poetry or teetering on the ramparts of the institutional walls, dismantling barriers between the university

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Wayne C. Booth, 'M. H. Abrams: Historian as Critic, Critic as Pluralist,' *Critical Inquiry* 2 (1976): 439. Booth thinks that "the possibility of having such a deconstructed history [as suggested by J. Hillis Miller in his review of Abrams' *Natural Supernaturalism*] exhilarating." "But," he goes on to say, "whoever attempts it must appreciate the standards by which it is to be tested."

and its outside, barriers such as the academic freedom upon which it depends. The danger for deconstruction is that it might be too easily absorbed into the curriculum without actually achieving very much institutional change whether the institution takes the form of the canon of questions asked of romantic poetry or the form of the university.

Derrida does have careful and careless readers, minute and sweeping readers. But it is as well to be wary about assessing readings on a qualitative scale where a particular reader is deemed (by whom?) to approach most closely to what Derrida is saying. The ideal of a close match or fit can only serve to close down or conclude reading - where close readings are judged to be readings par excellence 'even' by Derrida 'himself.' Deconstruction has been shaped as much by the careless readings, the critical readings, the extrapolatory readings, the presumptive and prescriptive readings as it has been by careful and close-fitting readings. And of what does this trail, track or career of deconstruction consist but these readings? There is a nostalgia for a true deconstruction, a philosophical deconstruction or a deconstruction which was read right, right from the beginning - whatever right might mean and whenever there was a beginning. Many of Derrida's pronouncements be they in the form of essays, interviews or conference papers show a pre-emption of possible criticisms or a defensive effort in the face of those who have already criticised him. This is evident even in the first paper he gave in the United States which will be examined later in the chapter. For now, I will go on to describe the development of the academy in the United States to the point where it became a forum where a concept such as deconstruction could be announced.

## ii. Self-supporting: The 1915 Declaration of Principles

Academic freedom has a fundamental rôle in defining any university. In this section, I look at how the Association of American University Professors by producing their '1915 Declaration of Principles,' set the university apart from the wider social sphere by attempting to delineate a space independent from 'outside' interference. Interference or constraint can emanate as readily from within the university as without and this has had repercussions on the status of subsequent conflict within the university. The '1915 Declaration of Principles' is read alongside some of Derrida's writing on the academic institution, namely his paper on Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and *On the Future of our Educational System* and his piece on the institutional moment of institutions, 'Declarations of Independence.' I use these to carry out my own reading of the foundational moment of academic freedom in the North American university.

As a concept, academic freedom has had a profound effect both on the public's view of the university and the academic profession, and on how professors see themselves. This in turn has influenced the conduct of debates about new or controversial ideas which have entered into and emerged from the university, including academic freedom itself and deconstruction. What is the relationship between deconstruction and academic freedom? It is more than merely one of dependence. Any work carried out in the academy depends on academic freedom to a certain degree. What deconstruction has done is to remind us to take a question such as 'what is the basis for any institution?' and apply it not only to the institution that depends on academic freedom for its identity, but to go further and ask 'what is the basis of the institution that *is* academic freedom'? Is it something that can be taken for granted or is it something that must constantly be refreshed and renewed? Such a renewal might not necessarily entail the rewriting of its foundational documents, but might be better served by a rereading of an old canonical document. This is an exercise Derrida has frequently carried out to good effect.

Derrida has spoken about two concepts that are relevant to this consideration of academic freedom: the decision and democracy. With regard to the decision (and in the context of the notion of undecidability) Derrida talks about the necessary work that must always be carried out before a non-programmable decision can be made. The thought and reflective process must be experienced but the decision itself is not of the order of a *necessary* effect. This apparently paradoxical decree where the process is inescapable but the outcome can never be

programmed by that process is what is both prescribed and allowed for in the concept of academic freedom as is shown in this first section. When it comes to the notion of democracy, it too is a necessarily open-ended affair. Academic freedom requires a democracy as the sine qua non of its existence (even though it allows for a form of elitism which could be - and has been - accused of anti-democratic practices), yet the terms of academic freedom set it apart from the democracy in which it claims its place. When Derrida talks about the democracy 'to come' he is alerting his audience to the necessity to constantly renew the aspirations of democracy. In saying that it is 'to come' does not mean that democracy is something that can be achieved at some future point. It is a condition of democracy that it never arrives as such.<sup>3</sup> One might live in a democratic state but one never lives in a state of democracy. Similarly, the non-programmable nature of academic freedom allows the institution to be what it is only on condition that it does not know and cannot prescribe where it is going. This is also one of the characteristic features of Derrida's work and the imperative he has laid down in order for any work to be called 'deconstructive.' It accords with his insistence that deconstruction is not a methodology which can be applied, but is something that happens like the event. The parallels between deconstruction of the kind Derrida has defended throughout his career and academic freedom will become clear when the declarations which founded the concept of academic freedom in the United States are examined in the light of Derrida's exhortations about rigorous reading, scholarly principles and his proscription of programmes in the next section.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida considers the nature of democracy to come, and the difference between the future and the 'to come' (*l'avenir*), in 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering",' trans. David Wood *On the Name* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) and in 'Perhaps or Maybe' *Responsibilities of Deconstruction, PLI Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 6 (Summer 1997): 1-18.

One needs to claim academic freedom before one can speak about academic freedom. On the other hand, sometimes one needs to assert one's freedom from its demands to be able to speak to the academy. This is the gesture Jacques Derrida performed when he began his paper, 'Otobiographies: L'enseignement de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre' at the University of Montreal in 1979.<sup>4</sup> All freedoms have rules; 'no freedom without responsibility' is the phrase usually used in the circumstances and academic freedom is no exception. In the declaration which founds academic freedom in the United States, the AAUP's '1915 Declaration of Principles,' the conditions are laid down.

The liberty of the scholar within the university to set forth his conclusions, be what they may, is *conditioned* by their being conclusions gained by a scholar's method and held in a scholar's spirit; that is to say they must be the fruits of competent and patient and sincere inquiry.<sup>5</sup>

This demand for a certain standard is echoed, consciously or not, by Derrida almost every time he refers to his critics. He is willing to accede to criticism solely on the evidence of reading which is, as the Declaration put it, "competent and patient and sincere." Too many times, according to Derrida, his critics have leapt to conclusions in an insincere and hasty manner and this makes them incompetent readers and critics. However, this does not mean that he can ignore or dismiss what they say about his work, and he has spent much time in dealing with such 'illegal' critiques.

<sup>4</sup> Derrida's paper, 'Declarations of Independence,' delivered at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in 1976, was coupled with the 'Otobiographies' paper in *Otobiographies: L'enseignment de Nietzsche et la politique du nom propre* (Paris: Galilée, 1984) but not included in the English translation by Peggy Kamuf and Avitel Ronell, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, ed. Christine McDonald (New York: Schocken Books, 1985). 'Declarations of Independence' was published in *New Political Science* 15 (Summer 1986), translated by Tom Keenan and Tom Pepper. It is referred to later on in this chapter. <sup>5</sup> AAUP 'The 1915 Declaration of Principles,' *Academic Freedom and Tenure: A Handbook of The American Association of University Professors*, ed. Louis Joughin (Madison, Milwaukee and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969 edition) 169. Emphasis added. Referred to as '1915 Declaration.' Given the constraints of time and available attention, the conclusions of academic research are published while the work that produced them is hidden because the scholar has to be trusted to a degree. Scholarly methods are described as being painstaking, rigorous and patient. Conclusions may be set forth but they cannot be leapt to (although in his work on the decision, Derrida *does* make a case for a leap from a foothold). Scholars must fulfil their obligations in the form of time and labour before they will be taken seriously by their colleagues. Even so, the conditions inherent in academic freedom, Derrida says, should not *always* be binding. When he addresses his audience in Montreal he wants to be free to save time and avoid boredom. He wants to go straight to the matter in hand – "'academic freedom,' the ear, and autobiography" – but, before it can be spoken about, dues have to be paid to the responsibilities of academic freedom.<sup>6</sup>

I would like to spare you the tedium, the waste of time, and the subservience that always accompany the classic pedagogical procedures of forging links, referring back to prior premises or arguments, justifying one's own trajectory, method, system, and more or less skilful translations, reestablishing continuity and so on. These are but some of the imperatives of classical pedagogy with which, to be sure, one can never break once and for all. Yet if you were to submit to them rigorously, they would very soon reduce you to silence, tautology, and tiresome repetition.

I therefore propose my compromise to you. And, as everyone knows, by the terms of *academic freedom* – I repeat: a-ca-dem-ic free-dom – you can take it or leave it. ('Otobiographies' 3-4; original emphasis)

"Everyone knows" the terms of academic freedom. Everyone listening to Derrida, he assumes, is a holder of academic freedom or, if s\he is not, is aware of the entitlements of academic freedom. Derrida goes on to give his paper on Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and *On the Future of our Educational System*, returning to academic freedom by name only at the end.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Otobiographies: The Teaching of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name,' trans. Avital Ronnell, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation: Texts and Discussions with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronnell, ed. Christie V. McDonald (New York: Schocken Books, 1985) 3-37. Referred to as 'Otobiographies.'

The "most recurrent theme" in the latter book, Derrida tells his audience, is "that the [German] university, regardless of its opinion in the matter, is nothing but the product or further development of what has been performed or programmed in the secondary school" ('Otobiographies' 27). For Nietzsche, academic freedom was a democratising influence which could only bring about the degeneration of the university. That freedom which was introduced into the United States at the end of the nineteenth century for the purpose of raising scholarly standards was believed by Nietzsche to be the opposite of culture, and culture was not the result of democracy but of necessary restraints and obedience.

All culture begins with the very opposite of that which is now so highly esteemed as 'academical freedom': with obedience, with subordination, with discipline, with subjection.<sup>7</sup>

Where Nietzsche saw homogenisation, American scholars saw the freedom to specialise and the imperative for rigour. In the United States, academic freedom was seen in some quarters as alien and elitist, bestowing a privilege on those who claimed it which was not available to everybody. Resistance to foreign influences was not lacking; to some commentators German ideas seemed antithetical to pragmatic American claims "that in a democracy the only scholarship with a right to exist is that which serves the practical needs of the masses."<sup>8</sup> 'Democracy,' that unassailable rallying cry used by all forms of lobbying groups in the United States, became a justification for utility in the courses to be offered in the revitalised nineteenth-century university. The people should be given what they wanted.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Future of Our Educational Institutions*, trans. J. M. Kennedy, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1909) 140. Referred to as *Future of Our Educational Institutions*.

<sup>8</sup> Hugo Munsterburg quoted in Laurence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965) 180. Referred to as Veysey.

<sup>9</sup> "But if no course of study was as vulnerable as the American curriculum to social demand, nowhere else in the world (a 1911 Carnegie Foundation report pointed out) did colleges compete for students, nowhere else was education treated as a commodity." Frederick Rudolph, *Curriculum: A History of the American Undergraduate Course of Study Since 1636* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1977) 8.

Therefore the autonomy pertaining to the work of the professor implied in the concept of academic freedom is not as thoroughgoing as its critics would suggest. The professor is never completely free to do as s\he pleases, as there are constraints, both self-imposed and emanating from the 'outside.' There are the rules of "classical pedagogy" which can be skipped over but must at least be articulated or gestured to at the beginning of a paper if one wants to be taken seriously as a member of the academy. There are also the constraints posed from without, "the silhouette of a constraint which is all the more ferocious and implacable because it conceals and disguises itself in the form of laisser-faire" ('Otobiographies' 33). This constraint is characterised in Nietzsche's German context as the State but Derrida adapts it to more recent times and to the United States context by introducing the media.

If today such a [State] apparatus is on its way to being in part replaced by the media and in part associated with them, this only makes Nietzsche's criticism of journalism – which he never dissociates from the educational apparatus – all the more striking. ('Otobiographies' 33-4)

Both Nietzsche's philosopher and his student are scathing in their attitude towards journalism in *The Future of Our Educational Institutions*. For them, the newspapers of the day are symptomatic of the lack of culture of the masses and serve only as a monitor of the level of one's own culture. If one is not repulsed by the discourse of journalism one cannot recognise culture (*Future of Our Educational Institutions* 48). The student explains that he has given up teaching because of the power of the media, a "viscous stratum of communication which cements the seams between all forms of life" because, "[i]t is precisely in journalism that . . . [t]he expansion and the diminution of education . . . join hands" (*Future of Our Educational Institutions* 41).

In Nietzsche's series of lectures, a complex set of framing devices is employed in relating a fictional encounter. This accords with the traditional dialogues of philosophy (Nietzsche mentions the *Phaedrus* and, of course, in these lectures, Greek culture is held up to be the epitome of all that is best.) The structure of the lectures exemplifies all the questions Derrida

raises about the status of literature and philosophy and the idea of fiction. Why does Nietzsche choose to address himself through his characters? Does he really mean what he is saying? The notion of good faith is an important element of academic freedom, and despite the dismissal of academic freedom in Nietzsche's lectures, they are dependent on it. Built on a form of trust whereby the professor speaks what he or she believes to be the truth there is an onus on the interpreters to learn to read not just what is being said but how and in what genre it is being said. The AAUP in its 1915 'Declaration' mounts its own attack on the newspapers who misinterpret what professors say because they take it at face value. The AAUP insist on the privilege of the classroom in order to guard against this, saying that discussions with students "are often designed to provoke opposition or arouse debate" ('1915 Declaration' 171). In other words, professors sometimes say things they don't really mean. The AAUP draws a line between what a professor says in class and what that same professor might publish ("[d] iscussions in the classroom ought not to be supposed to be utterances for the public at large" ('1915 Declaration' 171)) which leads to the possibility that rhetorical gestures such as those used in Nietzsche's lectures will not be remarked. Publishing his work as a professor of philosophy, what he says is invested with the authority and seriousness which is attached to philosophical discourse. One of the lessons Derrida has insisted on teaching is that one should not pass over such 'framing' devices in silence in order to get to the heart of the argument. The difficulty of transferral is a recurrent problem about the extent to which work must be adapted when it is published in a different medium and is one which Derrida has addressed with regard to newspapers. I will come back to this issue of good faith in chapter three.

The State and the media are entities that are not entitled to academic freedom but are free to criticise the university, at times to the point of influencing its direction. While the AAUP makes a case for independence, Derrida cites Nietzsche's reminder that "behind both of them [professor and audience], at a carefully calculated distance, stands the State, wearing the intent expression of an overseer, to remind the professors and students from time to time that

*it* is the aim, the goal, the be-all and end-all [*Zweck, Ziel und Inbegriff*] of this curious speaking and hearing procedure" ('Otobiographies' 37). So much for an autonomy forged in a spirit of independence which asserts that without the specific freedom which the academy claims, the university cannot survive and without the university civilisation cannot survive. It was on building blocks of arguments like these that the American profession based and still bases its claims for autonomy from the state which (both comforting and threatening) is 'right behind it.' Nietzsche inserts a "carefully calculated distance" between the state and the university but, according to him, it is the state which controls the calculations governing the extent of the gap, whereas in America the professors like to believe that they are the ones who paced out the boundaries.<sup>10</sup> The professors declared their independence from the state, originally in 1915, and have vigorously defended it ever since.

An inviolable refuge from [the tyranny of public opinion] should be found in the university. It should be an intellectual experiment station, where new ideas may germinate and where their fruit, though still distasteful to the community as a whole, may be allowed to ripen until finally, perchance, it may become a part of the intellectual food of the nation or of the world. ('1915 Declaration of Principles' 167)

The AAUP claims a space of non-interference and pays for it by promising that the work carried out in this prohibited area will benefit the people, the community, the nation, and the state. This complex, asymmetrical arrangement is examined now in the light of Nietzsche's criticisms of the concept which the Americans were in the process of adopting and adapting during the latter half of the nineteenth century, that is, at the time his lectures were published.

The 1915 'Declaration' refers to a concept that previously existed in another country, Germany, but it also constructs its own quite different version. It is a complex text which performs not only what it describes but also what it is shaping for the future. In other words, it is an anachronistic product of the freedom it is producing. It constructs a circumscribed area

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> J. M. Kennedy's 1909 translation uses "modest," not "calculated," but this does not detract from the

of autonomy for its members and any other professorial bodies who wish to endorse it. It cannot rest its authority on tradition alone because that would imply a dependence on the German model, when its aim is to create a specific identity for the American university. This modified American version will have to gain legitimacy by referring with unswerving confidence to the obvious and clearcut necessity for what it hopes to achieve: a privileged space within society for the work of the professor to progress unimpeded by meddling outsiders who here include the administration, the "sensational newspapers" (1915 Declaration' 171) and the public. It is well to remember that the 'public' is itself defined by the terms of academic freedom. The public comprises those who are not entitled to academic freedom but who benefit from what the university produces for them. Although what the university offers can be rejected, "it is highly needful in the interest of society at large, that what purport to be the conclusions of men trained for, and dedicated to, the quest for truth, shall be in fact the conclusions of such men and not echoes of the opinions of the lay public, or of the individuals who endow or manage universities" ('1915 Declaration' 162). Yet the professors need to have the public on their side, they have to appear reasonable and democratic even if what they are asserting here is inherently exclusive, demarcating as it does a space of non-interference which has to be respected. In return, the public will receive the benefit of the work carried out under these free conditions.

The three freedoms rolled into one to form academic freedom have to be in place before the work of the university which is also threefold, can go ahead.

Academic freedom... comprises three elements: freedom of enquiry and research; freedom of teaching within the university or college; and freedom of extra-mural utterance and action... The importance of academic freedom is most clearly perceived in the light of the purposes for which universities exist[:]

- A. To promote inquiry and advance the sum of human knowledge.
- B. To provide general instruction to the students.

power allowed to the state, here designated "supervisor" (Future of Our Educational Institutions 126).

C. To develop experts for various branches of public service. ('1915 Declaration' 158 & 163-64)

The authors of the 1915 declaration were anxious to assert the autonomy of the faculty in matters of teaching and research, from the administration and the trustees of the colleges and universities, as well as from the public. The declaration is quite emphatic that those in authority who are ultimately answerable to the public could not impose their beliefs or opinions on the professors. The only exception allowed is the proprietary college, endowed by a church or by a wealthy individual for the express purpose of disseminating a stated ideology. Any college which appeals to the public for support could not take "a proprietary attitude" towards the faculty or "lay... restrictions upon the intellectual freedom of its professors" ('1915 Declaration' 160). The professors were staking out their territory in this declaration but they needed the support of the public who supply them with funds, with students and with goodwill.

The relationship between the university and the public is (ideally) based on a form of consent and trust which could easily be violated. In their study of American academic freedom, Richard Hofstader and Walter Metzger ask,

What if, as so often happened, the public should consent to the violation of that trust? What if crusading newspapers or patriotic groups, presuming to speak for the whole community, should try to warp the university toward their particular goals? American theorists had to maintain that the real public interest was not the same as the public opinion of the moment... They fell back in the last resort upon a *mystique* of general will.<sup>11</sup>

In other words the university, in the form of the "American theorists" (who might be presuming to speak for the whole university, like those crusading newspapers or patriotic groups who speak on behalf of the "whole community"), took it upon themselves to distinguish between the real and the not-real public interest. What the university produces is

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Richard Hofstader and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (London: Columbia University Press, 1955) 399-400. Referred to as Hofstader and Metzger.

for the public good, they say, while they simultaneously define what the public good is. If the immediate use or benefit of what was being produced by the university was not obvious to the existing public, an ideal public would be found for it. "The public for which the trustees acted and to whom the professors were responsible was an abstraction called 'posterity'" (Hofstader and Metzger 410). This idea about a potentially 'ideal' public carries with it a suggestion of Derrida's concept of a 'democracy to come' which is not one that will simply arrive sometime in the future. Despite appeals in the AAUP's 'Declaration' for support from the public and the acknowledgement of dependence on it, the public as it currently exists, the everyday public as 'represented' by direct outside influence, such as the press, would seem to have no place in the university.

The AAUP's 1915 'Declaration of Principles' and 1940 'Statement of Principles,' not only define academic freedom, they enact and produce it.<sup>12</sup> The documents are important partly because they refer to their own importance (which is not necessarily to say that they are self-important). They simultaneously bolster the authority of the work being done, the people who do it, the profession itself and the institution in which it is carried out.

If education is the cornerstone of the structure of society and if progress in scientific knowledge is essential to civilization, few things can be more important than to enhance the dignity of the scholar's profession, with a view to attracting into its ranks men of the highest ability, of sound learning, and of strong and independent character. ('1915 Declaration' 61)

The scholar's profession is not inherently dignified, according to the declaration, what dignity there is has to be enhanced in order to attract the right people. The enhancement takes the form of documents such as those of 1915 and 1940 which act as a prop to the profession. They can then be read in a manner similar to the way Derrida reads The Declaration of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> '1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,' *Academic Freedom and Tenure: A Handbook of The American Association of University Professors*, ed. Louis Joughin (Madison, Milwaukee and London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969 edition). Referred to as '1940 Statement.'

Independence when he asks "Who signs, and with what so-called proper name, the declarative act which founds an institution?"<sup>13</sup> That is, on what or whose authority can foundational declarations, such as those of the AAUP – documents to which there is constant subsequent reference – be founded? They are legitimated not only on the authority of the signatories, authorised by the AAUP, but also on the authority contained therein and the anticipation of future endorsements or co-signatories.

One cannot decide – and that's the interesting thing, the force and the coup of the force of such a declarative act – whether independence is stated or produced by this utterance [the Declaration of Independence]... It is not a question here of an obscurity or of a difficulty of interpretation... This obscurity, this undecidability between, let's say, a performative structure and a constative structure, is *required* in order to produce the sought-after effect. ('Declarations of Independence' 9)

In the case of the Declaration of Independence the document was signed by those who spoke "in the name of the [American] people." What Derrida calls "the relay of [the good people's] representatives and of their representatives" ('Declarations of Independence' 9), is a chain of command that also resonates through the AAUP's documents, authorised as they are by the signatories who represent the AAUP. These signatories take it upon themselves to speak on behalf of the professors and, by extrapolation, on behalf of the university, but not that part of the university which is answerable to the public – the administration. By insisting that the university cannot be itself, cannot be called a university or fulfil its function unless it can practice academic freedom, the declaration that founds academic freedom in the United States simultaneously founds the institution and divides it into faculty and administration. It thus draws the line which demarcates the territory to be filled by the faculty. But, Derrida reminds us, in the case of the American people, "this people does not exist. They do *not* exist as an entity, it does *not* exist, *before* this declaration, not *as such.*" ('Declarations of Independence' 10; original emphasis). The space of independence created by the Declaration of Independence was filled by a nation comprising the people of that nation who *came into being* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> 'Declarations of Independence' New Political Science 15 (1986): 8. Original emphasis.

with the declaration but who *also* signed it and were therefore anterior to it. The '1915 Declaration' and the '1940 Statement' by the AAUP serve a similar function bringing into being the space which defines the people who occupy it, whose occupation in and of the university embodies and performs the freedom their declaration describes. The declaration renews its authority as a reference point – something which can be pointed to *as* an authority because 'it says here, in the 1940 Statement that...' – as it is countersigned by the people it represents.

The other major declaration by the AAUP, the 1940 'Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,' was a development of the 1915 'Declaration' rather than a replacement for it, and it is to this statement, in combination with the 1915 founding document, that the AAUP continues to refer. The '1940 Statement,' endorsed not only by individual institutions, but also by most of the major organisations associated with higher level education in the United States, has its importance affirmed both by the status and numbers of its signatories.<sup>14</sup> The AAUP undertakes to investigate any claims by its members who believe that their rights have been infringed by the administration. In this work, which is both mediatory and judgmental, the AAUP consistently refers to both its foundational document and to the subsequent documents which developed from it.<sup>15</sup> These later documents were written in light of events at the time (such as McCarthyism) and the one most frequently referred to is the '1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure.' The Summer 1990 issue of *Law and Contemporary Problems* is devoted to academic freedom on the occasion of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> For a detailed account of the discussions, debates and debacles in the production of the 1940 'Statement,' see Walter P. Metzger, 'The 1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure' in *Law and Contemporary Problems* 53.3 (1990): 3-77.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Accounts of the AAUP's investigations into perceived infringements, and lists of the latest professional associations to have adopted the statements can be found in the AAUP's publication, *Academe*, in print or on their website: <u>www.aaup.org</u>. The May-June 2000 edition (Vol. 86, No. 2) is headed, 'Tenure: Will It Survive?' and includes the regular reports on professors losing their jobs without adequate notice or without due process.

fiftieth anniversary of the Statement. In the Foreword of the issue William W. Van Alstyne points both to the authority of the two documents and to their relative weakness because they are not included in the "nation's explicit basic law."

The 1940 Statement has been endorsed by over 135 additional learned societies and educational associations [in addition to the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges]... It is frequently incorporated into faculty handbooks, and it has been cited by a number of state and federal courts, including the Supreme Court. By this means it has achieved a certain legal cachet... In some countries (West Germany, for instance), academic freedom has received some degree of express constitutional standing in the nation's explicit basic law. In this country it never has... But even so, major parts of the Bill of Rights have over time proved quite serviceable in resolving academic freedom disputes... Indeed, in a practical way, a certain synergy has grown up, as it were, between the principles articulated in the 1915 and 1940 Statements... and particular provisions of our constitution. (1-2).

The 1915 and 1940 Statements can work together with the Bill of Rights in a law court but have little legal authority on their own. There remains a whiff of the 'gentlemen's agreement' hanging over the documents supported as they are by the authority of numbers, tradition and trust. The claim for academic freedom is not based on an appeal to the legal system to legitimate it. However, this lack of an additional strut on which to secure itself could also be a means of self-support. It reinforces the autonomy of the university as an institution which declares its independence from the nation which declared its independence. The separation of the institutions of higher education from the state has possibly made them more answerable to the public than they might otherwise have been. The state does not officially monitor what goes on in the university (but as Derrida and Nietzsche would say, 'Look out, it's behind you') and professors accept that the public is (ultimately) their employer but still assert their right to self-determination. The demands for academic freedom from the profession coupled with its protestations of social benefit have at times led to a relationship of mutual suspicion between the public and the university. The public the university wants to serve, that ideal public whose time will never come, is not the public it encounters every day. Inevitably,

blame for this mutual incomprehension is placed on the conduit between the two: the public press. The AAUP highlighted the press who "garbled [classroom] remarks," and Derrida too in his "propositions" for a college he was instrumental in shaping, was also concerned about negative aspects of the public press.<sup>16</sup>

'Sendoffs' was Derrida's contribution to the report collated for the French Minister of Research and Industry during the initial stages of the foundation of the International College of Philosophy in Paris in 1982. In it, Derrida lays out a series of "hypotheses" ('Sendoffs' 18) regarding the subjects to be treated and the questions to be asked in the college, always in the knowledge that what he is doing should not be seen as a prescription towards a previously decided upon "destination" ('Sendoffs' 10). Derrida's hopes for the College echo his concern with any form of programmatic or predetermined closure. I will return to this in the next section on end-oriented and fundamental research. For now, I want to mark out Derrida's brief mention of the necessity for work to be carried out on "mediology," a requirement which would take the form of a *defence*. His precautionary attitude is indicative of the suspicion in which the "mass media" might be held, but by his own admission it would be futile to reject it outright.

Without a 'reactive' attitude, without 'rejection' (which is in any case doomed to powerlessness), faced with the extension of the mass media, the College will pose the 'deontological,' 'ethico-juridical,' or 'ethico-political' problems associated with such an extension. ('Sendoffs' 33)

Whereas the AAUP document defined its territory in opposition to "sensational newspapers" as well as the public, the government and the administration, Derrida insists that in order to optimise its independence, the International College of Philosophy should acknowledge the points where it has inescapable links to other bodies.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Sendoffs,' trans. Thomas Pepper, *Yale French Studies* 77 (1990) 9. Referred to as 'Sendoffs.'

Not telling (itself) too many stories about its own independence from this or that power of legitimation (dominant forces of society, institutions, university, State, etc.) is perhaps the *first* condition of the greatest possible independence, though that does not preclude looking for others. ('Sendoffs' 20)

Although academic freedom is based on the fiction required to ensure the success of a foundational event (as Louis Menand puts it, "like any ideal concept [academic freedom] requires a willing suspension of disbelief in order properly and efficiently to do its work"<sup>17</sup>), it would be better for the academic institution that it not tell itself stories about its independence. Independence implies objectivity, and the assertion that an institution is totally independent could lead to complacency and a refusal to take into account those areas where it is necessarily dependent on external factors. A single example to the contrary (such as research funded by corporations) could undermine the autonomy of the whole institution leading to doubts as to whether it is objective in *any* respect if it persists in telling itself stories that it is objective in *all* respects.

Derrida's reminder serves as a warning against simplification. Meanwhile, in the course of reading the AAUP's declarations, Derrida's 'Otobiographies' and 'Declarations of Independence' we can begin to distinguish some of the figures which will feature in later chapters. We have the university as an institution with the professors 'inside,' demanding a necessary freedom to do their work wherever that may bring them. 'Outside' are the 'public' whose support has to be won but who have to be kept at bay. Between the two is a relationship of separation based on the possession and development of specialist knowledge by one side (a defining characteristic of the professor as professional), and the demand by the other side that such knowledge must be useful and must have some perceptible purpose (pragmatic employers and the government).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Louis Menand, 'The Limits of Academic Freedom,' *The Future of Academic Freedom*, ed. Louis Menand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 6.

The following section is a brief survey of the different, often contradictory, aspirations governing the German university - the major influence on the modern university - and the American university which adopted that model. The purpose of this is to give some idea of the institutional tradition from which a philosopher such as Derrida comes and the conflictual arena in which his work is read in the United States. While academic freedom ensures that deconstruction gets a hearing in the United States (as it would wherever there is an ideal of academic freedom), the prevailing ethos of pragmatism demands a specific and specified use for it, a demand voiced by both its critics and its supporters. Coupled with this is the surviving belief that the university and its professors have a rôle in the moral health of the nation. In such an environment calling deconstruction 'nihilistic' or 'amoral' was guaranteed to make any case against it prejudicial (thus illegal, in Kant's sense as defined in The Conflict of the Faculties). While Derrida would not, of course, countenance dilettantism or nihilism, he is loath to simply assign a programmatic structure and a readymade moral function to deconstruction. The section closes with a look at Derrida's most specific definitions of what can be hoped for in an institution, definitions shaped by his involvement with the International College of Philosophy.

## iii. The Ends of Research.

Research is conveniently, and traditionally, divided into two types: fundamental and endoriented, but it is sometimes difficult to see where one leaves off and the other begins. "Freedom in research is fundamental to the advancement of truth" according to the AAUP's '1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure' (34). This would seem to erase the traditional division of research, declaring as it does that the freedom which is usually associated with fundamental research is itself fundamental to a defined end: "the advancement of truth." The certainty implicit in this phrase serves the purpose of instilling confidence in the public with regard to the research carried out in the university and maintains the tradition of the social benefit of research which was originally sold to the public and university benefactors at the birth of university research in the United States in the late nineteenth century.

Jean-François Lyotard, in his "Report on Knowledge" produced at the behest of the government of Quebec, points out that "many countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries adopted this university organization as a model for the foundation or reform of their own system of higher education, beginning with the United States."<sup>18</sup> More than 9,000 students from the United States attended German universities at a time when the German system was heavily influenced by the ideas of Schleiermacher who had produced a proposal along liberal lines for the foundation of the University of Berlin. The minister's adviser, Wilhelm von Humboldt, legitimated Schleiermacher's recommendations by combining the pursuit of scientific knowledge with the aims of producing moral citizens (*Postmodern Condition* 34). The foundation of the university along these principles was thus fissured from the outset by the potential for conflict between these aspirations. This foundational conflict had to be smoothed over so that a single set of aspirations could be presented to a nation for the purposes of both unifying and producing that nation.

[I]t is a conflict between a language game made of denotations answerable only to the criterion of truth, and a language game governing ethical, social, and political practice that necessarily involves decisions, obligations, in other words, utterances expected to be just rather than true and which in the final analysis lie outside the realm of scientific knowledge... [T]he unification of these two sets of discourse is indispensable to the *Bildung* aimed for by Humboldt's project, which consists not only in the acquisition of learning by individuals, but also in the training of a fully legitimated subject of knowledge and society. Humboldt therefore invokes a Spirit... animated by... a single threefold aspiration: 'that of deriving everything from an original principle' (corresponding to scientific activity), 'that of relating everything to an ideal,' (governing ethical and social practice), and 'that of unifying this principle and this ideal in a single Idea'

<sup>18</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 34. Referred to as *Postmodern Condition*.

(ensuring that the scientific search for true causes always coincides with the pursuit of just ends in moral and political life). This ultimate synthesis constitutes the legitimate subject. (*Postmodern Condition* 32-33)

This derivation and relation of "everything" from something and to something, and their combination in a "single Idea" swaddles the researcher allowing little room for manoeuvre, much less the freedom to question the concept of original principles or ideals. However, it is not surprising that any project which produced "a fully legitimated subject... of society" would be acceptable and even desirable in the United States even though a fully legitimated subject of society there might, in fact, be a very different beast to its German counterpart. Coupled with the fact that the fully legitimated subject of *knowledge* is not always synonymous with the fully legitimated subject of *knowledge* is not always synthesis" are clear. For example, a "subject of knowledge" may be legitimated by his or her own colleagues but may not be legitimated by society. American society would recognise legitimate subjects as those who could be of use, that is, be of obvious benefit to a largely pragmatic society. While the American university wished to produce graduates who were qualified to fill jobs, the German university in the nineteenth century was less concerned with vocationalism. The German university did not wholly live up to Humboldt's hope that it would form some kind of organic offshoot of the ideal society.

This [German] indifference to vocational ambitions, this insistence on disinterested research, created a gulf between the spirit of the university and that of everyday life. Like an independent spiritual order, the German university trained its own personnel, held novitiates to its own standards, and kept the secular world at a certain remove. (Hofstader and Metzger 374)

The Americans who returned from Germany and set about reshaping the university along German lines admired disinterested research but did not envisage an unbridgeable gulf between their work and the secular world – even though a declaration of independence would be necessary before long. They did not see themselves as part of a monastic order; such an idea was alien to the rôle of the university in American society. They adopted the notion of autonomous fundamental research *and* the Humboldtian ideals, creating their university by

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amalgamating independent research with a belief in its ultimate benefit to society. The American university as an institution was answerable to its public and could not countenance a concept of 'pure' learning along German lines. There had to be a demonstrable point to every research project.

The German ideal of 'pure' learning [*Wissenschaft*], largely unaffected by utilitarian demands became for many Americans the notion of 'pure science' and acquired methodological connotations which the concept had often lacked in Germany. The larger, almost contemplative implications of *Wissenschaft* were missed by the Americans, who seem almost always to have assumed that 'investigation' meant something specifically scientific. (Veysey, 126-27)

Even if it was possible at one time to think about either the European or American institution as a whole, the foundations of that institution were divided on principle. This division continues to cause problems for the university as it attempts to justify itself in the face of demands for accountability and social utility. Jürgen Habermas, in a lecture series celebrating the six hundredth anniversary of the foundation of Heidelberg University, uses 'communication' as a gelling agent for the university.<sup>19</sup> Habermas criticises the post-World War II attempts by Karl Jaspers to reanimate the aspirations of the German university in the spirit of German Idealism and based on the Humboldtian desire for a unified and liberal community of scholars. Habermas resists Jaspers' nostalgia, asking, "Isn't the very premise that a vast structure like the modern university system should be permeated with and sustained by a way of thinking common to its members unrealistic?... Organizations no longer embody ideas" (New Conservatism 101-102). The appeal to realism in Habermas's critique differs from the kinds of appeals that were voiced during the development of the ideals of the German university when 'reality' was the world outside, and the university enshrined a space in which one was licensed to do research in all directions even if the value was not immediately obvious. Habermas's ideas are therefore closer to the American

<sup>19</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The New Conservatism* (London: Polity Press, 1989).

university than to the German model. He posits the notion of "specialized internal public spheres" by which he tries to acknowledge the public obligations of researchers while maintaining a form of segregation between the university and its outside.

The scientific and scholarly disciplines were constituted within specialized internal public spheres and they can maintain their vitality only within these structures. The specialized internal public spheres come together and branch off again in the university's organized public events. (*New Conservatism* 124)

For Habermas, there is a time and place when it is suitable to communicate with the general public, when the internalised public spheres of the university intersect momentarily before branching off again into their own private concerns. He is careful to maintain the necessary divide between what goes on in the university and society at large. In this he is critical of any form of Humboldtian unity.

[T]he idea of the unity of science and scholarship with enlightenment was extravagant in that it burdened the autonomy of scientific and scholarly disciplines with the expectation that within its walls the university could anticipate in microcosm a society of free and equal citizens. The science of philosophy seemed to combine in itself the universal competences of the human species in such a way that the higher education institutions were for Humboldt not only the pinnacle of the whole educational system but also the 'apex of the moral culture of the nation.' From the outset, however, it remained unclear how this mission of enlightenment and emancipation was to accompany the abstention from politics that was the price the university had to pay for state authorization of its freedom. (*New Conservatism* 112-13)

The university is founded on the premise that it is in some way separate from the concerns of society and from politics, and is not answerable to the morality that normally applies. At the same time the university is burdened with the task of somehow embodying *and* constituting that morality which will help shape a nation. Somehow a way had to be steered between remaining aloof from political involvement while shaping a nation's morals. In this, the American university could no more achieve the high moral aims laid down by Humboldt than the Germans could. But the aspirations still linger.

The foundation of new institutions as alternatives to the university could be regarded as a partial corrective to the university's involvement with the state, and a way by which the tradition of scholarship could be divorced from any specific moral or social purpose. In the early 1980s, the conservative government in France attempted to dilute the teaching of philosophy to students at secondary level. A number of philosophy teachers came together to resist this and formed GREPH (Groupe de Recherches sur l'Enseignement Philosophique). On foot of this and because of his involvement in the Etats Généraux de la Philosophie, Jacques Derrida was invited to partake in the shaping and foundation of the International College of Philosophy in Paris. He, together with the other philosophers whose opinions were solicited, wrote a report for the French government (Derrida's contribution was published as 'Sendoffs,' mentioned in the previous section), and it agreed to support the College. He described its status in an interview with Geoff Bennington.

It has a legal existence and the legal status of this institution is that of a private association, supported by the government, but as a free, private and autonomous institution.<sup>20</sup>

The purpose of the College, according to Derrida, is to explore "problematics, topics, research, which are not legitimized or accepted in the given institutions in France or in the other countries."<sup>21</sup> With this kind of project in mind the college wants to remain outside the university system and also outside the influence of the government. Whether this is possible can only be shown in the attempt.

[I]t has to be a liberal institution. Which implies that it should be totally autonomous and totally free with regard to its relation to the state on the one hand and on the other to – let's call it civil society...[W]e know that we need the help of the State (we live on the money of the State, a very small amount, almost nothing), but on condition that we remain totally free in the choice of our themes,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, interview with Geoff Bennington, 'On Colleges and Philosophy,' *ICA Documents 4* & 5: *Postmodernism* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986) 66. Referred to as 'On Colleges and Philosophy.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida in Imre Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 15. Referred to as Salusinszky.

subjects and so on and in the choice of people who teach and do research in the College. ('On Colleges and Philosophy' 67)

Autonomy, looked at in a certain way, can become a trade off. Academic freedom protects the right of the researcher to do work in *any* area and in *any* direction. For Derrida, in this bargaining with the state (and in this economy what does the state gain?) it is the state who pays. The college will accept state support only on condition that the state does not encroach on its freedom to do and teach as it pleases. This college is founded on the principles of illegitimacy. In fact, research projects acceptable to other universities would, by definition, be banned from this college because they would have already found their place. Conversely, "something not well received in other institutions but which to us looks necessary, well, we open the college to at least an attempt to constitute this as a real object of research" (Salusinszky 15). This would seem to imply that the research carried out in such an institute would be fundamental as opposed to end-oriented. But, according to Derrida, it is not easy to distinguish one from the other. "Sometimes you may find that fundamental research is end-oriented research, only with a detour. We want to pose this problem, as such, without knowing where we are going" (Salusinszky 16). This college then would not be answerable to consumers.

[T]he first step we have to take, even if we don't believe in the last analysis that these oppositions [between fundamental and goal-oriented research] work, is to claim that we want to undertake no goal-oriented research, to remain free of any programme that could be imposed on us, not only by the state but by many other forces in society, and first we should analyse what this traditional opposition means and to what extent it works. ('On Colleges and Philosophy' 67)

The college is itself a form of fundamental research, and one of the 'ends' of this fundamental research, which does not know where it is going, is to question the relationship between fundamental and end-oriented research. The college becomes, and the research finds its ends, in its performance and therefore cannot completely escape orientation. It must steer a course which exhibits responsibility even while attempting to bar the state and other forces in society from its premises.

In this perspective, responsibility is neither on the side of pure truth nor subject to the governmental or technocratic powers that demand that thought submit to the demands of efficiency and utility, but is stretched by, and towards the coming of the event...this is the effort of the Collège International de Philosophie.<sup>22</sup>

Derrida's interest in this non-university institution is no doubt a function of his fraught relationship with the university in France, so different from his relationship with the North American university.<sup>23</sup>

Here [in the US], the people I know, the people to whom I speak, are on the faculties. In France, it's almost the contrary: I've very few relations with colleagues or with professors in the university. (Salusinszky 19)

If he had not been accepted by the university system in the US he would not have been accepted anywhere there, as there are few *liberal* higher education institutions outside the university in the US. (The many end-oriented research institutions funded by private organisations or the government frequently operate outside the university system but could hardly accommodate somebody such as Derrida whose work demonstrates his problems with directed research.) Derrida's difficulty with the traditional academic path in France has contributed to the willingness with which he has taken up invitations to teach and speak in the Unites States. It seems that from his experience both as a student and as a candidate for a university chair at the Sorbonne, Derrida felt restricted by the necessity to establish his position within the heritage of European philosophy. Pierre Bourdieu, in his study of the French academic scene, notes Derrida's marginal status in the traditional universities there, despite his successes abroad.

[In France,] the distribution of works according to their degree of conformity to academic norms corresponds to the distribution of their authors according to their possession of specifically academic power... I need only mention the

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Geoff Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 266. Referred to as *Jacques Derrida*.

 $<sup>^{23}</sup>$  For an understanding of Derrida's status within the French university system, see *Jacques Derrida* 331 & 334 and Jacques Derrida, 'The time of a thesis: punctuations' in Alan Montefiore, *Philosophy in France Today* 34 – 50.

astonishment of a certain young American visitor, at the beginning of the seventies, to whom I had to explain that all his intellectual heroes, like Althusser, Barthes, Deleuze, Derrida and Foucault... held marginal positions in the university system which often disqualified them from officially directing research.<sup>24</sup>

Of course Derrida has many vehement critics in the United States academy but he has developed relationships with a number of colleges such as the University of California, Yale and Cornell. He frequently visits the United States and has received various visiting professorships. In 1982, the year in which he was preparing his report on the International College of Philosophy, Derrida was nominated for the Andrew Dickson White Professor-at-Large at Cornell University. He was evidently spending time considering the institution that is the university during this period and this became the subject of his inaugural speech at Cornell where he spoke about the foundations and destination of the university.<sup>25</sup>

## iv. At Large in Cornell.

At the beginning of his paper on the university, Derrida draws his audience's attention to what cannot be avoided.

[I]t is impossible, now more than ever, to dissociate the work we do... from a reflection on the political and institutional conditions of that work. Such a reflection is unavoidable. It is no longer an *external* complement to teaching and research; it must make its way through the very objects we work with, shaping them as it goes along with our norms, procedures and aims. ('Principle of Reason' 3)

The paper opens by bringing the audience up to date, up to the moment in which they are situated. "Now more than ever," the onus is on the university and its occupants to be aware of the conditions of their work. It seems that Derrida believes that there is something different about this moment, something which was not a factor before. It is possible that he believes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, 1984, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988) xviii.
<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils,' *Diacritics* 13 (1983): 3-20. Referred to as 'Principle of Reason.'

that there was a time when these conditions *were*, or were believed to be, external, in a manner no longer available. The university now has to accept this responsibility to reflect on the conditions that institute it and to allow the reflections to make their way through the objects 'we' work with. Derrida is not opening the gates fully here. The political and institutional conditions will be filtered through the reflections which the university ('we') carries out. An exploration of its context and conditions, a genealogical survey of its heritage, points the way towards the possibility of a deconstructed university.

Derrida has long been interested in the business of the institution and how it carries out that business. He has been interested to the extent of taking part in the foundation of a college and in his Cornell paper he uses his time to speak of the responsibility the institution has to examine itself, its purpose, its destination. The necessity of this is what distinguishes deconstruction, as he states in another context - that of the French institution.

Here I do no more than name... the necessity of deconstruction. Following the consistency of its logic, it attacks not only the internal edifice, both semantic and formal, of philosophemes, but also what one would be wrong to assign to it as its external housing, its extrinsic conditions of practice: the historical form of pedagogy, the social, economic or political structures of this pedagogical institution. It is because deconstruction interferes with solid structures, "material" institutions, and not only with discourses or signifying representations, that it is always distinct from an analysis or a "critique."<sup>26</sup>

If deconstruction is to do its work it must be seen to be work which is neither criticism nor analysis, and which does not take its allotted place within the given categories of the university. Deconstruction does not recognise time in the usual sense of progression or teleology. Neither must it know its place because one of its tasks is to question the notion of

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Parergon,' *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987) 19-20. Referred to as 'Parergon.' This passage is also quoted in Samuel Weber's essay 'The Limits of Professionalism' in his *Institution and Interpretation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987) in Weber's own translation. Derrida refers to Weber's "remarkable" essay in 'The Principle of Reason' (9).

place, boundary and division and to do that it must not acquiesce to the assignation of a fixed place in the university, as a school of thought within a department. This, for Derrida, is what makes deconstruction unique. It "interferes with solid structures" not only with "discourses." Not waiting to be told where to go, it announces itself at all junctures of the university.

It is with this task in mind that Derrida addresses himself to Cornell and, as a professor-atlarge he feels free to address himself to the university-at-large, that is, the university as institution. The questions he explores are about the origins of the university, its principles of foundation, which have very little to do with history in the conventional, temporal sense. History, in this sense, is not ignored or expelled from Cornell in Derrida's address. It takes the form of a conventional tracking through Aristotle, Heidegger and Kant as a way of reminding his audience that deconstruction is not in the business of doing away with the forefathers (heroes or antiheroes) of the institution even as it uses them to reflect on the institution -atask which is no more and no less than what they did in their own time. In other words, what Derrida is doing is nothing 'new' nor would he advertise it as such. To say that what he is doing is 'new' or 'original' would be to imply that it could become old and outdated and this view would betray what deconstruction is about. Derrida is concerned in this paper with the history of the university from its point of origin in reason and the point of the university in these times of end-oriented and funded research. How far 'back' can we go in exploring origins and foundations? And how far 'out'? Will the questioning of the institution necessarily bring one outside the institution in a movement of self-expulsion?

Derrida is careful to remain within the constraints of pedagogy which he articulates (only to put aside) in 'Otobiographies': "the classic pedagogical procedures of forging links, referring back to prior premises or arguments, justifying one's own trajectory, method, system, and more or less skillful translations, reestablishing continuity and so on" ('Otobiographies' 3). He forges a link between the geographical location of Cornell, at a distance from the town and separated from it by a bridge over an abyss, to alert his audience to the old division between the university and its outside. He maintains that division while surveying this abyss; he does not recommend filling it in. The university, grounded on reason, is suspended above an abyss, one which can be traversed as one goes to and from one's daily work but to which it is necessary to be alert, not to take for granted. The questioner is also suspended, neither inside nor outside the university.

Are we obeying the principle of reason when we ask what grounds this principle which is itself a principle of grounding? We are not – which does not mean we are disobeying it, either. Are we dealing here with a circle or an abyss? The circle would consist in seeking to account for reason by reason... The abyss... would be the impossibility for a principle of grounding to ground itself... Is it rational to worry about reason...? Not *simply*; but it would be over-hasty to seek to disqualify this concern and to refer those who experience it back to their own irrationalism, their obscurantism, their nihilism. ('Principle of Reason' 9)

The point that Derrida consistently makes in his work on the institution is that care is necessary in defining what is deemed appropriate to the academy. It is too easy to say about a certain type of research that it is pointless, irrational or wasteful and has no place in the university. Equally, the work carried out should not be frivolous or self-indulgent. How to distinguish between the wasteful and the useful is not as straightforward as it would appear, hence the caution about hastiness, the admonishment against rubbishing the irrational. The grounds upon which one can call somebody else's work rational or irrational have to be called into question.

Concerned as he is about the state of the institution, Derrida does not use this occasion to call for the reversal of the university to some form of enclave which would continue its work only after burning its bridges. Neither does he see a rôle for the university as a purely utilitarian production facility, carrying on its research at the behest of the government, industrial interests or the military.

Once upon a time it was possible to believe that pure mathematics, theoretical physics, philosophy (and, within philosophy, especially metaphysics and ontology) were basic disciplines shielded from power, inaccessible to

programming by the pressures of the State or, under cover of the State, by civil society or capital interests. The sole concern of such basic research would be knowledge, truth, the disinterested exercise of reason, under the sole authority of the principle of reason... And yet we know better than ever before what must have been true for all time, that this opposition between the basic and the end-oriented is of real but limited relevance. ('Principle of Reason' 12)

Derrida again draws his audience's attention to their particular moment as he did in his opening words. "Now more than ever," "better than ever before": these phrases point to a change in the effect of the university's work. He is careful to point out that "once upon a time it was possible to believe" in some form of autonomous research (as Kant did, when he posited a faculty of philosophy, the autonomous site of legal conflict and removed from external influences); he does not assert that such pure research was a reality. All research has to be funded and is carried out in response to an external stimulant. Commentators such as Derrida will strive to maintain independent viewpoints while they are simultaneously bound to acknowledge the influence the reception of their work has on the development of that work. The reaction of others, not only their 'own' community of professors and students but also the wider community of the media and the politicians, is never without effect on the work of people such as Derrida. How is the university to maintain some form or modicum of autonomy in the face of pressure from all sides? Derrida cannot exclude his own work from this force of influence.

In the course of his Cornell paper, Derrida carries on the traditional antagonism between the university and the press enshrined in the '1915 Declaration of Principles' which spoke of "sensational newspapers [which] have quoted and garbled [classroom] remarks" ('1915 Declaration' 171). His outburst against those "great professors or representatives of prestigious institutions" who criticise texts which "they have obviously never opened or that they have encountered through a mediocre journalism that in other circumstances they would pretend to scorn" ('Principle of Reason' 15) is an example of Derrida's opinion of those who conduct 'illegal' conflicts. Using descriptions of, for example, deconstruction, from mediocre

journals whose writers have not done their work is not acceptable academic practice. according to Derrida. It would be uncharacteristic of him to dismiss the media out of hand. and he does pay some attention to the manner in which deconstruction has been described in the public press but his comments are usually negative and predictably run along the lines of journalists' (and 'professor-journalists') trivialisation of terms they know nothing about. In the Cornell paper Derrida indirectly criticises journalism through direct criticism of a scholar (Walter Jackson Bate) and an Education Secretary and (subsequently) head of the National Endowment for the Humanities (William J. Bennett). They rely on sources from outside the university (such as Newsweek, which Derrida mentions in a footnote) which are necessarily brief and potentially superficial. Rather than dealing with his critics by castigating their use of unorthodox sources and their lack of familiarity with the texts they criticise, it might be more interesting if Derrida spent some time exploring the reasons for the inability of the press to talk about issues such as deconstruction in an acceptable manner and how this affects perceptions of the institution in the wider community. If, "now more than ever" it is impossible for the university to "dissociate the work we do . . . from a reflection on the political and institutional conditions of that work" ('Principle of Reason' 3), it is necessary to pay attention to institutions such as the press and their influence on the work of deconstruction. Derrida does allude to the necessity for "mediology" in 'Sendoffs' but this is for the purposes of defence against what he perceives to be a threat. On the other hand, one can sense Derrida's despair and consequent refusal to deal with the ignorance exhibited by someone as powerful as Bennett who wrote in the Wall Street Journal, and Derrida quotes, "A popular movement in literary criticism called 'Deconstruction' denies that there are any texts at all. If there are no texts, there are no great texts, and no argument for reading" ('Principle of Reason' 15).

This is clearly an unacceptable interpretation of deconstruction, so inane it beggars belief. While Derrida does not deal with it as such – because everything he writes gives it the lie – he does not ignore it; he speaks about it because this is the kind of criticism that, while it might seem facile, is not without influence whose extent cannot be measured. Although a consideration of Bennett's comments might appear to be a waste of time (and Derrida has already asked about how one decides what is waste), their inclusion is an indication of the kind of reflection that Derrida is advocating for the university. Moreover, when somebody with Bennett's power and influence misrepresents one's work to such an extent, they cannot be ignored.

No longer can a university claim autonomy on the basis of reason which allows it to claim its independence from external constraints. Kant's argument about the criticism of reason is based on the strict observance of the rule of conflict which prescribes that one can only argue with reason on the basis of reason.

It is absurd to expect to be enlightened by reason, and at the same time to prescribe to her what side of the question she must adopt. Moreover, reason is sufficiently held in check by its own power, the limits imposed on it by its own nature are sufficient; it is unnecessary for you to place over it additional guards.<sup>27</sup>

Reason does not require external critique because it restricts itself; it is its own arbiter. As far as Kant is concerned, speculative arguments are the business solely of those who are enlightened and who adhere to the principles of reason. It is vital for reason that it be criticised, but only valid critique on the basis of reason will be permitted. This allows Kant to delineate what is proper to reason. As Derrida demonstrates in 'The Principle of Reason,' the university was founded on reason so its claim of autonomy (that is, being answerable only to the authority it recognises) appears unassailable in its circularity. As regards the 'outside' world, Kant asserts that speculation and its critique cannot harm humanity because there is no necessarily practical outcome. At the same time, in a move echoed by the AAUP, he assures his audience that because reason will always prevail, humanity will ultimately benefit from speculative disputes.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (London: Prometheus, 1990)
419.

Allow your opponent to say what he thinks reasonable, and combat him only with the weapons of reason. Have no anxiety for the practical interests of humanity – these are never imperilled in a purely speculative dispute. (*Critique of Pure Reason* 418)

Everything in nature is good for some purpose . . . The objections raised against the fallacies and sophistries of speculative reason, are objections given by the nature of this reason itself, and must therefore have a destination and a purpose which can only be for the good of humanity. (*Critique of Pure Reason* 417)

This circularity is based on the abyss as Derrida shows in his paper. "Up to now" the difficulties inherent in such shaky foundations have been put aside but that can no longer be the case. His point is that the university must still maintain its freedom while acknowledging external influences as he does himself in this paper. When Derrida argues that it is impossible for the university to dissociate itself from a reflection on its conditions he is not advocating that the distinction between the university and its outside should be erased. The university retains an identity in its capacity to reflect its conditions but should not cling to a belief in the possibility of a "compartment of philosophy... which Kant thought ought to be kept unavailable to any utilitarian purpose and to the orders of any power whatsoever in its search for truth" ('Principle of Reason' 13). To do so would be to ignore the possibility that its conclusions could be hijacked by external forces and would exhibit a measure of irrationality or irresponsibility. It is not a question of rejection or assimilation but one of intervention. This prevents the university becoming a passive image of the 'outside' world. It too is part of that world but has a distinctive rôle. If, as Derrida says, "[w]ithin the university itself, forces that are apparently external to it (presses, foundations, the mass media) are intervening in an ever more decisive way" ('Principle of Reason' 13), the response should not be - and cannot be one of acquiescence or expulsion. The university must reflect on these issues, not reflect them, but it should do so at a rhythm which cannot be given as a law.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>28</sup> The reflection Derrida proposes here takes time. Not a paper goes by without his claiming and mourning the lack of time. It would not do to pass over these throwaway lines of Derrida's; if we have learned anything from his work it is that it is worth our while to pay attention to the subtext, the

Onora O'Neill, in her essay on Kant's approach to reason, refers to the criticism that he does not go far enough in providing answers, but constructs a version of reason which offers no ultimate grounds. Her conclusion is that

[t]he Kantian approach to the vindication of reason is fundamentally a modest affair. It does not disclose any hidden route back to [Leibniz's] Principle of Sufficient Reason... All that is vindicated is a precept of thinking and doing without relying on any fundamental principle which either presupposes some arbitrary 'authority,' or cannot be followed by others. Minimal indeed, but far from empty.<sup>29</sup>

This, of course, evokes echoes of deconstruction as "an almost empty motif" and the open, unauthorised yet internally regulated nature of academic freedom. There *is* a certain structure but the guiding principle of that structure is that too much should not be expected of it. Looking for rules means one has already broken the rules. Decisions (about ultimate ground or ultimate ends, the ends of research or the grounds of the university) cannot be made in advance and neither can they be reached as such. They can only be leapt to from the ground that an institution such as the university offers.

It is in terms such as these that Derrida counters his critics within the university. He has frequently been the object of attacks and has consistently guarded his institutional credentials by replying at length and in detail thus adhering to the courtesies of the scholar's method and spirit. His other tack is to refer to these ideals and to accuse his attackers of betraying their scholarly obligations and resorting to "heaping insults." Thus his defences appear reasoned

margins and the extemporaneous comments. Derrida's regular pleas both for his audience's indulgence and for time should not be ignored, highlighting as they do something which might still be possible to find within the academy. His is no less than a request and a demand for academic freedom and this gives us an idea about the problems inherent in portraying Derrida's work in the public press. This issue is explored further in the second chapter.

<sup>29</sup> Onora O'Neill, 'Vindicating Reason,' *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 305.

and reasonable, well within the boundaries of the institution which, as he says in his Cornell address, was founded on reason.

Derrida might question this foundation but he does not deny that at that point and in that place he is submitting himself to its principle ('Principle of Reason' 16). In other words, Derrida is aware that he must sound reasonable while questioning reason or he will not get a hearing. Equally, he can use reason without questioning it when he is defending himself against attacks such as those of Walter Jackson Bate and William Bennett, which may emanate from the institution, but are non-institutional because they do not conform to scholarly methods and spirit. *They* are therefore unreasonable in the sense of being unfair and irrational. This is a different form of irrationalism to that attributed to those who "worry about reason" ('Principle of Reason' 9) which would include Derrida himself. Critics can be made to appear unreasonable by not playing according to the rules of scholarship. This puts them outside the pale of the academy and embeds Derrida more firmly in it.

We can easily see on which side obscurantism and nihilism are lurking when on occasion great professors or representatives of prestigious institutions lose all sense of proportion and control; on such occasions they forget the principles that they claim to defend in their work and suddenly begin to heap insults, to say whatever comes into their head. ('Principle of Reason' 15)

The critics who do not read the texts show all the symptoms of madness: losing all sense of proportion, lacking control, becoming forgetful. Derrida separates out the institution from the non-institution (sanity from insanity, reason from unreason) on the basis of competence, sincerity and patience, that is, on the basis of the terms used to define academic freedom. This partition is doubly enforced by the manner in which Derrida speaks of his critics in the body of his paper. It is not that he leaves his prepared text to harangue his audience about the unfairness of it all but there is a sense of departure from what had gone before and what comes after, the reasoned discussion of the foundations of the university. (On the other hand it could also be seen as the point to which the paper was leading up to all along, a self-insertion into the institution by way of questioning the right of others to be there.) The idea that

Derrida's (or anybody's) work can be divided into his 'real' concerns and into time spent answering his critics is implicit in any discussion of what pertains to the university. Academic freedom seeks to absolve professors and their work from the rough and tumble of public influence but this is clearly not possible. Derrida's work is as much guided by his critics – both scholarly and non-scholarly – as by his supporters and acolytes.

In her essay in *The Future of Academic Freedom* Joan W. Scott makes an important point with regard to the legitimating power of academic freedom and tenure which aspires to bestow a form of immunity. This is pertinent to Derrida's case as his opponents have frequently used his unorthodox writings as a weapon to attack his right to a place in the establishment.<sup>30</sup> If submission to the authorisation of academic freedom guarantees a place in the academy, that freedom has had to stretch to include critics of orthodoxy such as Derrida.

Academic freedom protects those whose thinking challenges orthodoxy; at the same time the legitimacy of the challenge – the proof that the critic is not a madman or a crank – is secured by membership in a disciplinary community based upon shared commitment to certain methods, standards and beliefs... The critic of orthodoxy thus, ironically, must find legitimation in the very discipline whose orthodoxy he or she challenges... But the inseparable other side of that regulatory and enabling authority is that it secures consensus by exclusion. And the grounds for exclusion can be, historically have been, difference – difference from some representative type... or difference from the reigning philosophical and methodological assumptions (about causality, say, or intentionality, or the transparency of fact in the writing of history). (Scott in Menand (ed.) 166-69)

<sup>30</sup> For an example of this see the letter written to *The Times* at the time of the Cambridge 'affair' in 1992 in which the signatories attempt to undermine the legitimacy of Derrida's place in the academy stating that "in the eyes of philosophers, and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigor" (*Points . . . Interviews, 1974-1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 420). The letter is an appendix to an interview in which Derrida says, "I have always been refused a university chair" (*Points* 416).

If one prefers to be taken seriously as a scholar and not be accused of madness one must conform to certain precepts. Questioning such precepts leads to exclusion or to containment, that is, the loss of the privileges of academic freedom. The problem for deconstruction has ever been how to question legitimacy while remaining legitimate. Derrida has always staunchly defended both the scholarship and the trappings of the institution. This maintains his membership of the disciplinary community and bears out his own 'position' as being neither inside nor outside the institution.

If... I was indeed convinced of the necessity for a profound transformation, amounting even to a complete upheaval of university institutions, this was not, of course, to substitute for what existed some type of non-thesis, non-legitimacy or incompetence. In this area I believe in transitions and in negotiation – even if it may at times be brutal and speeded up – I believe in the necessity for a certain tradition, in particular for political reasons that are nothing less than traditionalist, and I believe, moreover, in the indestructibility of the ordered procedures of legitimation, of the production of titles and diplomas and of the authorization of competence. ('Time of a thesis' 42)

Derrida is at pains here, in the course of his 1980 thesis defence at the Sorbonne, and at other places, such as Cornell, to assure his audience that he and his work are legitimate members of the establishment even while he criticises it. The only aspect of the university that Derrida does *not* scrutinise is the value awarded to rigour and competence. These are the standards by which he judges his critics and himself. If there is a founding principle to Derrida's work, so obvious to him that he never stops to examine it, it is his adherence to careful reading and his insistence that others do likewise. A second foundational principle is his insistence that he be allowed to approach his subject by examining *its* foundations. Thus when Derrida talks about literature it is in terms of how it is defined, what space it occupies and how it marks itself off from other 'institutions.' In this his work on literature has many similarities with his work on the academy, in its demand for a certain freedom from programmatic constraints.

## v. A New Way of Reading.

His concern with the limits of institutionality distinguishes Derrida's work on literature from other work which has been called deconstructionist. Derrida's analyses of 'literary' texts have a purpose that goes beyond intratextual critique. Those who took an early interest in Derrida's work such as Wayne Booth (quoted above on p. 27), believed that the prospect of a "deconstructed history" could be "exhilarating," but warned that it would have to be measured against existing standards. Others, such as Frank Kermode (considered below), regarded it as "perfectly applicable" to certain narratives, but did not see its potential for questioning by what standard the 'applicability' of a theory to a text is measured. Derrida works from a different perspective, exploring how disjunctures can prompt questions about delimitation or framing, such as the attempts to specify what literature is or what it should do. The assimilation of deconstruction into departments of literature meant that either it could be used as yet another reading method, conveniently labelled post-structuralist and slotted in somewhere between New Criticism and post-colonialism, or it could draw attention to, and thus disturb, institutional and pedagogical assumptions. Derrida's work was thus taken up by certain people in US literary departments as a new way of reading, sustaining research and fuelling necessary controversy.

The early commentary by Frank Kermode in the first pages of *Critical Inquiry* (in the course of an essay dealing with the unreliable narrator of *The Good Soldier*), on the implications of 'Structure, Sign, and Play,' is symptomatic of the kind of rôle that was being mapped out for Derrida's work and the selective reading to which it was subjected. Kermode hospitably goes out of his way to accommodate a new form of interpretation. In fact, he is at pains to indicate that despite Derrida's *own* misgivings about the possibility of interpretation, a place could be made for him in literary analysis. Kermode translates the late, now much quoted, paragraph from 'Structure, Sign, and Play' about the two interpretations of interpretation. "The one .... that dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin ... The other ... affirms play and tries to pass

beyond man and humanism.<sup>\*31</sup> He goes on, with much equanimity, to allay the possibility that the second form of interpretation could have implications other than a new way of reading the canon. He is not blind to Derrida's monster, announced in the paragraph following the two interpretations. He simply chooses not to look too closely, arguing instead that the second mode of interpretation is "perfectly applicable" to narrative, for example, to *The Scarlet Letter* (Kermode 118). This allows him to ignore Derrida's caution to his audience that it is *not* a question of choosing, not only because a choice would be trivial, but because "we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference" ('Structure, Sign, and Play 293). Denis Donoghue's critique, in the following issue of *Critical Inquiry*, does little to disturb Kermode's argument, other than to assert that what Kermode performs is actually more akin to Derrida's first form of interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Donoghue does not mention the second and, following a reply from Kermode, the editors close the 'debate,' observing that it "takes place on a middle ground" and asking, "What, then, is the dispute about?<sup>\*\*33</sup> The participants were conducting a particular form of literary debate which was soon to be called into question.

Alan Bass (who later translated *L'écriture et la différence* and *La carte postale*) published an essay in *MLN* in 1972 which was more perceptive about the impending changes and signals the magnitude of the effect deconstruction would have on literary theory.<sup>34</sup> Opening his essay with the question "What is literature?" he goes on to discuss *Dissemination*, referring to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 292. I quote Bass's translation rather than Kermode's which he cites as being from Macksey and Donato's *The Structuralist Controversy* but which exhibits a number of discrepancies as the editor of *Critical Inquiry* noted in the following issue, (Dec. 1974) 449.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Denis Donoghue, 'A Reply to Frank Kermode,' Critical Inquiry 1 (1974): 449.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> Editor's Comments, Critical Inquiry 1(1975): 700-701.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Alan Bass, "'Literature'/ Literature' *Velocities of Change: Essays from MLN*, ed. Richard Macksey (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 341-353. Referred to as "'Literature''/ Literature.'

Derrida as "a 'philosopher' whose texts are 'literary' because they have attacked the fundamental notion of 'scientific' truth" ("Literature/ Literature' 341, 342). In the closing pages he writes about the implications of Derrida's work: "[o]ne immediate consequence of this essential openness of texts [as demonstrated in *Dissemination*] is the destruction of the idea of literature" ("Literature"/ Literature' 352). With dramatic portentousness Bass ends on a note which presages the upheavals about to be experienced in departments of literature during later controversies over approaches to literature, theory and the canon.

Because of its illimitability, literature must be seen as annihilating itself, exploding itself and thereby implacably subverting the metaphysical system that has *named* it such in order to confine the *letter*, which as Rousseau has taught us, *kills*. ("'Literature''/ Literature' 353; original emphasis)

In 1979, J. Hillis Miller in his address to the American Departments of English (ADE) seminar, voices the concerns about "the changes [that] are coming from society in one direction and from within the discipline itself in the other." <sup>35</sup> By 'society,' Miller explains, he means "parents, school boards, trustees, regents, legislatures, the 'media'" ('Function of Rhetorical Study' 10). Even if New Criticism is "still powerful," Miller notes that departments of literature are beginning to teach texts which are not part of the traditional canon and are being influenced by new forms of criticism such as,

structuralist criticism... psychoanalytical criticism, mostly imported from France... a revived Marxist and sociological criticism... reader response... [and] finally, a form of literary study that concentrates on the rhetoric of literary texts... [which] method is sometimes called 'deconstruction.' ('Function of Rhetorical Study' 11)

Miller uses the opportunity of this "keynote address" to mention the upcoming publication of *Deconstruction and Criticism* and gives an example of a deconstructive reading. His analysis of the current state of affairs in departments of literature, his declaration of allegiance to deconstruction, together with Kermode's attempt to continue as before, and Bass's warnings

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'The Function of Rhetorical Study at the Present Time,' *ADE Bulletin* 62 (1979): 10.

of explosions, provide the context for an understanding of the background of the 'culture wars' and deconstruction's place within them.

It is not that Derrida sets to destroy or 'explode' the literary genre. Many of his texts focus on writers who could find a place in departments of literature but, as Derek Attridge points out in his 'Prefaces' to *Acts of Literature*, the works Derrida focuses on "in some way 'perform' literature, put it into play, establish and question its laws, operate at some internal distance from the institution and the category which they at the same time confirm."<sup>36</sup> In other words Derrida is concerned still with the institution, the institution that is the university *and* the institution that is literature. It is not a question of his 'dealing with' something, that having written about it, it has been dealt with and can be put back on the shelf to recover from its ordeal. In his interview with Attridge, ""This Strange Institution Called Literature", 'Derrida disturbs its borders by stating that literature is an institution which "tends to overflow the institution" (*Acts of Literature* 36). The terms Derrida uses to describe the institution of literature are uncannily like the terms of academic freedom which both define and realise, in all its diversity, the work of the university.

[L]iterature seemed to me [during my adolescence], in a confused way, to be the institution which allows one to *say everything* in *every way*... What we call literature (not belles-lettres or poetry) implies that license is given to the writer to say everything he wants or everything he can, while remaining shielded, safe from all censorship, be it religious or political. (*Acts of Literature* 36-37; original emphasis)

Literature is not wholly encompassed or defined by the university. Yet it is an institution, according to Derrida, which claims for itself, and is described by, a freedom which echoes the self-definition of the university. Derrida says in this interview that he signed, but did not completely go along with, a letter protesting the fatwah against Salman Rushdie which "said that literature has a 'critical function.'" For him this is a limitation of literature, it gives it a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Derek Attridge, ed. Acts of Literature (New York: Routledge, 1992) ix.

programme and a directive which would be too restricting. In language similar to that used to defend fundamental research, Derrida warns against limiting the scope of literature.

I am not sure that "critical function" is the right word. First of all, it would limit literature by fixing a mission for it, a single mission. This would be to finalize literature, to assign it a meaning, a program and a regulating ideal, whereas it could also have other essential functions, or *even to have no function*, no usefulness outside itself. (*Acts of Literature* 38; emphasis added)

Implicated as they are in each other, these two institutions, literature and the university, are not parallel and any analogy drawn from one to the other would get tangled up in the ties between them. The two institutions combine and separate along various points, neither united nor completely apart. Derrida cannot work within, or with, either institution unless he examines their conditions of existence. It was this aspect of his work that was often effaced when deconstruction began to make its way into departments of literature.

Derrida's first oral presentation in the United States marked a watershed not only in his own career but also for departments of literature. His work was gradually disseminated from a specific point in 1966 to a time in the late 1970s when deconstruction was a word most people in departments of literature would have heard with varying levels of understanding. All convenient fictions or strategic narratives have a title, be it 'The University' or 'Literature' or 'Deconstruction.' They 'exist' but not in the way their titles suggest; on closer inspection they reveal themselves, or are revealed, as something else, related to what they aspired to be, but only distantly. Like proper names, they are no more than "metonymic contractions."<sup>37</sup> In the case of the propagation of a certain (uncertain) practice called deconstruction by its popularisers, proponents and critics there are markers to indicate that what is being written is deconstructive or even about deconstruction. These markers include key words such as, 'decentred' *différance*, 'dissemination,' *pharmakon*; overloaded terms such as 'text,'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Gayatri Spivak, 'Introduction' to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) liv. Referred to as Spivak 'Introduction.'

'writing,' 'always already,' 'binary oppositions,' 'subject,' re-mark,' 'origin,' 'foundation.' A position is taken up, and it is worth remembering that it was difficult if not impossible not to 'know' something about deconstruction, given one's time and place (such as the US university in the 1970s) even if what one knows is merely the name of a marker and could be way off the mark. Derrida often remarks that those who criticise his work have not read it even in the most straightforward meaning of the verb 'to read.' But even those who have not read about deconstruction or who have not read deconstruction or who have not read deconstructively but write something which includes it, have taken their place in the story and have influenced the movement of deconstruction to its present condition.<sup>38</sup> Any attempt at 'tracing' the 'development' of deconstruction is in some way a betrayal of it; a failure to escape from the teleological models which it would question. Such a tracing might be legitimate if it looked at the progress of deconstruction indirectly, that is, if the way in which departments of literature dealt with the deconstructive phenomenon was examined rather than deconstruction 'itself.' This points to the idea of two deconstructions: the deconstruction adopted and adapted by departments of literature throughout the United States and the deconstruction practised by Derrida. A third type of deconstruction might be deconstruction as it is portrayed by those who are hostile to it but it is not in fact separable from the other two. It should come as no surprise that the two deconstructions are posited only for convenience. They are, however, resilient. J. Hillis Miller sketches out the conventional

<sup>38</sup> This is possibly what Derrida had in mind when he talks about "the traffic of that surreptitious circulation without rigorous reading" in an interview to Michael Sprinker in April 1989, that is, during the time of the Paul de Man controversy (examined here in chapter four). Although Derrida is speaking about how Heidegger's influence was to be found in the French university of the 1960s even among those who had not read him, he could be as easily talking about his own experiences at the time. "We all have an idiosyncratic or idiomatic way of working, reading, not reading, of reading without reading, not reading while reading, to avoid without avoiding to deny… But there was that impregnation, that is, a certain presence, an authority, a legitimacy of the Heideggerian discourse that was in the air, in references... You know that these motifs weigh upon a philosophical discourse even if one doesn't read the author." 'Politics and Friendship,' *The Althusserian Legacy*, eds. E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (New York and London: Verso, 1993) 190-91.

narrative of what happened to deconstruction, concluding that "however cogently this story is shown to be a linguistic construct based on a whole set of radical misreadings, it is still likely to be unconsciously assumed."<sup>39</sup> Thus any narrative of deconstruction should be disrupted at a pace equal to its construction.

Miller recounts how scholars justified a turn to history, to "thematic and mimetic interpretations of literature, to the social, to multiculturalism" by denigrating deconstruction and post-structuralism. In order to do this deconstruction "had to be falsely identified as nihilistic . . . as concerned only with an enclosed realm of language . . . as ahistorical, quietistic, as fundamentally elitist and conservative" ('The Disputed Ground' 82). Thus the so-called 'Yale critics' could be depicted as New Critics, with the discovery of de Man's wartime writing serving to confirm their questionable politics. However, seeing as it was difficult to paint Derrida in similar colours, he could be conveniently expelled from literature departments and categorised as a philosopher with the result that the institutional – or political – implications of Derrida's work are nullified. What remains of Derrida's work leaves its mark on departments of literature as a reading method. This is the story usually told with regard to deconstruction and it conveniently sidelines some of his central occupations.

called deconstruction has arrived and is preasured. Gove a

Earlier in this chapter Derrida's work on the institution and academic freedom was examined. This is a 'big' issue, one which looks at the history of the university, its relation to its society, its aspirations, its influences and its ideologies and values. Leaving in abeyance, for the moment, any claim that Derrida has more intellectual rights to the word 'deconstruction' and what it means (and that therefore anything which he chooses to concentrate on is more important), there is still an underlying, unacknowledged belief at work that the issue of the institution is of more importance than something that goes on in a class within a department

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'The Disputed Ground: Deconstruction and Literary Studies,' *Deconstruction is\in America*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995): 83. Referred

within that institution. The figure of boxes within boxes would diminish what is done in the smallest box of them all, the classroom. If we approach it from the other 'side,' that of the classroom, we can see deconstruction working as a pedagogical tool, used to analyse a specific text, what Frank Kermode called "new ways with old novels."<sup>40</sup> Joining these two deconstructions together and at the border between them, is the deconstruction which questions what texts can be read, analysed and assayed, what that means for the department, and what that means for the university. Departments of Literature attract attention from commentators on the university so that controversies or changes within the department tend to be extrapolated for use as indicators of what is going on in the university as a whole. Before we know it we are back at the borders of the institution once more.

Certain early readers of Derrida's work became sufficiently enabled by *their own interpretation* of what his texts did to uplift a recognisable method and deposit it onto literary, philosophical, psychoanalytical, sociological, and ethnological texts. However different or even oppositional these interpretations might be, they are identifiable if only from the terms used or the references appended to their articles. Names are dropped, words inserted, there is cross-reference and recognition of others who are doing the same thing and thus something called deconstruction has arrived and is spreading. How many of those at the 1966 colloquium would call themselves 'structuralists'?<sup>41</sup> How many would now admit to being 'deconstructionists'? Not out of some sense of embarrassment at the tag but because to assume such a label would be proof that one is not what one calls oneself, which is why

to as 'The Disputed Ground.'

<sup>40</sup> Frank Kermode, 'Novels: Recognition and Deception,' *Critical Inquiry* 1 (1974): 118.

<sup>41</sup> As John Sturrock points out in his introduction to *Structuralism and Since: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), four of the five thinkers considered in his book would not "be at all happy to be labelled a 'structuralist,' which each would see as a gross violation of his freedom of thought" (3). Three of those four, Barthes, Lacan and Derrida, participated in the conference.

Derrida has so many problems with the word 'deconstruction.'<sup>42</sup> As soon as it is applied (*because* 'it' 'is' 'applied') to a reading or a text it is not what it claims to be. Deconstruction could not exist as such but there was a 'school' that went by that name and even if it was a misnomer, as it had to be, responsibility had to be taken for it.

Derrida assumed the responsibility for introducing the word to the North American academy in 1966.<sup>43</sup> His name was made by this occasion and by the three books which followed – marked and re-marked in the thousands of bibliographical references which have produced and sustained his influence, whether that name was used improperly or not. In that introductory moment when Derrida spelled out what he was and was not doing, it seems that he was not only trying to prevent misunderstanding or foreseeing what reactions would arise but was also taking responsibility – responding to his own writing even as he spoke it. From his first words Derrida was quick to insert his precautionary remarks – warning his audience that he would be using a word ('event') which would make them uneasy (if they were true structuralists – but this could not be assumed). They might not like the word but he will use it anyway – with their permission. "Let us speak of an 'event,' nevertheless, and let us use quotation marks to serve as a precaution" ('Structure, Sign, and Play' 278). The event marked here is the introduction of caution before he has even started. When Derrida begins with a

<sup>42</sup> This is a point I return to in chapter four, but meanwhile it is worth noting that although Derrida would not call himself a 'deconstruction*ist*,' he has spoken about "being true to what I teach as a deconstructive philosopher." In the next breath he reminds his audience that his life is "irreducible" to what he teaches (Derrida speaking during a roundtable at Loughborough University in November 2001 at a conference titled, 'Life After Theory'). Derrida is very careful about what he says. He is not saying that he *is* a deconstructive philosopher – earlier he had characterised himself as "act[ing] as a philosopher and also as something else by asking questions about philosophy."

<sup>43</sup> "It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself." Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 282. Referred to as 'Structure, Sign, and Play.' self-cautionary gesture he is also warning his audience, conditioning them to expect something different, a parental (or paternal) warning that the following programme might disturb. We had better watch it then.

We have seen how in his Cornell paper Derrida laid claim to his own place within the institution by gesturing to accepted pedagogical and scholarly standards, by asserting his right to academic freedom and by charging his opponents with crimes against reason. In the 1966 paper Derrida affirms his inalienable right to a place in the US university even if, technically, he is an alien. Even a visiting professor can make his claim for academic freedom; independent as it is from the American constitution one does not have to be a citizen to lay claim to it. In this his first paper given in the United States, and long before he addresses Cornell, Derrida appeals to reason using the term "sense" with its unspoken appeal to 'common' sense; he is not without it, his work is not nonsense, he announces, in pre-emption of what he knows will come.

There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history. ('Structure, Sign, and Play' 280)

This attempt to forestall misreading was not enough if some of the subsequent criticisms of Derrida are anything to go by. Having appealed to sense he appeals to tradition, another way of assuring that he comes in peace and is no alien, crank or madman. He will take his place "continuing to read philosophers *in a certain way*" ('Structure, Sign, and Play' 288; original emphasis). At the end of his paper and before the discussion, Derrida points to the "after," the future, where the question is not one of choice between the two interpretations of interpretation, already quoted: the one which "dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin [and] the other which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism" ('Structure, Sign, and Play' 292). It is not the right time to make choices for two reasons. First, because "here we are in a region (let us say, provisionally, a region of historicity) where the category of choice seems particularly trivial; and in the second, because

we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différance* of this irreducible difference" ('Structure, Sign, and Play' 293). Derrida might be in a region where choice has become trivial but most of his critics, popularisers and proponents are not. The task which he sets, what must first be done, namely, the attempt to "conceive of a common ground" will, of course, never be done, as he prescribes it in the same moment that he introduces what Spivak has called "his master concept," *différance* (Spivak 'Introduction' xliii). At the moment of its introduction into the North American academy, at the moment when it is being used by Derrida to mark out an area of where irreducible difference can be conceived, he describes the choices which *should not* be made and thereby reinscribes those choices into the subsequent career of his work as we will see in the next chapter.

What deconstruction *has* done is to call attention to academic freedom, especially in Derrida's work on the difference between end-oriented and fundamental research and his work on the institution both in France and in the United States. Derrida refers to the university as "perhaps the only place within society where play is possible to such an extent." By "play," in this instance, Derrida means "study without waiting for any efficient or immediate result."<sup>44</sup> His speech at Cornell, 'The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils' is a reminder to those who are listening that the work of demarcating the borders of (and within) the university and the department is never done. It might be the "only place within society" where 'inefficiency' and delay is tolerated but that does not imply that it is a static refuge. Derrida concludes his Cornell paper with some questions for his audience.

Let me recall my *incipit* and the single question that I raised at the outset: how can we not speak, today, of the university? Have I said it or done it? Have I said how one must not speak, today, of the university? Or have I rather spoken as one should not do today, within the University? Only others can answer. Beginning with you. ('Principle of Reason' 20)

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida in Imre Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 19-20. Referred to as Salusinszky. Derrida is concerned to maintain a distinction for the university; he has never believed that the university should only answer to the utilitarian needs of those who influence it from outside. His wish for the institution he helped found in France was that it be vigilant with regard to its autonomy from the state. For him the university is essential to deconstruction but it is also essential that the university be permanently in deconstruction. The 'we' and the 'you' referred to here are those who are members of the university; it would seem, then, that Derrida is reinscribing the division between the university and its outside. 'We' (which includes Derrida and his audience) ask the questions, 'you' (the audience) must work on the answers. Yet in the middle of this enclosed circle of initiates Derrida inserts a question about the 'University' which seems to open the circle out again (and here we hear echoes of his question about circles and abysses). What is the question? Is Derrida asking if he has spoken out of turn, been discourteous to his hosts in the manner in which he has spent the past hour? Earlier in his speech he had confessed his anxiety with regard to the Cornell occasion, aware that it might appear that he was acting "with all the unseemliness of a stranger who in return for noble hospitality plays prophet of doom with his hosts" ('Principle of Reason' 5). Or is he asking whether he has spoken from too far "within the University" (the capitalised 'University' in general), from which it would be wrong ("one should not do today") to speak because it implies an area cut off from the concerns of the "political and institutional conditions" of the university's work? In other words, Derrida is asking whether he has gone too far in either direction: too far out towards the boundaries, ignorant of the etiquette of the university and therefore something of an outsider? Or too far into the heart within the University and therefore something of a high priest encircled by initiates, the possessor of secret knowledge? This in and out movement of deconstruction in relation to the university is what has prevented it from becoming a movement that has been and gone. Deconstruction disrupts traditional institutional designations by maintaining a position neither on the edges of the university nor in its centre. To be able to demonstrate how it does this it is necessary to try to show where the edges of the university are situated. Here, academic freedom was used as the defining principle which dictates, albeit problematically and in no way finally, where the university begins and ends. Deconstruction, especially in Derrida's writing, tries to maintain its apartness while being a part of the institution. This is evident in the statements Derrida has made about his place in the institution, statements which have been selected here to demonstrate that not only was deconstruction instrumental in causing anxiety within the university and within departments of literature, it also experienced its own anxiety about acceptance. This anxiety produces deconstruction from behind, negatively as it were, and has influenced the movement of deconstruction as much as any positive statements about what it is or does. It is in this moment of concern, Derrida's 'Have I gone too far?' that a place within the university has been claimed for deconstruction even as it refuses a tenured position and declares its freedom to redefine what 'too far' might be.

In this chapter I have foregrounded the difficulties the American university faced in fulfilling its remit towards a public which could not always see the benefit of the kind of work being carried out if the results were not immediately and obviously applicable in some pragmatic way. This difficulty is part of the legacy of the German university model. The AAUP Declaration of 1915 insisted on professors having their own space in which to work unimpeded by adverse public opinion which might find their work incomprehensible or even distasteful. Professors of course would accept reasonable criticism from their peers as long as the work which went into that criticism was of a scholarly standard and was not motivated by reasons other than those of promoting knowledge. The 1940 Statement recognised the necessity for "public understanding" of what academic freedom entails and, as Derrida has said, people can take or leave the results of scholarly research ('1940 Statement' 34). Quite often, however, the public learn about what is happening in the university through the mass media and this is never a neutral medium. That the media could have a harmful effect on the university was recognised as far back as 1915 when the AAUP referred to the twist being put on certain classroom statements by the public press. This would be familiar territory to anybody who experienced the so-called cultural wars of the 1980s in the North American campus as this received disproportionate media attention and will be explored in the next chapter.

#### i. Introduction

# **CHAPTER TWO**

## **CAUGHT UP IN THE WAR:**

# **DECONSTRUCTION AND THE PUBLIC PRESS**

## i. Introduction

This chapter continues the study of the relationship of deconstruction with the North American university by examining how deconstruction was dealt with as a feature of the 'culture wars.' It focuses on the difficulties experienced by Derrida and others when they engage with the public media. This engagement produces an inevitable double bind: the necessity of dealing with and writing in the public press coupled with the impossibility of doing so on anything other than its own terms (resulting in a nondeconstructive exchange), and the simultaneous but equally impossible demand for propaedeutic explication before deconstruction can be said to begin. Deconstruction has to start somewhere but any propaedeutic work, coming as it does before deconstruction, must be nondeconstructive (yet this would be a different 'nondeconstruction' to that which has gone on in the public press) to be predeconstructive.<sup>1</sup> One way of beginning this explanatory work might be to call terms such as 'deconstruction' into question or to insert a cautionary note of vigilance with regard to terms which are used too fluently and quickly. Such a task has proved too onerous for the 'deconstructionists' and for those who would represent them either positively or negatively. Three conclusions are reached from this examination of deconstruction in conflict with, and in, the public press: deconstruction is rejected by both the left and the right sides of the cultural wars, it is misrepresented by the public media, and 'deconstructionists' cannot do a better job themselves in the public press.

<sup>1</sup> A 'deconstructive' reader or writer might point out that the idea that there is a 'before' to deconstruction is problematic in itself.

The so-called 'culture wars' or 'PC wars' occupied an amount of space in certain nonacademic publications in the early 1990s and deconstruction was a frequent target of attack and derision. The terms 'PC' and 'culture' wars have been used interchangeably in many commentaries but are not strictly synonymous although there is some overlap between them. The 'Political Correctness wars' arose when specific developments such as equality legislation came in contact with long-held assumptions about language and behaviour. The 'culture wars' were more narrowly focussed on how social change was impinging on the canons of culture. This had wide-ranging effects from the funding of marginalised artists to the re-writing of booklists for undergraduate literature courses. Both the 'PC' and 'culture' conflicts signalled a widespread sense of social upheaval, but the focus here is solely on how this was reflected in accounts in the public press of what was happening within the academy.

The opposing sides can be broadly (and this is part of the problem: the urgency of communication prescribes such short cuts) described as the right-wing neoconservatives and the liberal (or radical, depending on one's view) left.<sup>2</sup> Deconstruction was used as a scapegoat by one side and as excess baggage that could be jettisoned when the going got tough by the other. As the right commandeered the pages of the public press the academic left looked on and acknowledged its lack of effective tactics in an area that was unsuited if not inimical to any form of thoughtful critique. There was a need to adapt to this new medium even if it meant sacrificing a certain amount of rigour. Neither side really took note of, or questioned, the territory over which they fought and the paradigm of conflict which they were enacting. The left were convinced that they were protecting the last site of independent critique and that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> As an indicator of just how valueless such labels are, it is worth remembering that Derrida has named himself a conservative in certain circumstances such as the preservation of the educational institution. "So you see, I am a very conservative person. I love institutions and I spent a lot of time participating in new institutions, which sometimes do not work. At the same time, I try to dismantle not institutions but some structures in given institutions which are too rigid or are dogmatic or which work as an obstacle to future research." (Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 8).

the preservation of it was an end in itself. Thus the old curriculum would be replaced by the new shinier version and everything would go on much as before except there would be more women\nonwhites\gays in positions of power (either at the podium or on the reading lists). Meanwhile, the conservative right were fighting for traditional Western values embodied in something like survey courses called 'Great Books of Western Civilisation.'

Writers such as Derrida and Bill Readings approach the issues from a different perspective. Readings tries to stand to one side of the warring factions and "in a sense . . . draw the lesson that it is necessary to think the institution from deconstruction."<sup>3</sup> According to him neither side has taken into account the change within the academy which has emptied it of any definable purpose or value. The culture wars have thus arisen "between those who hold cultural power but fear that it no longer matters and those whose exclusion from that cultural power allows them to believe that such power would matter if only they held it" (Readings 114). The real power of advanced capitalism, that is, "the high stakes game," has "moved to another table" (Readings 104). As described by Readings, the university as a centre of reason or cultural value (the characterisation of it by Kant and the German Idealists respectively) has been replaced by the university as a centre for excellence – a value without reference. Readings' suggestion of a university which remains aware of the opaque nature of the social bond is influenced by the deconstructive questioning of the conditions of communication. The idea that it is possible with practice or with a necessary reduction in intellectual standards to communicate with a nonacademic public is cast into doubt along with the possibility of any form of transparent communication. Unlike some writers who advocate the popularisation (and unavoidable simplification) of theories such as deconstruction, Derrida turns the responsibility over to the reader. Communication may not be possible but it should at least be attempted. Readers should therefore take it upon themselves to learn how to read carefully

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996) 219, note 19. Referred to as Readings.

and with some understanding of the issues. This does not offer a solution but opens the circle of conflict up – or reminds us that it is inherently incomplete. Derrida (in a lecture which Geoffrey Bennington later characterises as being "written, 'notoriously,' in May 1968"<sup>4</sup>) posits two strategies of deconstruction which are implicated in each other. The first is akin to that which has been described in the pages of the public press. The second is more like the kind of complex operation which insistently reminds us of the problematic site on which conflict is enacted.

[O]ne has nothing from the inside where "we are," but the choice between two strategies:

- a. To attempt an exit and a deconstruction without changing terrain, by repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic, by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is, equally, in language. Here, one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, *relifting (relever)*, at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs. The continuous process of making explicit, moving toward an opening, risks sinking into the autism of the closure.
- b. To decide to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference . . .

A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction.<sup>3</sup>

Peggy Kamuf attempts this continuity and irruption in *The Division of Literature or the University in Deconstruction* (examined later in this chapter) as she 'lifts' (but does not completely disengage) deconstruction away from the controversies it has been caught up in. This deconstruction would be unrecognisable to those academics and nonacademics who bandy it about in the pages of debate produced during the PC wars. Yet the 'two'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Bennington 'Deconstruction and the Philosophers (The Very Idea),' Oxford Literary Review 10 (1988): 101.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Ends of Man,' *Margins of Philosophy* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Press, 1982) 135.

deconstructions are not unrelated and it is the connection between them that is the crux of the communicative problem. That problem is the focus of this chapter.

### ii. Two anecdotes.

([I]n the Spring of 1992), at a conference open to the public at which I was responding to a keynote address by David Lehman, I was asked by someone from the audience what deconstruction meant. It was clearly a lehman's question  $\dots$  and I gave an incomprehensible, article-length answer, partly because I was afraid to say, in front of smart and well-informed peers (including – gulp – Barbara Johnson), something more like 'deconstruction suggests that everything is relational to everything else and therefore can't be defined in and of itself. Let me give you an example: male\female' – which, I think, works better, and has more direct social consequences, than deconstructing speech and writing or presence and absence. (Michael Bérubé)<sup>6</sup>

One day, two years ago [1992], when I was in Cambridge – there was this terrible honorary degree crisis in Cambridge – and a journalist took the microphone and said, 'Well, could you tell me, in a nutshell, what is deconstruction?' Sometimes of course, I confess, I am not able to do that. But sometimes it may be useful to try nutshells. (Jacques Derrida)<sup>7</sup>

These two incidents occurring as they do at a contact point between the university and its outside (but recounted in academic texts), highlight the communicative problems between the academic community and the public. The participants perform their prescribed rôles and whether those rôles were prescribed solely by their surroundings or whether they were assigned in the subsequent telling is arguable. The journalist and the member of the public (Bérubé somehow inferred that his questioner was a nonacademic person as is suggested by

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Michael Bérubé, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London: Verso, 1994) 167. Original ellipsis. Referred to as Bérubé.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 16.

his pun on lehman/layman), ask their straightforward and slightly confrontational questions (confrontational because straightforward). One academic, Derrida, does not tell us in this account how he answered - although he had earlier in an interview with the Cambridge Review in 1992 where he also mentions, but does not describe in detail, the exchange between himself and the journalist.<sup>8</sup> The journalist was apparently "surprised" at Derrida's "difficulty" in responding to the question. One can imagine the implication of this surprise: if the socalled 'father' or 'dean' of deconstruction can't explain it without difficulty, how are the rest of us supposed to understand it? Derrida's difficulty is not, of course, in explaining deconstruction but in explaining it under the constraints of the immediate situation. This direct exchange between the journalist and Derrida is a nutshell in itself of the difficulties experienced when the university tries to explain itself to the public medium. The other academic, Bérubé, believes subsequently that he did not give an appropriate answer because what he said was too long and was aimed more at his academic colleagues than at the questioner.9 The intention here is not to set the problem right or give the correct answer to the question 'tell me in one sentence and in words of less than four syllables what deconstruction is,' but to show how such questions constitute and demonstrate the communicative divide between the university and the public and between different forms of deconstruction. Questions are asked and answers attempted but there is a mismatch between them and neither participant feels satisfied with the outcome. The divisions are further aggravated when one party speaks from a position of unquestioning belief in the qualities of succinctness, directness and clarity while the other is put at a disadvantage by any display of hesitancy, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *Honoris Causa*: "This is *also* extremely funny", 'trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Points*... *Interviews*, 1974-1994, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 406. Referred to as *Honoris Causa*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Bérubé's anecdote exemplifies the tendency I described in the introduction, of academics to continue to bypass the public, even when they appear to be addressing it. Bill Readings observes, "it is noteworthy how often intellectuals tend to forget about the position of the listener in favor of worrying solely about the speaking position or position of enunciation" (Readings 185).

requirement for a detour or for reference to an intellectual heritage which their interlocutor might not share.

What concerns 'liberal' or 'left-wing' academic writers such as Michael Bérubé, Cary Nelson, Joan Scott and others is that developments in the universities, specifically in departments of the humanities, were used as points of attack from the right wing. The 'PC Wars' were waged on the pages of the public press and Bérubé in his book *Public Access* has described the success with which the detractors have dubbed their opponents with catchy but loaded terms such as "McCarthyite" and "thought police."<sup>10</sup>

The smear campaign against contemporary scholarship in the humanities has successfully set the terms for further public discussion on the subject . . . such campaigns, however dishonest, can be devastatingly effective whether they focus on deconstruction or the writings of Lani Guinier . . . ['political correctness'] refers variously to liberal hypersensitivity, leftist dogmatism, or ludicrous euphemisms . . . You can be labelled PC for worrying about the rainforest, reading Jacques Derrida, disliking Rush Limbaugh, or just saying 'African American' in daily speech. (Bérubé ix-x)

It is the inclusion of Derrida and deconstruction on the list of targets that is of interest here. How did deconstruction end up being included among the PC labels? The first part of this chapter will be given over to an examination of how deconstruction found itself in the company of contentious issues prevalent in the American university of the 1980s and early 1990s. The second part looks at descriptions of deconstruction in the pages of the public press in the United States. How are deconstruction and its practitioners portrayed in these articles and do they confirm stereotypical images of what occurs within the university? The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> George Will in a "nationally syndicated commentary" reprinted in *Debating P. C.: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses*, ed. Paul Berman (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992) 258-61 uses "thought police" to describe those who conduct "racial awareness seminars." Jim Neilson in 'The Great PC Scare,' *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy*, ed. Jeffrey Williams (New York: Routledge, 1995) gives a list of the "media representations of PC [as being] identified with fascism" 60-62.

controversies within the university with regard to feminism, multiculturalism and left-wing theories have been covered in the American public press, usually in the context of focussing on the changes to the curriculum in the humanities and the reformulation of the literary canon. Deconstruction, however, has neither a specific ethnological base nor an ethical core value centred on a desire for equality, the demands of which are voiced in all social institutions, the university being only one among others. Yet in its concern with logocentrism and with the implicit assumptions of the Western metaphysical tradition, deconstruction *has* a rôle in the transformation of institutions – although this assertion should not place it too quickly on the left wing because the outcome in terms of equality is never assumed. The third part of the chapter examines Derrida's reaction to the public press. Exasperated by misconceptions, he blames writers for their lack of care and diligence. He turns the responsibility over to the readers in a move that acknowledges both the difficulty of conveying something like deconstruction in the pages of the popular press and the failure of its supporters to adapt their writing to the medium.

When it comes to describing deconstruction, in many cases the language used in the public press (by academics and nonacademics) suggests that it is an insidious growth which would take over large areas of the academy. It is described as a form of arcane, jargon-ridden anarchy. Misconceptions about deconstruction are used by its opponents *within* the university in the ongoing debate 'over' it. Thus Derrida describes a kind of mutation which seems to overtake those professors who write for the public press. They use their right to academic freedom yet do not adhere to its attendant responsibilities to produce work of a scholarly standard. After all, if they have the right to promulgate their beliefs in any medium does this mean that different standards apply when speaking in the public forum? If anything, those standards should be even higher in such a context, Derrida would argue.

What certain academics should be warned against is the *temptation of the media*. What I mean by this is not the normal desire to address a wider public, because there can be in that desire an authentically democratic and legitimate political concern... This temptation of the media encourages these intellectuals to renounce the academic discipline normally required "inside" the university.<sup>11</sup>

The desire to address a wider public is "normal" in Derrida's eyes. It is a manifestation of the rôle the university plays in society at large and a tacit assumption that the results of such work should be shared. Yet, for him, the discipline demanded within the university is also normal. When these two norms are brought together for a public audience in the form of work which displays acceptable scholarly standards (an example of which might be Derrida's two essays for Le Monde supplements - examined later in this chapter - published together under the title The Other Heading), one might begin to see the kind of communication that might be possible between the university and the public via the public press. This chapter aims to highlight the manner in which Derrida redraws the communicative borders between the university and the public press. The ability of certain professor-journalists to produce, in the press, work which is not academic not because it is not published in the academy but because it does not adhere to the kinds of standards which pertain there, is an example of the kind of simplifying, programmatic, reactive practices which Derrida warns his readers against. For him the division is less between the university and the public press (that division does exist but is at least remarked and made more complex by Derrida's use of quotation marks around the word "inside" above) than between those who are prepared to read and those who are not.

### iii. Mixed Company: How Deconstruction Found Itself in the 'Culture Wars'.

In the course of the 1980s and the early 1990s the debates surrounding diverse concerns such as gender studies, gay studies, affirmative action and canon revision prompted (and were fuelled by) the publication of a number of books about the academy, released by nonacademic presses, and reviewed in nonacademic magazines and newspapers. Books such as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Honoris Causa: "This Is Also Extremely Funny," trans. Marian Hobson and Christopher Johnson, *Points* . . . *Interviews*, 1974-1994, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 401-402.

Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* and Paul Berman's *Debating PC: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses* which were all published between 1987 and 1992, purported to tell the public what was going on in the higher education institutions of their country.<sup>12</sup> According to Michael Bérubé, attacks on the academy in books such as Kimball's and Bloom's (which were funded by right-wing organisations such as the Olin Foundation and the Institute for Educational Affairs) were frequent and vehement enough to warrant intercession by left-wing or liberal academics to stem the damage. Bérubé believes that the right wing have been winning the war in the public arena partly because they do not play by the rules of academic integrity and partly because they hold sway in some of the most influential organs of the public press. His book, *Public Access*, is concerned with the so-called PC wars which briefly took over (some of) the pages of the broadsheets. Bérubé believes that there has been an orchestrated campaign by the right to delegitimise those who do not agree with their politics and that one of the strategies they use is to confirm the anxieties of

<sup>12</sup> Allan Bloom, The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987); Roger Kimball, Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); Dinesh D'Souza, Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus (New York: Free Press, 1991); Paul Berman, Debating P. C.: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses (New York: Dell Publishing, 1992). As Kimball notes in the first chapter of his book, "As it happens, the most widely noticed contributions to the debate over the canon in recent years have also been amongst the most reviled in the academy: E. D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987] and Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind . . . Indeed, Professor Bloom's book, after an extraordinarily positive reception in the nonacademic press, has been subjected to an unremitting barrage of criticism and abuse from the academic Left . . . both books are highly critical of the current situation in the academy. And both garnered extraordinary public attention. The Closing of the American Mind was number one on The New York Times best-seller list for the better part of a year, while Cultural Literacy followed close behind at number two . . . Their commercial success is one of many suggestions in contemporary cultural life of how widespread is the concern about the state of American higher education" (Kimball 3-4). The publishing houses named for each of these books act as an indicator of their remit. The readership aimed at was clearly not confined to the academy.

Americans who espouse "values" (Bérubé, x) with stories of anarchy and nihilism on campus. Michael Sprinker in his essay 'The War Against Theory,' points out that this social group have similar values because of the education they received.

The right-wing antitheory crowd has received the widest publicity, doubtless because their appeal to the traditional values (generally unspecified) of (always Western, meaning Euro-American) high culture is nothing more than the common sense of middlebrow editors and readerships for the Sunday book reviews and the mass circulation weeklies, themselves products of the pretheory epoch in American universities.<sup>13</sup>

Writers from this social group gave the impression that the American university was a hotbed of feminists, gay activists, deconstructionists, marxists, poststructuralists, canon-revisionists and non-white activists who were causing intellectual standards to plummet and traditional values to be undermined. Anybody could be categorised according to how they stood on various issues and if there was any doubt about somebody's credentials, it became necessary for them to reject opinions that would place them too far to the left or too far 'into' theory and therefore not sufficiently concerned with social issues. Deconstruction, then, was ideally 'positioned' to be rejected by the right – for its radical questioning of time-honoured assumptions – and only partly and partially accepted by the left who remained ambiguous about 'strong' (philosophical, jargon-ridden) deconstruction while maintaining the absolute necessity to protect the rights of academic freedom.

Deconstruction is not attached to any particular group of people, it sounds like something mechanical and inhuman and many people's understanding of it is shaky at best, so it could be used as a convenient scapegoat. In order to fulfil that rôle it had to be drafted into the war in the first place. This is one reason why deconstruction is included in the PC list by the group which Bérubé and others call the neoconservatives. A second reason was given by Dinesh D'Souza in a televised round-table discussion, broadcast in 1991, on "The Politics of Race

<sup>13</sup> Michael Sprinker, 'The War Against Theory,' PC Wars, ed. Jeffrey Williams, 155.

and Sex on Campus." According to Cary Nelson who describes the programme in his book *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*, "the shared scare words of the hour were 'deconstruction' and 'multiculturalism'."<sup>14</sup> Nelson points out the apparent illogic of combining "high theory" with "canon revision" and blaming the former for the latter.

[I]t may surprise some academics to hear that all these projects – from deconstruction's efforts to track the internal contradictions in Lévi-Strauss's anthropological writings to American colleges' efforts to hire more minority faculty – are deeply implicated in one another . . . D'Souza volunteered to explain their relationship: deconstruction, it seemed, had provided the *philosophical* underpinning for the projects of multiculturalism by arguing that all knowledge was reducible to political struggle and that no true and permanent values exist. (Nelson 99)

A reason had to be found for promoting affirmative action or multiculturalism in the academy and, according to D'Souza, deconstruction seemed to provide it. This is to ignore or forget all those who were calling for better representation in the university and who had little interest in deconstruction. Deconstruction becomes a red herring cast out by certain people on both sides of the argument. Those on the left such as Bérubé or Nelson are lukewarm about many aspects of deconstruction because, they feel, it does not concern itself enough with social issues. Bérubé and Nelson *are* concerned with such questions and therefore believe that while deconstruction should not be vilified, only the parts which are directly 'applicable' are of interest. One cannot, it seems, be a deconstructionist (or one can only be a certain type of deconstructionist) and a multiculturalist at the same time. Nelson, in the interests of his own agenda, promptly jettisons Paul de Man in these circumstances. Faced with the difficulty of doing justice to the de Man controversy, Nelson takes the quickest way out and asserts that

for many of us, of course, the key figure in deconstruction remains its founder Jacques Derrida, who happens to be a Jew, not any of deconstruction's American interpreters, neither de Man nor anyone else. No matter. The media took up the de Man issue with a frenzy. Academics responded ineffectively, certainly not in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Cary Nelson, *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* (New York: New York University Press, 1996) 98. Referred to as Nelson.

ways that would work outside the university, and the battle was lost. As damaged goods, deconstruction now serves as a conveniently vulnerable figure for the whole range of critical positions, for all those "Marxists, feminists, and people who read Marvel comics instead of books," to quote Bennett again. (Nelson 100).

For Nelson, the important issue is to get in there with the critics and battle it out. On the way, the unquestionable influence and standing of de Man is denied. No matter. Nelson hurries on in order to pass judgement on the outcome of the battle, not pausing to call into question the terms by which such a battle could be said to have been won or lost, nor by whose standards and in whose eyes deconstruction could be said to be "damaged" or not. Nelson consistently allows his opponents to set the targets for him thereby conceding the battle in advance.

In her book *The Division of Literature or the University in Deconstruction*, Peggy Kamuf also points out that both 'sides' in the 'cultural wars' reject deconstruction. She describes a review by C. Vann Woodward in the *New York Review of Books (NYRB)*, which named deconstruction as something undesirable in the context of a conservative attack on multiculturalism. The conservative stance viewed deconstruction as part of the multiculturalist agenda. A subsequent letter to the *NYRB* from Clyde de L. Ryals of Duke University stated that none of the multiculturalists would accept the designation 'deconstructionist.' In Kamuf's opinion the two sides therefore agree in their perception of what deconstruction *is*.

Between the two sides is this thing called 'deconstruction,' which one side wants to get rid of as much as the other. This rejection thus forms a kind of secret and unavowable liaison between them, even as it destabilizes the terms of their opposition. It is, in other words, a deconstructive effect that will have occurred ... [the press's] identification of 'deconstruction' as the enemy nevertheless allows a crack to appear that traverses the whole field of academic political discourse from left to right.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Peggy Kamuf, *The Division of Literature or the University in Deconstruction* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997) 145. Referred to as Kamuf.

There is a deconstructive turn within the deconstruction rejected on all sides. In excluding 'it,' 'it' is undergone, experienced. The deconstructive effect within the rejected deconstruction can therefore be no more avoided than can the hermeneutic circle of self-legitimation, or the traditional notion of the metaphysics of presence, or the institution, or all those things that deconstruction would deconstruct.

Bérubé criticises himself for defining deconstruction at a public conference in obscure and inaccessible language and suggests that linking deconstruction to a public issue of the day such as the changing definitions of what it is to be male or female would be a better way of answering the question 'what does deconstruction mean?' Better in what way? Better for the questioner because they could understand what was being said? Better for Bérubé because he would be practising the kind of communication with the nonacademic world which he believes is vital to win the 'culture' war? Better for the conference audience because the nonacademics among them would see that deconstruction is not so bad after all? Would such an answer not be a betrayal of the kind of care that deconstructive writing calls for? Or are there levels of deconstruction? - the form that concerns itself with social or political issues, the literary form, the philosophical form, each one 'deeper' into the university than the last. Bérubé may see himself as the champion of minority causes but even he is critical towards what he calls "strong poststructuralisms" and only "somewhere within shouting distance of nihilist things like deconstruction" (Bérubé 13 and 23). He feels honour-bound to attempt to define deconstruction in public and will defend it against an onslaught from the right but for him it is "better" to define it in terms which have "more direct social consequences" as we saw in his anecdote. These are the sacrifices of rigour which have to be made if something like deconstruction is to be defended in public. Cary Nelson, a strong critic of the conservative attack on cultural studies and affirmative action, refers to deconstruction as "a now notorious but for most part of its history rather marginal theory in literary studies and continental philosophy" (Nelson 99). Neither Bérubé nor Nelson wish to go too far 'into' deconstruction. As D'Souza said, it can be used to add theoretical weight to the issues at hand especially if it is described as a form of relativism and a questioning of long-held beliefs in Western philosophical systems. If Derrida can query the whole of Western metaphysics and all the assumptions handed down since Plato then he must be on the side of the feminists, postcolonialists and canon revisionists. At the same time one of the left's criticisms of deconstruction has been that those who espouse it are not politically active enough and are more likely to remain within the confines of textual exegesis. An honourable exception is often made of Derrida. As Cary Nelson puts it "American deconstructive critics like Paul de Man were inclined to avoid larger moral issues. But Jacques Derrida, the founder of deconstruction, has for years regularly written about apartheid, nuclear war, racism, and the politics of academia" (Nelson 51). Although it is the case that Derrida has regularly written on moral and ethical issues, especially in the last decade, Nelson is overstating the case by saying that Derrida has regularly written on apartheid, nuclear war etc. His explicit pieces on these topics are few and far between and the manner with which he deals with them are not as politically unambiguous as the left would like to believe. Indeed, nothing should be taken for granted when considering the political position of deconstruction or of Derrida. He has said that he is a man of the left and that he votes Socialist but he has also said that this might not always be the case, that it has "to be evaluated at each moment from standpoints that are finite."16

Yet according to Bérubé any subtlety, nuance or concession on the part of the left merely causes the right to pounce on this as confirmation of their warnings. Therefore, to take the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Politics and Friendship,' interview with Michael Sprinker in *The Althusserian Legacy*, eds. E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1993) 212, 215. Derrida's relationship with Marxism, is a long and complex one, the outline of which can be traced from his involvement with the *Tel Quel* group in Paris in the late 1960s, to his assertion in the Sprinker interview that "[o]ne never reads enough Marx" (195), to his meditation on the state of Marxism after the fall of the Berlin wall (*Specters of Marx*), to his question, in *The Other Heading* about responsibility for a "*new* critique of the *new* effects of capital... is not this responsibility incumbent upon *us*, most particularly upon those who never gave in to a certain Marxist intimidation?" (57).

time to describe Derrida's approaches to racism and his direct and indirect engagement with it would only play into the neoconservatives' hands. While the left is riddled with an awareness of the multiplicity of views and a desire to maintain academic standards, the right, according to Bérubé and Nelson, are happy to use a sledgehammer of lies to get their message across. Thus despite the existence of replies which directly contradict some of D'Souza's wilder surmises in *Illiberal Education*, it is his stories which get told and retold. The left take rearguard action which hobbles their ability to gain any advantage because "the right can count on a comfortable lag time between conservative smear campaigns and critical analyses that expose them. SuperReaders travel much more slowly than speeding bullets" (Bérubé 10). And by the time the SuperReaders have all their documented ripostes together the public (or the publication) will have lost interest. This picture of the liberal left wailing and wringing their hands saying that the other side is just not playing fair and that they are not being given a chance puts them at a disadvantage in the short term. So it is with some urgency that Nelson says,

[i]t is essential to realize that even wildly irresponsible and hyperbolic claims about the state of American campuses will seem plausible both to nonuniversity intellectuals and to the general public. If the right are allowed to continue dominating media representations of campus politics, then we will eventually face a curtailment of academic freedom . . . While it is necessary to point out the inaccuracies and distortions in work like Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* and D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* . . . that kind of honourable counterargument will not suffice . . . it would be naive to imagine that people like Bennett and Cheney [two former chairs of the NEH renowned for their conservative attitude] would be troubled by having their inaccurate claims exposed. They will simply continue to lie as long as they feel their claims are getting more coverage. (Nelson 109)

The problem, of course, is that arguments go at a different pace within the academy. Those who partake in them cannot get away with wild accusations (when they do make them it is usually in the public press) and they are under an obligation to sufficiently support their challenges in a manner that is recognised by the academy. All exchanges occur at a much slower rate as participants acknowledge that immediate rebuttal is only the beginning of the

counterargument. If their opponents wish to meet the conservatives in the pages of the public press (and it seems that they must) then certain values, such as the care with which terms are used or the time and space taken to explain them, must be put aside, postponed indefinitely in the unspoken hope that at some point in the future it will be possible to smooth out all communicative difficulties. In the meantime, the war must go on.

An example of how deconstruction became a term which was publicly mentioned only to be denied is the Sheldon Hackney Senate hearing. This case is outlined in Bérubé's *Public Access* and in Jeffrey Williams's Introduction to *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy*. Williams describes how Hackney, at the 1994 Senate confirmation hearing for his post as the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities,

went out of his way to denounce the 'intellectual form of political correctness' – specifically naming deconstruction and post-structuralism – that maintain 'that every thought is a political thought, that every statement is a political statement, so that there can be no objective tests for truth' . . . Hackney was compelled to make a sort of 'I am not now, nor have I ever been' statement, distancing himself from PC and contemporary theory. (W illiams 2)

Here and elsewhere, deconstruction has been publicly included in the list of PC issues for the express purpose of plucking it out from the crowd for specific vilification. Even the conservatives know that they can reject deconstruction with impunity because it is not linked to any particular ethnological group. Naming and refuting deconstruction allows them to indirectly criticise all the other PC issues by association without antagonising any particular group. Hackney was able to specifically name deconstruction and post-structuralism thus avoiding feminism or multiculturalism because to reject them would mean offending and alienating large numbers of people.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> It is clear that Hackney was not a 'natural' conservative but in order to ensure appointment he had to set any ambiguity with regard to his attitude towards liberalism to rest. See D'Souza p. 146 for a characterisation of Hackney as a supporter of affirmative action and pp. 201-2 for an account of a racial

Bérubé has spoken of the difficulty of answering the misrepresentations and lies of the 'hard right' and it is possible that any defence is better than no defence but Bérubé's understanding of 'deconstruction' does not bode well for a better representation by its defenders. His own use of 'deconstruction' is not entirely justified when he deals with the public press headlines about Hackney and another controversial nominee for a public post, Lani Guinier, as he implies that to 'deconstruct' an opposition is to elide it. This, of course, is a typical misunderstanding and superficial use of the verb.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Bérubé is using it in a book which argues that it is vital for the left to start to meet the right wing in public, armed with similar weapons, that is, to leave lengthy and considered definitions behind because "popularizing the work of academic cultural criticism is something we absolutely must do" (Bérubé 161). When it comes to popularising deconstruction, however, Bérubé has no suggestions. Indeed, deconstruction gets lost in the shuffle.

To popularize the more controversial academic inquiries of the past twenty years – into deconstruction, gender, sexuality, new historicism, ethnicity, popular culture, and postcolonialism – is thus only to take seriously the claims of our scholarship on the lived subjectivities of ordinary people, and to take seriously as well our own claims to be producing a knowledge that is not solely specific to the reading of literary texts. For neither gender nor sexuality nor ethnicity nor history is 'extrinsic' to literary study – or to human life as we've known it to date ... [This means that] we should try to imagine nonacademic readers who ask only that the languages of academic criticism be translated into their languages. (Bérubé 164-65)

incident in which Hackney, as the president of the University of Pennsylvania, supported black students against one of his professors.

<sup>18</sup> See Bérubé pp. 7 – 12. In fairness to Bérubé it should be noted that he uses the term 'deconstruction' more carefully in a sustained reading of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. It is a legitimate use in the context of the complicated relations between two races and racial uncertainty as outlined by Bérubé. This use, however, is in the course of a ten-page discussion of Johnson's novel (Bérubé 253 – 263).

First on the list of "the more controversial academic inquiries of the past twenty years," deconstruction does not even appear in the remedy which takes as its starting point the relevance of these academic inquiries to "human life." It is doubtful that the recommendation of translation could apply to deconstruction unless it was to transform it into a process whereby oppositions are either elided or, alternatively, exemplified by the "male\female" opposition. Questions about the oppositions between speech and writing and presence and absence themselves become elided because it takes more time to relate them to 'real issues.' Deconstruction, included in all the lists of controversial topics which divide the academy internally and divide the academy from the wider public arena, does not have the reality credentials to merit its inclusion among solutions that look to reality as a way of bridging the difficulties of communication between the university and its outside. As Mitchell Stephens, a journalism professor, puts it, when it comes to recent literary theory, including deconstruction, "the gulf between the press and the universities has rarely seemed so wide."19 Stephens goes on to ask the fundamental question "You don't have to believe in deconstruction's merit to accept its significance. Why hasn't the press been able to contribute much more than twenty-year-late hints and gibes to the public's understanding of it?" (Stephens 40). Stephens gives reasons such as an anti-theory bias among journalists which was most clearly manifested in their reaction to the Paul de Man 'affair' and the inclination of American journalists towards "mocking intellectual pretensions, especially when those pretensions are expressed in large, unfamiliar words, [and an] illiberal attitude towards new ideas" (Stephens 41). He goes on to note the sense a journalist might get that there is "something incompatible with the journalist's worldview in the face of extended critique of the belief that there is a reality that might be verified independent of language." Yet for Stephens the "major source of journalistic intolerance for contemporary theoretical work in the humanities ... may just be simple late-twentieth-century, information-overload, get-to-the-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Mitchell Stephens, 'Deconstruction and the Get-Real Press' *Columbia Journalism Review* (Sept.\Oct. 1991): 38. Referred to as 'Deconstruction and the Get-Real Press.'

point impatience" ('Deconstruction and the Get-Real Press' 42). The perceived incompatibility between questions about language which theories such as deconstruction examine and journalistic assumptions about objectivity, truth and fact, combined with impatience when it comes to jargon or lengthy explanations is enough to ensure that the gulf between the press and the university might never be breached, yet Stephens reiterates the necessity for some attempt which he lays at the door of the journalists. Stephens' own attempt to breach the gap, a profile of Derrida in California in the Los Angeles Times Magazine, published a few months before his piece in the Columbia Journalism Review, is measured enough in its assessment of deconstruction, although in crossing over from academic to journalistic writing he succumbs to the conventions of such articles by describing Derrida's clothes and diet. It seems that such 'contextualisation' is deemed necessary to give 'colour' or interest to profiles in these magazines but it would be out of place in an academic assessment of Derrida. Stephens does, however, attempt to get to grips with deconstruction and mentions Derrida's interest in the concept of friendship which Stephens says was "inspired in part by [the] terrible news" of de Man's anti-Semitic writing. However, any even-handedness is thwarted by the enticement to the readers set into the text of the first page and no doubt dreamed up by an editor - it is not a quotation from anything in the article. "The Most Reviled Professor in the World Defends His Diabolically Difficult Theory," it says in highlighted large font.<sup>20</sup> In accordance with scholarly conventions I have credited Stephens with this but, given his argument in the Columbia Journalism Review, it is most unlikely that he is responsible. It would have been interesting if he had addressed this outlandish presentation of his article (and the possible accreditation to him of the subheading) in his subsequent piece for an academic audience but he does not cite it and it is probable that the latter was written in advance of the publication of the former.

<sup>20</sup> Mitchell Stephens, 'Deconstructing Jacques Derrida,' Los Angeles Times Magazine 21 July 1991: 12.

Writing in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, it is journalists or students of journalism who no doubt make up the bulk of Stephens' readers. Articles like this might go some way in carrying out the task which Derrida also sets, as he reflects on the 1992 controversy over his nomination for an honorary doctorate at Cambridge University: "Our responsibility is to redefine the rules, to invent others (for journalists as well as for academics), a huge and formidable task, I agree, and by definition an endless one" (*'Honoris Causa'* 402).

Must the neoconservatives' public misrepresentations or lies be refuted? Is it necessary to answer them at all? Academics who are concerned such as Gregory Jay, Cary Nelson, Joan Scott and Michael Bérubé believe that it is, not only because such attacks have the direct effect of defunding the humanities but also because the political power of the right is such that academic freedom could be undermined within the university as the intolerance displayed on the pages of the public press become part of the common culture.<sup>21</sup> The issue is not the age-old war between the hard right and the liberal-left but the manner in which it is conducted. While some commentators bring an *ad hominem* aspect to their argument by implying or stating that the right (or left) are by their nature dishonest\manipulative\corrupt it might be more useful to examine the changes which have occurred to the forum and the form in which these contests take place, that is, the public sphere and the medium of the public press.

According to Habermas, the nonreflective character of contemporary public opinion is facilitated by public media which convey items for consumption rather than stimulate critical debate. If such debates do arise they are products of a commercial medium. As consumers, however, the public have little real power because they have no right of reply, beyond the minimal reaction of acceptance or rejection, that contract embodied in the tenets of academic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> References to the issue of funding by private foundations to right-wing projects and the reduction of funding to the humanities or to various projects because of their 'political' nature can be found in Jay (1997) 46, Nelson, pp. 98, 108, 149-150, Bérubé pp. 62-63, 76, 112, 176, Neilson (in Williams), pp. 72, 78, Henry A. Giroux (in Williams) 297, Williams 3.

freedom which Derrida alludes to when he says that it can be taken or left. The people who read about the university's conflicts or deconstruction in the mass media are offered preformed opinions in the guise of neutral reporting.

Bill Readings posits institutional reasons for the problems evidenced in the public press's representation of the 'culture wars'. For him, "[t]he causes of the media's sniping at the University are not individual resentments but a more general uncertainty as to the rôle of the University and the very nature of the standards by which it should be judged as an institution" (Readings 1). Rather than rush to fill the vacuum left by the withering away of the notion of culture or reason or any other *raison d'être* around which the university centres itself, Readings suggests a "community of dissensus" which has as its empty centre the belief that "to preserve the status of the social bond as a question is to tolerate difference without recourse to an idea of identity . . . It is to understand the obligation of community as one to which we are answerable but to which we cannot supply an answer" (Readings 187).

Readings believes that by questioning fundamental assumptions a new understanding of the rôle of the university can be reached. He wishes the university to begin again from the place where it now is, at the point 'in' history which sees the demise of the nation-state and the end of the university's contributing rôle as preserver and producer of the culture which underpinned that state. However, the ruins in the form of the university of culture, and the public who maintain a misguided belief in the persistence of the nation-state, still stand and there is an ongoing obligation to respond to them. What Readings fails to acknowledge is that the community to which the university remains answerable persists in its demands for truth (in which it still believes) and accountability. This is similar to the kind of extant public described in the '1915 Declaration of Principles,' which may not be ready to receive the work produced in the university because the "fruit" of scholarly effort is "still distasteful to the community as a whole." This fruit should, however, "be allowed to ripen [in the university]

until finally, perchance, it may become a part of the intellectual food of the nation or of the world" ('1915 Declaration of Principles' 167).

Hofstader and Metzger describe a similar scenario, saying that "'the public'... was an abstraction called 'posterity'" (Hofstader and Metzger 410). This public of "posterity" is the one which is implied in the AAUP's "perchance." The ideal nature of this public and the possibility that it will never come into existence is conceded by the AAUP when they interrupt the natural process of the ripening fruit with the less assured chance. In other words, the public as it is, rather than as these writers want it to be, again drops out of the picture; *it* is as much of an abstraction as the ideal public to whom these professors believe the university is answerable.

Readings might allow for a form of accountability but he is adamant that the definition of such a form should remain with the university.

I argue that it is imperative that the University respond to the demand for accountability, while at the same time refusing to conduct the debate over the nature of its responsibility solely in the terms of the language of accounting. (Readings 18)

The problem here is that "the demand for accountability" is only recognisable to those who make it when it is couched in the language of accounting. In what other terms can accountability be put that it would be agreeable to Readings and recognisable to those who demand it? If there are to be new or other terms for accountability, is there time and space (and money) for a moratorium on accountability while those who demand it are taught the new language, that is, brought up to speed? If not, and if the university *refuses* to conduct the debate, how can it respond or be responsible? Readings believes that the response – which is imperative – and the refusal to reduce the terms of the debate to the language of accounting can occur at the same time.

Before the university can reach a point where there is a community of dissensus the way must be prepared; people must be convinced that the concept of the ideal university based around culture and the nation-state is indeed outmoded. This is a realisation that may gradually be dawning on the academy as a result of the publication of books such as *The University in Ruins* but it has to be conveyed to the world at large. Nobody has convinced the general public that the university is in ruins (many books and articles have been published which indicate that it is in *crisis*, but that is not the same thing) because to do so would be to undermine the institution. Readings does not really mean that the university is *irretrievably* ruined. His attention-grabbing title may attract a readership made up of those who read Allan Bloom or E. D. Hirsch and who might see Readings' book as a confirmation of what they already suspected, but his 'solution' of a "community of dissensus" leapfrogs forward into new territory which might leave many of his non-specialist readers behind, especially those who never realised that their faith in communication was an ideological assumption to begin with.<sup>22</sup> There is a huge unexplored area between assumptions (by both professors and journalists), about a common reader who knows what great literature is – the implied reader

<sup>22</sup> There may have been nonacademic readers of Readings' book but their reaction cannot be known. The only barometer (and it is a paltry one) is the number of sales. Allan Bloom's book spent the better part of a year in the NYRB's bestseller list and many nonacademics may have read it but this says little about the 'success' of his argument. However, the number of copies sold can be seized upon by supporters of a particular side in a debate as an indicator of readers' agreement. This is the crux of what Habermas refers to as the collapse of the public sphere. The public, as such, have no forum and are consumers of culture and onlookers at dissent. They do not take part although their rôle as onlookers is vital to the protagonists. A reading of academic reaction to The University in Ruins might convey some idea of how far academics themselves have to go before some form of a "community of dissensus" can emerge. The sniping between Nicholas Royle and Dominick LaCapra in the pages of Critical Inquiry (with implicit nationalistic undertones) is hardly a good example of new and productive forms of conflict. See Dominick LaCapra, 'The University in Ruins?' Critical Inquiry 25 (Autumn 1998) 32-55, Nicholas Royle, 'Yes, Yes, the University in Ruins' Critical Inquiry 26 (Autumn 1999) 147-153 and Dominick LaCapra, 'Yes, Yes, Yes, Yes. . . Well Maybe: Response to Nicholas Royle' Critical Inquiry 26 (Autumn 1999) 154-158. A peculiarly academic feature of this exchange is the passage of time between the publication of Readings' book in 1996, LaCapra's critique in 1998 and Royle's response published a year later.

of articles about deconstruction in the *Wall Street Journal* and *Newsweek* (discussed below) – and a public who could begin to come to terms with (the not unrelated) notions about the dereferentialisation of the university and its attendant loss of purpose. In both cases the public is constituted in order to serve the arguments of the writers. In this sense, Readings is still talking to his own circle.

Readings endeavours to keep his solution in the realms of responsibility without providing a response which would close the institution down again by plugging the gaps of communication. His university must remain in ruins if it is to have a future beyond the production line of knowledge and qualified people. He would install a "community at loose ends" in the ruined university which would "take seriously the critique of modernity's claim to communicational transparency" (Readings 185). It is this claim or assumption which results in the "considerable hostility" with which, according to Readings, the work of Jacques Derrida and Jean-François Lyotard has been greeted (presumably by their colleagues and administrators in the university rather than by the 'public'). Both writers, "raise fundamental doubts about the assumption that communication is, in principle, transparent" (Readings 184). Derrida points out (in the press) that the press and the university parallel each other (or would unless "vigilance" is exercised) in their tendency to impose "the homogeneity of a medium, of discursive norms and models."

This [imposition] can happen, surely, through newspaper or magazine consortiums, through powerful European publishing enterprises . . . This can *also* happen through a new university space . . . Under the pretext of pleading for transparency . . . for the univocity of democratic discussion, for communication in public space, for "communicative action," such a discourse tends to impose a model of language that is supposedly favorable to this communication. Claiming to speak in the name of intelligibility, good sense, common sense, or the

democratic ethic, this discourse tends, by means of these very things, and as if naturally, to discredit anything that complicates this model.<sup>23</sup>

Derrida warns that the parallels between the university and the "newspaper and magazine consortiums" are *no less dangerous* than the abyss which divides them, if those parallels are manifested in a form of communication which confines itself to simplicity for the sake of convenience. He has spoken about the "temptation of the media" and Mitchell Stephens also refers to the temptation on the part of journalists to give in to their impatience with new ways of thinking such as that embodied under the term deconstruction.

We tend to want to dismiss – as "pure mumbo jumbo," as the worry of queer ducks, as morally questionable – that which we don't have the time or energy to understand. But if we are to begin making sense of late-twentieth-century thought and the conflicts it has engendered on the campuses, journalists are going to have to do a better job of resisting this temptation. ('Deconstruction and the Get-Real Press' 42)

The common sense form of discourse is making better headway. It is more accessible to the reader, it is "this lovely competition for 'the conquest of spirit(s)'"('Other Heading' 54). The competition is "lovely" because it is civilised. It is more than that, it is tolerant and pluralistic and everything a good liberal diligently reading Derrida in *Le Monde* and its sister European broadsheets (where the two articles comprising *The Other Heading* were published), should be. Such readers who might not buy a right-wing tirade against new discourses such as multiculturalism or postcolonialism find that the alternative is not as progressive as they thought. There is more to it. It is more complex than taking a liberal stance with regard to issues inside and outside the university. Are such readers of the public press equipped to recognise that deconstruction, if and when it is put before them, is neither right-wing nor leftwing nor a third wing? The natural, common sense to which Derrida refers is the "alibi" (to borrow a term from Readings) of writers such as the leader writer of the *Wall Street Journal*,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Other Heading: Memories, Responses, and Responsibilites,' *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 54-5. Emphasis added. Referred to as 'Other Heading.'

Camille Paglia or Kenneth Woodward. In the analyses of the press articles which follow, these unexamined assumptions of a community in transparent communication and the vast scale of the task that Readings and Derrida impose will become apparent.

## iv. Outside in the Press.

The result of the American educational policy of including literature and composition courses as part of the undergraduate programme is that the potential audience which has an opinion about literature courses is vast and diverse. Moreover, the belief that there is a link between the canon of literature taught at schools and universities and a nation's perception of itself is still commonly held, most notably, of course, by conservatives such as Allan Bloom, the title of whose book is portentous in its generalisation. The warning that changing the college literary curriculum will 'close American minds,' together with the magnitude of the audience ensures that what goes on in departments of literature will always be of interest and therefore worth writing about in the public press. However, the diversity of that audience might ensure that the unquestioned use of phrases such as "great literature" in a *Newsweek* article by Kenneth Woodward on deconstruction in 1981, might become less probable in the future. Woodward's use of this phrase – as if its meaning was self-evident – accords with writers such as Allan Bloom and E. D. Hirsch who believe that there is an unchanging core of texts which all students should read.

Literature is traditionally and widely perceived to be both reflective *and* constitutive of the national identity and any critique of the literary canon or any questioning of its basis will be viewed as an attack on that identity. This is why, as writers such as Bérubé and Nelson point out, it seems unAmerican to start using 'foreign' thinkers not because such writers are not American but because they are outsiders who ask questions and raise issues about the shaky foundations on which many fundamental and traditionally held beliefs are based. It is not that critics of multiculturalist revisions of the curriculum such as Bloom and Hirsch recommend a canon filled with born and bred (but not necessarily 'native') Americans. Aristotle, the Bible

and Homer are high on their list of desirable texts. These texts, however, are traditional pillars of Western civilisation and America as the apparently most civilised country and (selfappointed) leader of the Western world should enshrine them in its students' syllabus. In 1988 when Stanford University redesigned its core curriculum a number of articles were written in the public press, some more balanced than others. One of the least balanced but no doubt widely read was an editorial piece in the *Wall Street Journal* that blamed the changes on deconstruction. The piece opens with the suggestion that the American academy is even more recalcitrant than the Communists and has yet to learn its lesson.

Experience even in the Communist world has stilled the dreams of the 1960s, but at least one place continues to revere them – the ivory foxhole known as the American academy. A good example is Stanford University, which earlier this year caved into political pressure and cashiered its popular "Western Culture" course requirement for freshmen . . . Aquinas and Thomas More are out, but "Their Eyes Were Watching God" by feminist Zora Neale Hurston is in. Ms. Hurston's book offers a critique of the male domination of American society. Locke and Mill go down the memory hole, replaced by such as the U.N. Declaration of Human Rights and Rastafarian poetry . . . Much of this amounts to an intellectual fashion known as "deconstruction" – reading texts not as inherently worthy but to serve some professor's private agenda. <sup>24</sup>

Journalists employ attention-seeking gestures such as this with the intention of stimulating reaction or at the very least getting people to talk about their articles, or else they give into the temptation of intellectual laziness which Stephens warns against. Even so, this bizarre definition of deconstruction is shameless in its inaccuracy and irresponsibility. Even if there was a right of reply to this it is practically irrefutable; how could one ever respond to it? It also epitomises the suspicion, evident in conservative publications during the 'culture wars,' over what professors in their classrooms were doing, the suggestion being that professors spend their time indoctrinating their students with their own political beliefs.<sup>25</sup> In 1992, Lynne

<sup>24</sup> 'The Stanford Mind' Wall Street Journal 22 Dec. 1988: A14.

<sup>25</sup> According to Bill Readings this suspicion is the inevitable result of the demographic and ideological changes which the university has experienced. "What counts, and what marks the contemporary

Cheney, the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, echoed these portrayals in a report called *Telling the Truth: A Report on the State of the Humanities in Higher Education.* She argues that

[i]t used to be thought that [students], like professors, should have academic freedom. They did not come to the college or university to be indoctrinated in the views of their professors. They came . . . to explore and challenge a wealth of ideas on how to live and what to value.<sup>26</sup>

It is tempting to see the public debates as simplified microcosms of the more diverse conflicts which have gone on within the academy but it would be difficult to draw clear-cut analogies between the two. The public medium, for example a newspaper report or an article in *The New York Review of Books*, seems to be 'bigger' than the apparently more narrow confines of the academy. Therefore, it might be assumed that a public airing of the concerns of the academy would expand the discourse. More often than not, however, the public version is a reduction, from the nuanced shadings of certain stances to the black and white of certainty. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, in her introduction to a collection of papers given at a conference called 'Liberal Arts Education in the Late Twentieth Century' in 1988, recounts how "an attending journalist seized upon" a phrase, initially used "wryly" at the conference, before being picked up and used "ironically" by a second speaker. This self-descriptive term, "cultural left," was transferred to the newspapers and "has now become an easy label."<sup>27</sup>

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diatribes, is that the grand narrative of the University, centred on the production of a liberal, reasoning, subject, is no longer readily available to us... The liberal individual is no longer capable of metonymically embodying the institution... Both [feminism and racial awareness] are targeted by the old guard, because they remind them that no individual professor can embody the University, since that body *would still be gendered and racially marked rather* than universal. (Readings 9-10; original emphasis)

<sup>26</sup> Lynne Cheney quoted in National Endowment for the Humanities, 1992 Annual Report (Washington: National Endowment for the Humanities, 1992) 12.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, 'Introduction: The Public, the Press, and the Professors,' *The Politics of Liberal Education*, eds. Darryl Gless and Barbara Herrnstein Smith (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992) 2. Referred to as 'The Public, the Press, and the Professors.'

exclusively academic audience ('The Public, the Press, and the Professors' 11) but it is questionable whether she envisages many members of what she refers to as "the public" in that readership. There is a marked 'them and us' undercurrent in her reference to "irony, an occupational habit of philosophers and English teachers [which] fares very poorly under conditions of public controversy" ('The Public, the Press, and the Professors' 2). The journalist did not recognise irony and made no concessions to professors' 'habits.' This, for Smith, is indicative of how the press simplifies academic issues. Smith continues:

Certain types of messages are especially hard to put across the public media... long on concepts, short on personalities; long on analyses, short on punchlines; long on new, challenging ideas, short on familiar confirming ones... Of related significance here is the widespread conviction... that the way to reform humanities education is to make professors sound more like journalists. There is a corresponding conviction, especially common among professors, that the trouble with the public media is that its reporting does not resemble more closely the articles in academic journals, and that journalists would be better to write more like professors. The more general problem, it appears, is a failure to recognise the constraints in each type of transmission. ('The Public, the Press, and the Professors' 4)

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Here, Smith has identified one of the crucial problems of conflict representation, that is, what happens to it when it crosses the borders between an academic setting (such as a conference where differing views are expressed) and public media (such as the newspapers who reported on it). When conflicts such as those over the content of the humanities curriculum move from departmental to public discourse (where they may have originated), one consequence is probable: the tone of the debate heightens, and is intensified and simplified because of the medium through which it is relayed.

Academics are represented and represent themselves in the public press as beleaguered, hence they appear to uphold the borders between the university and the outside world balanced as they are within a web of dependencies and freedoms, the extremes of which could be described as material (such as their dependence on the 'outside' world for funds) and as ideal (such as the notion of academic freedom). Moreover, the asymmetrical interdependence between what takes place in the public sphere and the concerns of the academy cannot be discounted. When that problematic relationship is taken into account, any simple diagnosis that focuses solely on the difficulties inherent in explaining the workings of the institution to the public becomes redundant. Too often the academics protest that they cannot make their case in the public arena because of the journalistic constraints imposed which, they believe, lead to misunderstandings and misreadings. Thus the responsibility for the difficulties encountered is frequently and problematically judged to be that of the medium (or the reader implied by the medium) rather than the subject matter.

Representations of the academy and academics in the public media such as the New York Times Book Review, the Nation, Lingua Franca, the New York Times Magazine, Newsweek or the New York Review of Books, are not homogeneous and should be examined by taking their purpose and their audience into account. The NYRB is referred to by Peggy Kamuf as an example of a publication which is "more or less annexed to [the university]" ('Work of the Intellectuals' 424). Although it is a 'public' journal in that it is available every fortnight at newsstands, its contributors and those who take part in the exchanges of letters are, for the most part, academics. In the reviews and in the letters, the controversies within the university are played out but take on a different form in this medium. The NYRB can thus assume the guise of a closed club, the names of whose members appear regularly and predictably. The subjects addressed by the Nation and Lingua Franca at times overlap with those of the NYRB, but these publications are characterised by a more conservative stance. In this, they are useful and influential indicators of the diverse standpoints on a single issue. Newsweek's contributors and its readership seem anonymous in contrast as its international ambit would indicate. The New York Times Magazine takes its readers away from the weekday world of business to the pleasures of the glossy Sunday supplement. Articles in this publication should prompt thought but not controversy. They should not be too hard-hitting but neither should they be facile. Such is the article that Colin Campbell wrote about the so-called 'Yale school'

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for his readers in the *New York Times Magazine* and he is careful to acquaint them with a palatable version of deconstruction.<sup>28</sup> Before going on to look at a *Newsweek* piece and Campbell's 'The Tyranny of the Yale Critics' it might be useful to examine an example of a display of flamboyant vitriol which might catch readers' attention but is empty of intelligent or reasoned critique. This article, by Camille Paglia in *The New York Times Book Review*, accepts the idea that the American university is in crisis and the fault can be laid squarely at the door of 'French theorists.'

The article was written in 1991 and entitled 'Ninnies, Pedants, Tyrants and Other Academics.'<sup>29</sup> 'French' theorists such as Saussure, Lacan, Derrida and Foucault are castigated throughout. Paglia refers to them as "minor French theorists" who "have had a disastrous effect on American education." Is it possible that the mighty structure that is American education in all its diversity, with its millions of students and tens of thousands of teachers could not withstand the influence of a few "minor French theorists"? Have such theorists been unfailingly influential all over the United States? Whether these "minor French theorists" have been accepted or rejected, many American academics have engaged with them, much to Paglia's disgust.

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Lacan, Derrida and Foucault are the perfect prophets for the weak, anxious academic personality, trapped in verbal formulas and perennially defeated by circumstance. They offer self-exculpating cosmic explanations for the normal professorial state of resentment, alienation, dithering passivity and inaction. (Paglia 29)

<sup>28</sup> Colin Campbell, 'The Tyranny of the Yale Critics,' *New York Times Magazine* 9 Feb. 1986: 20-28,
43, 47, 48. Referred to as Campbell.

<sup>29</sup> Camille Paglia, 'Ninnies, Pedants, Tyrants and Other Academics,' *New York Times Book Review* 5 May 1991: 1, 29 and 33. Referred to as Paglia. Articles in the public press appear to be much longer than they really are because they are broken up by other pieces and by advertisements, whereas in a book like *Points*, or in an academic journal, this would not be the case. This also calls for a certain concentration from the reader as the 'broken' article must compete with the intervening text, that is, it must make itself heard among other demands for attention.

This type of writing may showcase Paglia's talent for malice but its wild assertions and 'broad' scope (Paglia refers back to America's rôle in World War II and her own family's rôle in it) are damaging and misleading and the editorial decision to place it at the front of *The New York Times Book Review* is questionable. But it gives us some idea of how deeply flawed and thoughtless articles will gain widespread attention because of their place of publication, their rhetoric and their author's name, which in this case is built around her scathing attacks and strongly held opinions. Yet is it possible that Paglia too has been infected by the French germ? Having stated that "in the US, deconstruction is absurd, since we have never had a high culture of any kind," she goes on to single out that very process as a quality of Allen Ginsberg's poetry which "fused the American bardic tradition of Whitman with Jewish moral passion to deconstruct institutions, history, social class and concepts of sexual and mental normality" (Paglia 33). This process (one which Paglia admires) sounds very much like a hybrid of Derridean and Foucauldian 'methodologies.' Ginsberg may have written in the sixties but Paglia's reading of him displays an awareness of what she calls 'French theory' along with a paradoxical wholesale rejection of it.

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Paglia's article is useful as it highlights an opposition which emerges frequently when the press turns its attention to other intra-academic controversies especially those which concern that import, 'French theory.' The American-French dichotomy has parallels with the kind of terms used to describe the public press as opposed to the academy. The press: straightforward, direct and uncomplicated; the academy: pedantic, nit-picking and convoluted. This form of representation is commonly used by both the press and certain academics and bears some similarity to descriptions of the national characteristics of the French and the Americans. Adam Begley, in an article exploring the phenomenon of literary theorists who turn to autobiography, quotes Alice Kaplan's self-description in her book, *French Lessons*: "It's not as if there's a straight-forward American self lurking under a devious French one, waiting to

come out and be authentic.<sup>930</sup> The figure of an American self which is more open-handed, normal or honest as opposed to the French self who appears to be underhand and difficult to interpret and who complicates issues by including the one hand *and* the other hand, is common when the influence of 'French' theory on the 'American' institution is discussed. It also accords with the idea of 'French theory' as a passing fad. This basis for opposition, the alien versus the familiar, finds its familiar way into articles in the public press which appeal to literature as something which is known and loved: "a form of communication, held in common by an author and his readers, about something of significance to the human community."<sup>31</sup> The aliens become those who would question assumptions about common and 'his' reader. Thus, Kenneth L. Woodward in his article for *Newsweek* in 1981, titled 'A New Look at Lit Crit,' describes the "all-out war" which has erupted between the "partisans of the humanistic tradition" and "the avatars of a radical approach to writing called 'deconstruction' [who] draw heavily on modern European theories of language and have developed a decidedly nihilistic philosophy of life" (Woodward 80).

Interestingly, Woodward takes the subversive sting out of this radical approach as he states, "In practice, deconstructionist writing is not nearly so forbidding as its theory." Although he does not indicate how writing can be separated from theory, he associates deconstructive writing with "word play" and describes deconstructive essays as those which "at best, uncover subtle connections between one kind of writing and another" (Woodward 80). He refers to Jacques Derrida as "the dean of deconstruction" and "the most discussed new thinker on POMITV COLLECE LIDDADV PRIMA

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Adam Begley, 'The I's have it: Duke's "<u>Moi</u>" Critics Expose Themselves,' *Lingua Franca* (Mar.-Apr. 1994): 58.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Kenneth Woodward with Eloise Salholz and Robert Kirkland in New York and Scott Sullivan in Paris, 'A New Look at Lit Crit,' *Newsweek* 22 June 1981: 80-83. Referred to as Woodward.

either side of the Atlantic."32 Woodward's article goes on to sketch Derrida's thought (which rests, according to Woodward, on "two fundamental bases: structural linguistics and the nihilistic philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche which denies the possibility of discovering truth" (Woodward 81)). He then refers to the criticisms which have been levelled at deconstruction. Geoffrey Hartman (who does the deconstructive case no favours by saying that in the light of deconstructive interpretation, "reading becomes multidimensional, like a new sort of geometry" (Woodward 80)) is the only 'deconstructionist' who is quoted directly but the critical comments of 'humanists' such as Morris Dickstein, William Gass, Douglas Cole, Ralph Freedman and Alfred Kazin are included. Kazin's remark is notable for its ambiguity. "They [the deconstructionists] compare themselves with novelists and poets but some of them can't even write English" (Woodward 82). Deconstruction is characterised in this article as "an impersonal skein of codes and conventions whose interpretation is open to anyone who cares to 'deconstruct' the text," as an "abstract, almost mechanical approach to literature" and as "verbal pyrotechnics" (Woodward 80-82). Deconstruction does indeed appear to be at odds with a humanistic outlook and cannot appear otherwise in these circumstances hemmed in as it is in an article which takes so much for granted. It is with an appeal to some timeless notion of great literature that Woodward concludes his article.

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Philosophically, the debate over deconstruction turns out to be just another round in an old battle between two kinds of humanism – one that finds human experience rich in meaning and another that concludes it has none. Great literature has long dramatized both outlooks, but deconstruction is a strategy which aims at settling the issue beforehand by robbing language of its unique ability to capture truth. Fortunately, deconstructed literature cannot match the wonder of a single well-told story, or a poem's power to make us see the world afresh. (Woodward 82)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> This accolade is at odds with a survey of French intellectuals about which intellectuals were most publicly influential, in which Derrida's name did not appear. The survey was conducted in France in the same year (1981) as Woodward was writing and reported by Jeffrey Mehlman. I return to this in Chapter 3.

It is too easy to pick holes in Woodward's short piece in a predictable defence which underlines the assumptions of journalistic as opposed to academic writing, which, ideally, would be more careful. Quite frequently the only way to deal with deconstruction in this arena is to ridicule it and to accuse it of perverse obscurantism. Woodward places himself among what he calls the "humanists," those "traditionalists" who, as he says, "scorn as so much literary gobbledygook" words such as "intertextuality," "signifiers," "trace" and "erasure" (Woodward 80). Yet accusations of the use of jargon instead of 'plain English' could also be levelled at many of those critics who abhor deconstruction and who cling to the use of their own particular form of jargon as a mark of their profession. The division between the journalist and a certain type of academic which is minimised in articles such as Woodward's by quotations from these academics in 'plain English' is reinserted in those same academics' writings in the setting of their profession. However, in the context of a publication for a wide and diverse readership, it may be in the interests of the academic to appear to be in tune with (or to second guess) the expectations of that readership.

The idea of deconstruction as foreign body is also evident in Colin Campbell's 1986 *New York Times Magazine* article, 'The Tyranny of the Yale Critics.' Here, Campbell builds deconstruction up as a perceived monster of nihilism only to deflate it by approaching a number of the 'tyrants' in their offices at Yale and discovering that they are, in fact, ordinary decent Americans, influenced but not completely corrupted by the French virus. Even the research students have not succumbed as Campbell concludes, "Fair numbers of graduate students... have been stimulated, but philosophically unconverted, by the French colonial presence" (Campbell 48). According to Campbell's version, 'American' deconstruction is internalised within the university (and within the article in the form of an insert called 'How Deconstruction Works') and made to seem harmless and domesticated, while the 'French' version, embodied by Derrida, remains on the edge, not quite expelled and therefore the cause of some underlying unease. It is fitting that Derrida was not available in person but puts in an appearance at the end of the piece in the form of a voice on the phone. 'How Deconstruction Works' (Campbell 25) is a reading by J. Hillis Miller of a phrase from *Paradise Lost* which focuses on the undecidability of whether Eve is fallen before the fall or not. It depicts 'deconstruction' as a reading tool which comes in a small box despite Miller's opening assertion to the contrary in which he claims that deconstruction is

by no means just one more 'method' of reading. It is a transformation of ways of thinking and doing that coincides with wide-ranging changes going on in Western societies today... All of these dimensions [institutional and pedagogical, familial and sexual, political and juridical, even theological and scientific] are involved when I, for example, read Book IV of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Campbell 25).

It is necessary here to keep in mind the place of Miller's piece of deconstruction and the rôle he is playing. Campbell has characterised him as the Yale deconstructionist who is closest to Derrida "both professionally and personally" (Campbell 48). Therefore the reader is assured that what is being produced here is deconstruction at its 'best' (although one might wonder why, if he is being named as the standard, a piece by Derrida could not have been included). Miller establishes the importance of deconstruction by claiming that it has a transformative power. Furthermore, he reinforces his authority not only as a deconstructionist but also as a professor of English literature by inserting a sense of habitual practice in his use of the continuous tense. "[W]hen I... read Book IV of Milton's Paradise Lost." This phrase encapsulates both the distance between and the shared assumptions of writer and reader in its throwaway "When... I read" which implies a continuous perusal of and subsequent familiarity with Paradise Lost so that it becomes 'Whenever... I read' and the allowance to the non-specialist reader in the reminder that it is Milton's Paradise Lost which is being discussed here rather than anybody else's. Miller then inserts his practice into the critical tradition. "The passage describing Eden has both moved and troubled many readers among them John Ruskin and William Empson" (Campbell 25). This has the effect of both establishing deconstruction and assimilating it. The early promise of a deconstruction which "coincides with wide-ranging changes going on in Western societies today" is not exactly fulfilled by a retreat into the specialities of Milton, a mention of Ruskin and Empson and a reading of a few lines of the poem which focuses on the problems inherent in Eve's wanton curls. Rather than proving his case, Miller's constrained attempt to show deconstruction at work serves to underline its irrelevance for most Sunday supplement readers. This has the opposite effect to that implied by Miller's opening words, as deconstruction here is indeed shown to be just another "method of reading." 'How Deconstruction Works' underlines the innocuous nature of a method of reading imported from France and domesticated at Yale. The reader is given two deconstructions: the one drafted into the PC wars and the one which seems to be suited only to the English classroom. It is difficult to see the connection between the two except, possibly, for the somewhat clumsy attempt by Miller to 'radicalise' Eve's rôle in *Paradise Lost*.

Campbell visits Geoffrey Hartman in his office and presents him as a surprisingly reasonable and sympathetic person, one with whom the reader of the *New York Times* would have some common ground. Hartman mentions Shakespeare and the Bible, he sighs at the attacks from the left. "He responds softly, rationally. He makes Les Critiques Diaboliques sound almost ordinary... Might [deconstruction], after all, have a humanistic core?" (Campbell 47). Hartman cautiously criticises Derrida "You could charge Derrida with being too cute and deliberate, too self-conscious. Derrida might go too far, he says... One has to admit... that Derrida is 'a fascinating episode in the history of criticism'" (Campbell 47-8). There is nothing to fear here, Campbell is telling his readers. The professors do see the aliens for what they are, excessive and irrational. Derrida is merely an "episode," so the danger is averted and the Sunday supplement readers can rest easy, the threat of invasion by wacky French theories (with their *suppléments* which throw doubt on certainties) dissipated. Or is it? TRINITY COLLEGE LIRRARY THIRD IN

Campbell visits a number of professors in the course of his research for the article and the research thereby becomes the article. This makes it appear more spontaneous and transparent because he is merely reporting on his day out at Yale; it is a useful method of closing the gap

between himself and his readers as he brings them along with him. This strategy also has the effect of seeming to be non-strategic or unselfconscious. The piece concludes with a phonecall to Derrida in France. Derrida is affable but cautious, refusing to "discuss philosophy or politics or his American cult over the telephone." He will only answer a factual question about his date of birth (asked because it is four days later than Harold Bloom's). Campbell, half in jest and wholly in earnest, asks if Derrida will abandon deconstruction when he reaches Bloom's age. "'Perhaps,' the philosopher answers." He reveals that he will soon be coming to Yale for five weeks. Deconstruction, it seems, still lurks in the bushes. Is it friend or foe? Familiar or alien? Derrida rises to his rôle as the not quite dead alien who will return once again. "'As you can imagine,' he says amiably, 'all this is very controversial, very dangerous really'" (Campbell 48). This is a Derrida who is performing for the reporter and delivering the required lines to the reader. The amiability has the effect of drawing the teeth of the statement. This rounds off Campbell's article nicely fitting in with the overarching theme of the defusion of any danger with which French theory might threaten the American campus reducing the tyrants – even Derrida – to friendly harmlessness.

Even so, the photographs which illustrate the article seem to emphasise Derrida's difference. These photographs of Derrida, Bloom, Miller and Hartman were commented on by David Shumway in an article in the *PMLA* titled 'The Star System in Literary Studies.'<sup>33</sup> Shumway focuses on the photographs used in Campbell's article, interpreting them simply as emphasising the star status of their subjects, especially Derrida: TRINITY COLLEGE LIRRARY THIRD IA.

Moreover, there is an additional image – the most starlike of the four – of Jacques Derrida... even Derrida's clothing is dramatic – a black corduroy jacket rather than the usual tweed sport coat – and it also serves to set off the star's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> David Shumway, 'The Star System in Literary Studies,' *PMLA* 112. 1 (1997): 85-99. Referred to as Shumway. It is worth noting that this photograph of Derrida framed by ornate pillars is used on the back cover of his *The Truth in Painting* trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) which has framing as its subject matter. In other words it was not only to emphasise Derrida's 'star-like' properties that this picture was taken.

face. The other three images are interesting pictures of professors. Derrida is presented like a movie star. (Shumway 91)

An alternative interpretation of these photographs would be that the differences between them serve to show how alien or 'foreign' Derrida is in comparison with the American professors. A tweed sport coat would only be 'usual' in an American context. Derrida becomes more starlike because of the difference and distance between himself and the American reader. In addition, it is possible that Derrida's photograph stands out purely because of circumstances. The Bloom and Miller photographs were both taken by the same photographer, Derrida was not at hand to have his taken for the Campbell article. Shumway might find the portraits of the professors "interesting" but Derrida thinks quite the opposite. A month after Colin Campbell's article appeared in the *New York Times*, Derrida was interviewed on French radio. His interviewer, Didier Cahen, asked about his "vigilance" with regard to photograph taken for publication "was because the code that dominates at once the production of those images, the framing they are made to undergo, the social implications (showing the writer's head framed in front of his bookshelves, the whole scenario) seemed to me to be first of all terribly boring, but also contrary to what I am trying to write and to work on."<sup>34</sup>

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Campbell's article is an example of a piece of writing where deconstruction is mentioned throughout but never appears. The interviewees come across as being more concerned with calming readers' fears about French nihilists than with questioning the assumptions inherent in the use of these terms. Despite the breadth of Campbell's investigation (he gives a potted history of literary criticism, he speaks with Bloom, Hartman, Miller and Derrida among others, he gives instructions for use, he takes a trip to the stacks, he even glances at *Deconstruction and Criticism*), and the length of the article (about 8,000 words), there is no hint that deconstruction is not a methodology and therefore cannot have a school. If Derrida

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, "There is no One Narcissism" (Autobiophotographies),' Points 196-197.

remains on the margin throughout the article, frequently named but not quoted until the final paragraph, so too does what he would recognise as deconstruction. One could argue, of course, that Derrida was given an opportunity to speak about what he means when he uses the word 'deconstruction' but declined, which again raises questions about the limitations of the discursive practices of the public press.

## v. Raising the Standard: Derrida and Kamuf in Interview.

How could one go about identifying a *point* where the university becomes the not-university? Speaking about borders, the *aporia*, thresholds and contamination at the annual Cerisy-la-Salle conference in 1992, Derrida argues that the border (between the limits of truth and its beyond, between different languages, and between language and its other, between guest and host) is divided at the moment of its tracing and so is never without its problems.

There is a *problem* as soon as the edge-line is threatened. And it is threatened from its first tracing. This tracing can only institute the line by dividing it intrinsically into two sides. There is a *problem* as soon as this intrinsic division divides the relation to itself of the border and therefore divides the being-one-self of anything.<sup>35</sup>

Implicit in both border and limit is the concept of separation which institutes that which it separates and which can take the form, for example, of a declaration which decides what is proper to a university and what is not. But a term like 'limit' also includes the possibility of non-communication, non-comprehension. The notion of a limit is more enclosed and constraining than that of a border which may always be crossed and re-crossed legitimately given the correct conditions. The breaching of a limit goes *beyond* what is conventionally acceptable. This implies reaching into the unknown, the extension of limits to create a new limit of what is known. In this sense, a limit is something which one comes up against and which becomes redefined when breached. A limit is a reference point, a marker which is

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Finis,' Aporias, trans. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993)

conventionally observed. The idea that *there is a limit* to what can be written, explained or communicated underlies all ideals to the contrary. (It should be noted however that when Derrida is accused of "going too far," as he was by Hartman in the Campbell article, the limits he has 'breached' are not those he would recognise.) Such 'ground-rules' are implicit in the mutual criticism practised by academics and journalists who accuse the other of faults such as over-simplification or obscurantism. This section is concerned, therefore, with how the *limits* of communication between the university and the press become *more* defined, *more* abyssal and less likely to be bridged, when the *borders* between them are crossed.

In The Division of Literature or the University in Deconstruction, Peggy Kamuf is concerned with the borders of the university, the point at which it becomes the not-university, and the rôle that literature and deconstruction have played in both reinforcing and questioning such borders (Kamuf 4). She describes how the announcement of a group, Teachers for a Democratic Culture (TDC), was reported by the New York Times. One of the aims of this group would be to represent "more accurately academic work to 'the public'" (Kamuf 157). Does Kamuf mean to represent academic work in a more accurate manner (more balanced etc.) to the public or does she mean that academic work is more accurate per se? The syntax here does not allow us to answer this so from the outset, as Derrida would predict, there are problems. In the NYT report there is a sound-bite description of deconstruction "which says that no text can have a fixed meaning," and the TDC, to Kamuf's knowledge, did not attempt to "correct publicly the NYT article" (Kamuf 157). The problem, as Kamuf sees it, is that neither the newspaper nor the group of academics seem to realise "that among the questions at issue may be some that cannot be dispatched in the form of information" (Kamuf 158). In other words, making "accurate academic work" known to "the public" for whatever reason is more than a question of correcting misrepresentations on a point of information which is one of the most powerful put-downs of the traditional debating situation.

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For the fact is that, in order to explain why such a phrase ['deconstructionism - which says that no text can have a fixed meaning'] or its evil twin

('deconstruction allows one to write absolutely anything') is neither simply true nor false, another kind of practice *other than simply predicative discourse* (S is P) has to be undertaken. And it is this 'other' that is judged to be too difficult, inaccessible or out of place by *both* the *New York Times* journalist *and* the organization of scholars that has given him his story. (Kamuf 159)

According to Kamuf, then, the problem is not necessarily one of comprehension or motives nor is it merely due to lack of time and space. The only example Kamuf can offer of a place where "another kind of practice" can go on seems necessarily limited to the academy where, in "books, journals, academic conferences, the graduate seminar, or even the undergraduate and secondary school classroom... this 'other' practice can and does go on" (Kamuf 159). The limit thus emerges between these areas where "this 'other' practice can and does go on" and public discourse in the form of the print media which labours under constraints acknowledged by groups such as the TDC who apply a different standard in their dealings with the public media as they allow reductive definitions of 'difficult' theories to slip by unchallenged.

If we judge such questions and the analysis they call for to be 'too difficult' or, worse, politically disabling because they complicate too much the model of effective public discourse, can we be so sure that the judgement and the decisions it entails have not themselves installed the very limits on public access that everyone in a democracy must decry? (Kamuf 161) RNITY COLLEGE LIBRARY THERE IN

The assumed constraints of public discourse insert the limit between the university and its other. Different standards apply, yet there is a continual appeal to the possibility that the same 'high' standards *could* be achieved. For Kamuf, then, it is not the 'fault' of individual journalists or even the TDC that sub-standards apply, because these are the limitations of the conditions in which they write. Her recommendation is that attention should be given to the arena of public discourse itself rather than what takes place within it. What is important to note here is that what Kamuf calls the "questioning of prior determinations" (Kamuf 158) involves more than a wealth of time. It also involves the ability to be open to a critique of these determinations, it is a certain mode of questioning which does not seek final solutions to

replace prior determinations. Thus it is that Kamuf can criticise John Guillory for believing that deconstruction had made a promise that it subsequently failed to fulfil.

According to Guillory then, deconstruction failed to keep the promise to deliver a relation of no-relation, that 'total autonomy from the laws of the market' without which the humanities curriculum is squeezed into obsolescence . . . Not only . . . has deconstructive thought never promised an aesthetic or literary or humanistic, that is, *non-technical* specificity in the name of which to 'take back' the traditional discipline of the humanities, it has explicitly and constantly urged a rethinking of all oppositions structuring the metaphysical or idealist apprehension of the technical as the 'other' of the properly human (or social or aesthetic etc.). (Kamuf 18-19)

The failure to keep promises, to fulfil potential, is inevitable and unavoidable when the expectations of participants in controversies such as those over 'deconstruction,' 'poststructuralism' or 'French theory' are based on a form of communication which is always at cross purposes and cannot be otherwise, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith explains in her analysis of various intellectual controversies, Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy.<sup>36</sup> Smith, not unproblematically, divides such conflict into opposing camps. On one side are the traditional philosophers or rationalists, that is, those who believe it is possible to make unconditional statements about the human condition. Such statements are then invariably proven to be true (or false) by the use of examples or arguments which conform to the terms used in the original proposition. This model uses the hermeneutic circle of self-affirmation and is based on the autonomy of reasoned conflict described by Kant in The Conflict of the Faculties. On the other side are those who are sceptical of such statements, those who constantly point out contingency, relativism and the impossibility of unconditionality. Smith examines Habermas's argument against antifoundationalism and shows how he runs into difficulties as he constantly attempts to (re)establish the grounds of his transcendental moral theory through the use of non-

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Belief and Resistance: Dynamics of Contemporary Intellectual Controversy (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997). Referred to as Belief and Resistance. transcendental, contingent or local empiricism or examples. She refers to these problems as "rationalist philosophy's need to invoke the authority of empirical science to bolster its own claims but, simultaneously, to deny that authority in maintaining its own epistemic privilege" (*Belief and Resistance* 113). When the possible and the impossible are previously (or always already) defined, it becomes 'impossible' to maintain one's position in the arena of controversy constructed by those who are one's opponents.

If the skeptic claims to speak 'with conviction,' then her questioning and alternative formulations, in necessarily claiming unconditional validity are self-contradictory, but if she denies that she is claiming unconditional validity in her speech acts, then she has confessed that she is not 'oriented towards genuine agreement' and thus not engaged in 'genuine communication' . . . Given this set of alternatives (Habermas . . . adds two others: committing suicide and going mad), it is not surprising that many skeptics take the self-excommunicating option . . . and bid 'farewell to reason.' (*Belief and Resistance* 117)

If excommunication means no communication, it would seem that the dissent dissipates, the opponents are no longer opponents and cannot exist as such. And if the university as an institution is founded on reason and established by and through division (a division which also includes the idea of division as divisive, that is, stimulating controversy and debate), unreason and the not-university will always have to be taken into account.

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[A] reverse or mirror critical theory would operate as a disauthorizing, desedimenting, counter-regulative ideal prepared to be 'critical' through thick and thin [of] any established theories including established (as might certainly happen) versions of itself . . . This alternative critical theory does exist and has existed, it seems, from the time there was theory of any kind. Like the devil, it has many names, including the devil's own names: nihilism, atheism, relativism, anarchism, deconstruction and postmodernism. (*Belief and Resistance* 122)

That deconstruction must remain critical of 'established versions' of *itself* is imperative if it is to remain in some way consistent with an 'itself.' The imperative to remain eternally vigilant is one which Derrida obeys and instigates within the forum of intellectual conflict. He persistently calls for a responsibility and accountability, a taking into account and a calling to account of the 'other' side, instigating new types of divisions while demonstrating the

permeability of the old. The kind of responsibility and accountability that Derrida (or Bill Readings) calls for with regard to the academy might not be recognisable as such. Derrida pushes at the limits of the possible and the impossible by making a case for a mode of thought such as deconstruction that does not shy away from being impossible. Once something is pronounced impossible the limits are already in place. As so often, Derrida warns against rushing forward with preconceived conclusions.

And I would say that deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible; also that those who would rush to delight in that admission lose nothing from having to wait. For a deconstructive operation *possibility* would rather be the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches.<sup>37</sup>

Keeping in mind Smith's account of the impossibility of direct communication (when such communication is between those who would use rationality as the basis of debate and those who would question such foundational assumptions) leads us to some understanding of the multiple confusions which arise when one of the devil's names which accepts impossibility as part of its remit meets the establishment in the form not only of the university but of the public media.

We have seen how Kamuf in her critique of the TDC and its dealings with the *New York Times* wishes to go beyond mere correction of facts. This is also Derrida's concern in a written interview with Peggy Kamuf in *Points*.<sup>38</sup> Here, in 'The Work of Intellectuals and the Press (The Bad Example: How the *New York Review of Books* and Company Do Business),' Derrida attempts to analyse some of the problems which run along and through the divisions between the university and the press. Derrida is concerned with correcting inaccuracies but BINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY DURY IN

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Inventions of the Other,' *Reading de Man Reading*, eds. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 36. This was a paper delivered at Cornell University in 1984. Referred to as 'Inventions.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Work of the Intellectuals and the Press (The Bad Example: How *The New York Review of Books* Do Business)' in *Points* 422-54. Referred to as 'Work of the Intellectuals.'

here he is more interested in the medium in which such errors come about. This is an example of an interview taking place in the academic environment and attempting to confront the issues of the public medium. The context is a representation of Derrida by Richard Wolin in the introduction to the second edition of The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader in 1993.<sup>39</sup> What is pertinent to our point here is not the controversy between Wolin (and another critic, Thomas Sheehan) and Derrida (which I will return to in chapter three), but Derrida's castigation of the forum in which it took place and his belief that the medium in which misinterpretation occurs determines the nature of the misinterpretation. Both Kamuf and Derrida point to the active rôle the forum of the NYRB played in the unfolding of this controversy. Its fortnightly publication means that there can be an exchange of views but the constraints of deadlines mean that these views are often simply reactive to the cage-shaking indulged in by writers for such publications and encouraged by editorial decisions like the one already seen in the example of Camille Paglia's diatribe. Derrida is well aware that he is in a no-win situation and puts in a plea for greater responsibility by journalists. An initial reading would suggest that he is no different from writers such as Bérubé who bewail their impotence in the face of the power of the press.

I therefore take the journalistic moment of this episode to be the most significant symptom of what we are obliged to talk about once again. The task is all the more important today by reason of the (real or imaginary) power that is often granted to such a press. No one dares any longer to say anything against it. It is not enough to underscore that the things that count and endure are in fact happening elsewhere, most often very far out of sight and beyond the scope of such a magazine whose power is exaggerated... It is this credit, this imaginary capitalization and this occult power that must be analyzed and, again and again, criticized. For they put in danger everything that partisans of democracy, in their attachment to the freedom of the press hold dear. ('Work of the Intellectuals' 425)

<sup>39</sup> Richard Wolin, ed. *The Heidegger Controversy: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1991; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 1993).

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The most significant symptom for Derrida in this controversy is not the distortion of his views on Heidegger, with the possible implication that he did not find Heidegger's Nazism problematic, or the re-publication of the interview without his permission (though he is, of course, highly critical of those issues), but the fact that the affair crossed over into the NYRB. Here in the comfort of an academic text and in interview with a sympathetic colleague (Peggy Kamuf is one of Derrida's most regular translators), Derrida appears to partake in facile media bashing. What does he mean when he says that no one dares say anything against "such a press"? He himself is saying much against it, so is Kamuf, so too are others who have taken part in the cultural wars. Possibly it appears that no one is saying anything because criticism of the NYRB's policies will not appear in its pages. Is Derrida saying that if it is not in the NYRB it is not anywhere, thus allowing it the power he has just questioned? For him the "things that count and endure are happening elsewhere." Does this mean that he would impose divisions between the things that count 'elsewhere' and the things that don't count which appear in the NYRB, thus sustaining accusations of triviality and simplification and the division of the university from the public press or even the 'public'? This of course is an immediate and decontextualised reading of the first part of Derrida's interview. Here (as in books such as Limited Inc. in which another controversy is played out in detail), Derrida has sufficient opportunity to complicate and explain, to be careful and to finish what he was saying.

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We are all familiar with the complaints of scholars and artists about the abuses of journalistic simplification that, in many fields, can have terrible political effects. These effects are on the scale of the demographic field covered by the media and by the almost *instantaneous* type of effect they produce. This complaint or this grievance sometimes motivates but does not always justify, disdain or condescension toward journalistic language. ('Work of the Intellectuals' 427-28)

Although Derrida would seem to be rejecting the disdain exhibited by scholars towards journalistic language, this does not mean that he is satisfied with this language in its present form. Nor is he satisfied with the readers of such publications who do not read further for themselves. He is acknowledging the impossibility of any 'nutshell' explanations and he is

saying that not only do publications like the *NYRB* fail to explain "research . . . that questions [the] certainties and axioms of Enlightenment" ('Work of the Intellectuals' 428), they *cannot* explain such concepts, all they can do is remind readers of their own shortcomings and failure to inform. Derrida does not see a solution in what is offered by leftist writers: the popularisation of theory or the refutation of misrepresentation. Bérubé and Nelson promote the entry of the left onto the field already marked out by conservatives. For them there is no time, the rot must be stopped before any more damage is done. Derrida advocates letting the readers decide by encouraging them to be more critical of what they read and to be more aware of the conditions in which writing by people like D'Souza, Kimball or Bloom becomes possible. When there is no room for explanation, the readers will have to make it for themselves.

The shared obligation of the researcher and the journalist, or even the professor who fulfils the role of the journalist, is to make every effort to explain... And especially, especially when this task appears impossible or when it is too difficult to acquit oneself of fully within the imposed limits of space and time (which happens in newspapers as well as in the university), the duty, the categorical imperative, I would say, *as much for the academic as for the journalist, and for both of them when they are the same person*, is to mark *humbly and clearly* that things are still more complicated and that the reader ought to be aware of that. One must tell readers that they are called upon to work, to read the text being discussed and not just the article... One must teach the reader as well as the student that the difficulty of a discourse is not a sin – nor is it the effect of obscurantism or irrationalism. And that it is often the contrary that is true: obscurantism can invade a language of communication that is seemingly direct, simple, straightforward. ('Work of the Intellectuals' 429; original emphasis) TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY DURI IN

In using words such as 'obligation,' 'duty,' 'imperative,' Derrida is sketching out a projected mission for academics, journalists, readers and academic\journalists. He is also showing himself to be somewhat naive, or at least idealistic, as opposed to the cynical nihilist he is sometimes portrayed as being. He acknowledges that the format of fortnightly journalism as it is encountered in the form of the *NYRB* is unsuited to the explanation of the kinds of questions which are considered in an academic setting. The injunction he imposes is that the

writer must make it clear how complicated things are. Writers should remain humble, that is, they should not speak loftily about how such subjects are beyond an ordinary reader's ken (the kind of condescension we saw earlier in this chapter displayed by Barbara Herrnstein Smith when she talks about "the habits" of professors). He is not saying that the 'reader' (as opposed to the student) is incapable of understanding the questions raised, merely that the medium is incapable of explaining it given the time\space constraints and the nature of the medium. If the writer of the article has a duty to point out to the reader that she should 'read the book' then the reader has a reciprocal obligation to get access to and engage with the book (we are talking here about those readers who would not have the resources of an academic library, unlike the students, professors and journalists). The difficulties of explanation are thus multiplied by Derrida's 'solution,' not reduced. This is not only the case for the lay\common\amateur reader. Derrida frequently accuses his critics of not having done their reading, usually of not having read him. This is a method of censoring or silencing his opponents by constantly alluding to standards of rigour and fairness. These are the accepted standards to which Derrida can refer with impunity in a forum which relies on such tenets for its authority, that is, the university. His insistence on careful reading, good translation and even-handed quotation goes to the very heart of academic controversy because they are principles which would seem, ideally, to apply right across the divisions between the differing factions within the university. Such standards require time which is a dimension of academic freedom. They are used to defend the university against the 'outside,' that which is not the university, which demands less in the way of rigour thus constituting itself as not of the academy. At what point would Derrida acknowledge that one could approach him with one's arguments, having done all the reading? At what point will there have been enough reading? In using the future perfect tense as Derrida frequently does to indicate an anterior but not strictly future concept, I wish to indicate that this is something which may never necessarily come about, is always deferred, a solution to academic controversy when the scales fall from our eyes and we all see eye to eye. But still Derrida refuses to play the 'get real' game.

When we see journalists (or professors who improvise as journalists, thereby accumulating the powers and publics of both) abuse their power and cite, for example, the lack of time or space to justify outrageous and thus distorting simplification, omission, non-reading, the refusal to render an account of difficult texts, and so forth, we are within our rights to accuse them of failing to uphold the principles of this deontology. Such behaviour breaks the implicit social contract that founds the press and publishing . . . Of course, we know that what we are talking about here is something like an infinite task or a regulating idea . . . it must always be possible to mark, here and now, in a readable fashion, that one is conscious of this limit. ('Work of the Intellectuals' 429-30)

What Derrida means by 'a readable fashion' is questionable. How readable would it be to be continuously inserting conditions, caveats and warnings about shortcomings? Does this make for 'good copy'? Who drives the notion of what makes good reading, the readers or the editors? Is Derrida looking for a balanced treatment, an impossible symmetry? Who benefits and what becomes of academic controversy as depicted in the public press when all sides are shown to be reasonable? This, as we saw in chapter one when Derrida undertook to probe the notion of reason as founding the university all the while staking his place as a member, is a question of how reasonable (or orthodox) one can appear in the course of exploring such values.

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It would seem that in Derrida's demand for education, care, vigilance, there lurks the parallel demand for understanding. How exact does this understanding have to be before it leads to silence? Thus we read Smith with some irony:

If orthodoxy is that which is manifestly true, self-evidently right and intuitively and universally preunderstood, then how is it that its truth and rightness elude the skeptic? The orthodox answer to this question is familiar: profound defects and deficiencies of intellect and character – an innate capacity for illogical thinking, unregenerate corruption by false (or French) doctrine, domination by personal resentment and political ideology, or unfamiliarity with the best work on the subject in analytical philosophy.

The explanatory asymmetry here – that is, the orthodox believer's conviction that he believes what he does because it is true while skeptics and heretics believe

what they do because there is something the matter with them – is a general feature of defences of orthodoxy: political, aesthetic and scientific as well as philosophical or religious. (*Belief and Resistance* 83)

Smith consistently places deconstruction on the 'side' of the sceptic (see p. 123 above, where she places it alongside "nihilism, atheism, relativism . . . and postmodernism"). However, it is clear from Derrida's own writings that he would always question the notion of the orthodox/unorthodox divide. It is here that Smith's problems in her use of the 'on the one side on the other side' expression mentioned earlier (and which is quite different from Derrida's frequent use of the 'on the one hand . . . on the other hand' formulation in that there would appear to be more distance between the sides than there would be between the hands), become apparent. Smith has singled out "(French) doctrine" on the side of the unorthodox, thus reinstating 'orthodox' or traditional borders. Yet Derrida is unorthodox only up to a point, in a limited sense. He still remains within the borders of orthodoxy when it comes to the university, and in his frequent demands for high standards of reading and argumentation which he puts on display in Limited Inc. Smith groups two faults together - "corruption by false (or French) doctrine" and the "unfamiliarity with the best work" - where Derrida would insert a faultline. One could be 'corrupted' by 'French theory' and be familiar (but familiar in what way? familiarity could imply acceptance, something Derrida would always be wary of) with the 'best work.'

The notion of asymmetry used above by Smith is an important one here because it clarifies some of the disjunctions between academic and non-academic writing, disjunctions which Derrida is trying to call attention to, if not efface, by asking for more care and higher professional standards. However, asymmetry does imply polarity even though the opposing factors are unequal. Smith uses terms such as orthodox, objectivist, believer, and foundationalist to describe one side of the debate, and sceptic, non-foundationalist, nonobjectivist, revisionist to describe the other. In all cases there is a 'one side' and the 'other.' The 'other' here is primarily defined by its relation to the 'one,' the dominant partner. But of TRNITY COLLEGE LIBRARY DUBLIN

course one could also say that even while in a subservient position with regard to rationalism, the 'other' also becomes constitutive in the definition of the dominant half of the equation.

In the interview with Kamuf, Derrida reiterates the appeal to notions of academic standards of rigorous reading and adequate translation that Kamuf highlighted in her dealings with the public press in *The Division of Literature*. The raising of standards over the ramparts of the border of the university and the not-university (in the sense that both Kamuf and Derrida call for a 'higher' standard of reading and writing, and in the sense that they display their own standards in their exchanges and texts) seems to reinforce a necessary limit in the dealings between the two. In the next section I examine two articles Derrida published in specialised newspapers. In both instances Derrida draws attention to his concerns about the modern media, raising the question whether it is possible to talk about the press in the press.

## vi. Derrida's Day Out

Derrida has not written very much for the public press although he has been interviewed for daily newspapers such as the New York Times and Le Monde. One of his rare articles for Le Monde was disguised as an interview and so will be examined in the next chapter. In January 1989, however, Derrida was invited to contribute a piece for Le Monde's supplement to mark the bicentennial year of the French revolution. In October 1990 he wrote a longer piece for a 'European' review, Liber, Revue européenne des livres, which was distributed with four national newspapers: Le Monde, Frankfurter Allgemaine Zeitung, L'Indice and El Pais. (The Times Literary Supplement was initially involved but, according to the translators of The Other Heading, "they apparently decided in the end not to participate in the project" ('Other Heading' 59).) One can therefore say that at least in France, if not in the United States, Derrida has written for a daily newspaper but that the occasion was not an everyday one. The two pieces were later published together as The Other Heading. The Liber article is much the longer and I will consider it before going on to the Le Monde de la Révolution française which is more overtly concerned with the press.

It seems obvious that if one is going to talk about Derrida's work *on* the press that one would have to look at his work *in* the press as if it would somehow prove a point about academic publishing in the public medium, for instance, that a professor should simplify an argument or 'clarify' his or her points for the 'lay' reader. Derrida makes no such concessions because, as far as he is concerned, he is as likely to be read or misread in the academy as he is in the press and clarity itself is not a given. Any assumption that there would be something 'different' about these articles is partly undone by a note accompanying the *Liber* piece, 'The Other Heading: Memories, Responses, and Responsibilities,' stating that it was delivered at a colloquium before being published in abbreviated form in *Liber*.<sup>40</sup> In other words, Derrida considers the material used for an academic conference to be suitable for the more diverse readership which would make up the audience of *Liber*. There are differences between the two versions but they are not of the order of 'readability.'

The newspaper version comes with a 'warning' from the editors in large italicised print beneath a pen drawing of the ship of Europe. They begin by referring to the "heritage" of reflection on Europe, "from Hegel to Valéry, from Husserl to Heidegger" which Derrida is now taking on in his turn ("*se propose d'assumer à son tour*"). The authority thus allowed to Derrida is, however, already at work by virtue of the appearance of his article in four major European newspapers. This piece is granted status even before the editors of *Liber* describe it as "a major text." According to the editors, "*despite* its length and difficulty, it seemed to us to accord with *Liber*'s vocation to publish this major text which, in our view, constitutes a reference document" ('L'autre cap' 12; emphasis added).<sup>41</sup> In other words, before Derrida even has a chance to say anything the editors mark the readers' card. When they say that the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'L'autre cap: Mémoires, réponses et responsibilités' *Liber* (Oct. 1990): 11-13. Referred to as 'L'autre cap.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> "Malgré sa longueur et sa difficulté, il nous a paru conforme à la vocation de 'Liber' de publier ce texte majeur, qui constitue, selon nous, un document de référence."

piece is a reference document there is a suggestion not only that it is important, but that it might not be read straight through, that it is something to be kept and referred to. The implication is that a reader might not be able to get through the whole piece as part of their newspaper reading but that the article should not be discarded like a newspaper for all that.

the Intellectuals' interview when he says. "Joine must tell readers that

And the article *is* difficult and long, with very little of substance removed from the initial conference paper except for contextual references to Italy – where the conference took place – and a number of rhetorical signs which identify it as an oral piece. The faith with which Derrida's conference papers are transcribed for publication means that every phrase is reproduced as he spoke it. This has the effect of making the tone of the book more intimate than the article in the newspaper. Derrida refers to the circumstances in which he thought about writing the paper and in which he is 'now' giving it. The newspaper article, constrained by limitations of space, thus appears both more formal and more dense. Derrida was given ample space in the newspaper, the article is over 5,000 words (although this falls short of the approximately 8,000 that Campbell had for his article on deconstruction in Yale). I will give only one example of this difference. In 'The Other Heading,' Derrida speaks about identity and difference and the impossibility of mapping one's direction or the future. The "history of a culture" orients itself as if it knows where it was going all along.

The irruption of the new, the unicity of the other *today* should be awaited *as such* (but is the *as such*, the phenomenon, the being *as such* of the unique and of the other, ever possible?); it should be anticipated *as the unforeseeable*, the *unanticipatable*, the non-masterable, non-identifiable, in short, as that of which one does not yet have a memory. ('Other Heading' 18)

In 'L'autre cap' this becomes,

The unicity of the other *today* should be awaited as the unanticipatable, the nonmasterable, the non-identifiable, that of which one does not yet have a memory. ('L'autre Cap' 12)<sup>42</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> L'unicité de l'autre *aujourd'hui* doit être attendue comme l'inanticipable, le non-maîtrisable, le nonidentifiable, ce dont on n'a pas encore la mémoire.

The conference paper is both more and less difficult to read. More, because of the cautionary parentheses which trip the flow, and less because they also gloss or add to the sentence. The newspaper readers have to do more, or different, work to approach an understanding of what Derrida is saying here. This is the kind of effort Derrida was talking about in 'The Work of the Intellectuals' interview when he says, "[o]ne must tell readers that they are called upon to work, to read the text being discussed and not just the article" (429). The *Liber* editors, at least, partly fulfil this duty by issuing their warning. After that it is up to the reader to read in good faith.

The substance of what was said at the conference is there in the newspaper: the quotations from Valéry, the references to Heidegger and Husserl and the complex argument surrounding the meaning of the word 'heading.' In places, the newspaper article is more definite as questions become statements. Thus, "is it not necessary to have the courage and lucidity for a new critique . . .?' ('Other Heading' 56-7) becomes "there should be [il faut avoir] the courage and lucidity for a new critique" ('L'autre Cap 12). There is however, one interesting omission in the newspaper version. This is Derrida's sole mention of deconstruction in 'The Other Heading.' It is included in the list of duties enunciated at the end of the paper. These are synonymous with the main duty which is "to respond to the call of European memory" ('Other Heading' 76). The fourth duty (of eight) which, he says, is the "same duty," "dictates cultivating the virtue of . . . critique, of the critical idea, the critical tradition, but also submitting it, beyond critique and questioning, to a deconstructive genealogy that thinks and exceeds it without yet compromising it ('Other Heading' 77; original emphasis). The duty is omitted from the list which ends 'L'autre Cap' as Derrida moves from the third (the duty to criticise totalitarian anti-capitalism) to the fourth (the duty of assuming democracy as a European heritage). Possibly it is omitted because Derrida does not want to call attention to 'his' word and therefore to himself in the persona of a famous philosopher writing in the newspaper. Possibly it is omitted because it might call for explanation and this too would call for an explication of his 'own' work. A reference to the overburdened word could have the effect of distorting the balance of the article the subject of which is the identity and future of Europe. The potential for it to skew a detailed article is an indicator of its history. It is possible that Derrida omitted it, not in deference to the possibility that his readers might not have heard of it but because they had heard too much of it.

The task Derrida sets himself in this piece is a redrawing of the borders of Europe along lines that allow for a state of openness or porosity. The borders are not effaced but are constantly questioned in a continuous gathering and dividing motion. This takes the form of a countermovement which demands hesitation at the beginning. Heading somewhere often involves taking the time to examine what one means by the idea of heading, allowing that there are other possible headings and that there are others of headings, when 'heading' carries with it the idea of a pre-decided orientation or eschatology ('Other Heading,' 14-16). Derrida explores these ideas with regard to politics and culture in Europe. This is no different from the kind of recommendations Derrida makes for any institution be it the public press or the university – and both those institutions have a rôle to play in what Europe will become. He wishes to see "neither monopoly nor dispersion" ('Other Heading' 41). By this he means that there should neither be an overarching capital (which need not necessarily be a city) in which communication is "immediate and effective" nor should there be multiple provinces confined to "self-enclosed idioms" ('Other Heading' 39). He acknowledges that this is an aporia, that in truth there *must be* an aporia.

I will even venture to say that ethics, politics, and responsibility, *if there are any*, will only ever have begun with the experience and experiment of the aporia... The condition of possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain *experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia* from which one may invent the only *possible invention*, the impossible invention. ('Other Heading' 41)

It is at the impasse, when all progress seems to have ceased that the possibility for ethics, politics and responsibility is awoken. If there is no difficulty, if one can make obvious and quick decisions and progress smartly then, according to Derrida, there is no progress. This is

the message that Derrida has brought from the university - from the colloquium - to the public press, albeit in abbreviated form. It is consistent with everything he has said about taking into account the divergent or even opposing demands of any engagement, be it between the institution and its other, between two institutions, between any two entities previously defined. What Derrida brings with him is the requirement for experiment, invention and an experience of the impossible. We should recall how the AAUP described the university as an experimental station and we know that invention often takes place in the university where the limits of the impossible are confronted. Issues which might be "distasteful" to the wider public are explored there and in making a claim to be allowed to do this the American professors asserted their right to academic freedom. What Derrida is doing here is expanding the borders of this 'experiment station' in a widely circulated piece reaching an audience who would not normally have access to his work. He challenges his readers by refusing to give solutions but by multiplying the difficulties. In another conference paper, some years before, he had associated deconstruction with the experience of the impossible. Once deconstruction becomes possible, accessible, applicable, it is no longer deconstruction but something else. It must be constantly reinvented, as must the notion of invention itself. This infinite state of flux - Derrida refers to a movement of "oscillation" in 'Inventions of the Other' - might appear to open up abysses of uncertainty to a newspaperreading public but once again Derrida reminds us that everything must be guided by the institutions which are already in place.

But presenting an invention, presenting itself as an invention, the discourse I am talking about will have to have its invention evaluated, recognized, and legitimized by someone else, by an other who is not one of the family: the other as a member of a social community or of an institution. For an invention can never be *private* once its status as invention, let us say its patent or warrant, its manifest, open, public identification, has to be certified and conferred. ('Inventions' 28)

The opposing problem then opens itself out: the closure of the abyss of uncertainty with seals of approval in the form of certificates. Is there not something permanent about the certificate, the warrant? Does that not lead to stasis? This is the experience of oscillation and Derrida keeps things going by reminding us that it is an infinite process of new difficulties and new events each one reopening and sealing the abyss in a process whose rhythm cannot be predicted. This institutional certification is also affirmation and it comes from the legitimate other, the other who is authorised, ultimately, and in a democracy, by a public.

Derrida enacts this process of new difficulties and new events in his piece for the newspaper. If, as he says in the second article collected in *The Other Heading*, "the 'freedom of the press' is democracy's most precious good," it is necessary to take the press into account whenever one wishes to speak about democracy.<sup>43</sup> Yet, he asks, "Is there democracy without reciprocity?" ('Call It a Day' 106). The daily nature of newspapers, moving ever on to new news, denies its readers the right to reply to any great degree. And because the press is "everywhere," "*the right of response hardly exists*" ('Call It a Day' 107; original emphasis). It is because of this that misrepresentations of terms such as 'deconstruction' go unanswered and thus make their way into the public consciousness as terms to be rejected.

However Derrida might experiment with the press in order to criticise it, he is limited not only, as he acknowledges, by the constraints of space ('Call It a Day' 108) but by what he refers to as "models of readability." Having invoked Kant's linking of the Enlightenment "to the freedom of making *public* use of reason" ('Call It a Day' 96) Derrida continues by marking, in a parenthesis, what cannot be discussed in a newspaper by which he means, ironically enough, the effect of the media on the workings of democracy. Speaking of Carl Schmitt and his influence on "every analysis of public space, for example in Habermas" Derrida goes on to say

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> 'Call It a Day for Democracy,' *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 98. Referred to as 'Call It a Day.'

(... These questions cannot be taken up here – let us not forget the constraints of the press, which are not only quantitative: they also impose models of readability. All the stakes that we are discussing at this very moment are concentrated in what I must entrust here to the ellipsis of a telegram. Can one speak seriously of the press in the press? Yes and no, in contraband.) ('Call It A Day' 97)

The obvious question presents itself – if not there, in the public press, where? Where can issues of the public use of reason or the analysis of public space which includes the press be spoken of? The medium in which Derrida chose both to write about and defer writing about the press was the first issue of a monthly journal, published by *Le Monde* but marketed as a separate publication.<sup>44</sup> Derrida's contribution was a page-long article responding to three questions in a section of the journal which was devoted specifically to the question of the freedom of the press, from its roots in the American and French Revolutions to the censorship laws of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As in the *Liber* article, the editors have the first word, warning their readers that having a philosopher speak about the freedom of the press is a risk for all concerned, the subject, the journal, the author. They emphasise the adaptations Derrida had to make to comply with the journalistic constraints of speed and format and even then, they say, cuts had to be made.

THEFT OF A LEVEL & ROOM OF MANY

Derrida begins by addressing the question of public opinion. Where is it to be found? How does it come about and how is it measured? He talks about the different rhythms at play in the daily press, the government and public opinion as it is expressed in, for example, (and it is possibly the only example, because, as Derrida says, the right to reply hardly exists) opinion polls. He refers to the government and the press as the "representative agencies," but reminds readers that the relationship has never been and could never be as untrammelled as this term would make it appear ('Call It A Day' 86). There is a complex set of negotiations at play and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'La démocratie ajournée' *Le Monde de la Révolution française* (Jan. 1989) 27, which was reprinted in expanded form in *The Other Heading* under the title, 'Call It a Day for Democracy.'

nothing can be assumed, neither that the press and the government simply reflect the opinion of those they represent, nor that they can directly influence such opinion. The press is not the intermediary between the government and the people, it has an active rôle in forming the news, deciding what is news and how it should be told. Derrida emphasises the word 'today' in this article as he did in 'The Other Heading.' What does his writing in a newspaper make him on that day? Does he speak as one who represents public opinion or influences it? Asked, "[t]oday, what is public opinion?" he answers from a position at one remove from his subject, but in the medium that is most intricately bound up with public opinion, that it is "the silhouette of a phantom [that] has rights and powers." Introducing the idea of the power of the phantom allows Derrida to speak about the "[1]iterally ephemeral" nature of public opinion. It is an essential feature of democracy but, given its mutability, can neither be predicted nor represented. It comes into its own in parliamentary democracies but cannot be contained by such systems. Here, Derrida takes advantage of his medium to address the 'public' on the subject of public opinion, in order, at least, to distinguish it from its 'representation' in the press or in parliament. The risk that he runs is that of addressing the issue in the press while emphasising that there is no forum for public opinion as such. If that is the case, what of the opinions expressed here on public opinion? Are they an instance of public opinion? In other words, in this article Derrida surveys public opinion in order to foreground what is conventionally believed to be transparent and is usually passed over, visible only in its application to the diverse subjects of the moment, the current affairs of the newspapers or the topics of an opinion poll. His concern is to make public opinion itself a subject of public opinion. Warning his readers about the increased "accumulation, concentration and monopoly ... that might marginalize or reduce to silence anything that cannot be measured on their scale" ('Call It A Day' 99), Derrida moves towards a critique of "the violence of [the] dissymmetry" ('Call It A Day' 107) which is the impotence of any response to "error or falsification, omission, interpretative violence, abusive simplification, the rhetoric of insinuation, stupidity as well" ('Call It A Day' 106). This echoes the kind of protests voiced by critics of the way in which certain elements in the 'culture wars' exploited various media

TERMINE VEVEL IN LAW ENDERNIER FREEZERS

to disseminate their versions of what the implications of developments within the university might be. Derrida, too, admits a kind of defeat. Speaking about the "memory of a promise" which once gave rise to revolutions, he predicts that it "no doubt, will no longer be 'revolutionary,' and it must take its time – beyond the 'revolutionary *day*.'" Acknowledging that "nothing guarantees" that this impulse for revolution or change will have its day or will be given the time to have its day, Derrida confirms all the difficulties for finding a place for this impulse and thus possibly a forum where public opinion could be explored, by saying "I can say no more about it in a page," a remark that was, ironically enough, cut from the newspaper version of this interview ('Call It a Day' 108).

The mutual censorship carried out in the two articles analysed here, Derrida's omission of 'deconstruction' from the *Liber* piece and the editors' excision of his reference to the limits of the newspaper page (in the context of an argument about the possibility of a new forum for public opinion) in the *Le Monde de la Révolution française*, returns each to his own in a move that cannot be remarked by the readers because it is that of the ellipsis or the silent omission. This has the effect of reverting Derrida's work to the university. It *cannot* be done in the newspaper, he says, (although, he adds, he will make "yet another effort" ('Call It A Day' 108)), and it can *only* be done in the university as his own omission implies and the quotation below confirms.

LTURE OF A VI I C INC. IN LOW I LINES DELIVER FUEL AND

It seems that there is only one place which escapes the diurnal rhythm and where it might be possible to demonstrate how conflict or debate is determined in the moment and medium of their inscription. In the university Derrida sees a specific site from which deconstructive questioning could be initiated, although it is an environment that is only relatively and problematically free.

[I]n at least some places within the university – the university is not a homogeneous field – the problems, the constraints, the end-oriented research, are looser. So you can study without waiting for any efficient or immediate result.

You may search, just for the sake of searching . . . So there is a possibility of what I would call playing. It's perhaps the only place within society where play is possible to such an extent. I'm sure it's not totally free . . . But in the humanities, in philosophy, we are freer, so to speak, than in other disciplines . . . it's the place where we can try and think what the university is . . . Of course, this place is getting narrower now, more and more, for reasons of money: the money given to the humanities, to philosophy, is always diminishing. (Salusinszky 19-20; first emphasis added)

The problem to which the circle always returns then is, how does one explain oneself or justify this "search for the sake of searching," the delayed, deferred and "inefficient" result? Derrida does not give reasons *why* the money is diminishing. It is possible that he has already put the reason in place: in an end-oriented society one must be able to justify expenditure in 'concrete' terms, not in loose play, in questioning notions of ends and orientations. Yet, at the same time, how can one *not* explain or justify oneself? The responsibility or obligation to do so remain in place even if it is not possible to fulfil that obligation in the terms in which it is posited (or, to paraphrase Readings, to be answerable, to be accountable, without being able to supply the answers). The attempt to explain difficult questions that require painstaking and lengthy answers which are not answers in the conventional sense, rarely makes its way into the public press and when it does it is 'misrepresented.' The implication is that the public press is not a suitable forum for such concepts because they cannot be explained along traditional lines and cannot be understood without doing the reading which Derrida suggests (or even demands) should be done.

THE REAL RAPE STRATE I WANTED AND A STRATE AND A STRATEGY

# vii. Another Anecdote

At talks in the 1980s [Walter Jackson] Bate was fond of opening with a salvo against deconstruction. "I don't call it *deconstruction*," he would announce, simultaneously whipping a handkerchief out of his pocket and waving it before the audience, "I call it *decongestion* and blow it out of my nose." (Nelson 219)<sup>45</sup>

 $<sup>^{45}</sup>$  To avoid the practice of demonisation it is necessary to be fair to Bate and add that Bérubé – also trying to be fair – gives him some space to redeem himself. "Only ten years ago [in 1983], when

It must have been some sight: a Harvard professor acting the showman, combining stand-up comedy and handkerchief-waving (was it silk? was it red?) magic, making deconstruction disappear to the guffaws of his audience. No doubt the trick was well received, not even the most ardent 'deconstructionist' could remain po-faced at this. Cary Nelson does not say what kind of "talks" these were but a performance like this would not be suited to a round-table discussion so we can assume that it was saved for larger occasions which possibly included the public. It makes for a good anecdote and good copy and saves wasteful explanations such as on what grounds does deconstruction qualify as something to be ejected from the Harvard body. (It only takes a short look at Bate's hamming to realise that what he is talking about is congestion not *de*congestion but of course using terms correctly like this spoils the whole joke.)

The point here of course is that deconstruction was seen as fair game for such crude abuse. While feminism and affirmative action might be equally loathed it would be difficult for a professor to redeem himself if he told a joke like this against them on the public platform (although he might do it in private). The impression made by such 'wit' is hard to undo. In any case such an opening gives us a good idea of the kind of talk the audience was in for. Nelson's account (and its repetition here) sustains the kind of conflictual debate that has been the question all along in this chapter and which should not be simply joined in a forward and back round of rejoinders. Deconstruction became part of the PC and 'culture' wars which were drawn along the crude lines of right-wing neoconservatives versus left-wing supporters of affirmative action, gay studies, feminism, marxism and whatever might be deemed to THE PRESERVE A PROPERTY AND A STRATEGY AND A STRATEGY

Stanley Fish pointed out an egregious error in Walter Jackson Bate's critique of Derrida (Bate had claimed that Derrida 'never turns to the really major philosophers'), Bate graciously acknowledged the error and replied, 'my short paragraph on deconstructionism was admittedly testy and unfairly dismissive ... But I hasten to say that a close study of [Jonathan] Culler's recent books helped to change my perspective and encouraged me to consider the subject with a less prejudiced mind. Accordingly I wish I had omitted that paragraph'" (Bérubé 103). Nelson's vague time frame does not allow us to know whether Bate continued blowing his nose after this retraction.

disturb the status quo, including deconstruction. Yet if deconstruction has a rôle it must be neither on one side or the other, such deconstruction is a misreading of what Derrida's work has been saying. It is fitting that deconstruction was rejected by both sides in the PC wars – that at least showed that it was at work as Kamuf has pointed out. The deconstruction that was named in the lists is not the deconstruction that does its work, *that* deconstruction is not so easily invoked either in the public press *or* in the academy.

In this chapter I have examined the node at which four elements, the academy, the press, the conservative-liberal conflict over political correctness and the deconstructive approach, engage with each other. These four elements are neither symmetrical nor of the same order. The first three share the programmed assumptions that because one is coming from this or that viewpoint, because one is writing in this or that forum what one says can be taken as read. It is predictable, it does not need to be read or it is read only in order to confirm one's expectations. Deconstructive critique is bound by its own refusal to be programmed and cannot therefore be slotted into some pre-existing form of discourse. The public press and the academy are both institutions and are therefore marked by the pre-existing framework of the concept of institutionality. They are embodiments of the idea of an institution and their discourses are regulated by institutional norms and expectations. To be sure, deconstruction is institutionalised to the extent that it takes advantage of both the space to play and the demand for scholarly standards that academic freedom defines. It is when deconstruction leaves its natural habitat that difficulties arise. To a degree the inability to represent it in the press (with the possible exception of Derrida's articles - but even they were 'censored'), is a success of sorts demonstrating the kind of difficulties it calls attention to. Representations of deconstruction by the public press, or by 'deconstructionists' themselves (such as J. Hillis Miller or Derrida), do not break down the borders between what is inside and what is outside the university, between the academy and the public press, between either 'side' of the intellectual debate or between deconstruction 'itself' and traditional criticism or theory. Deconstruction takes up the question of conflict at the point where transparency in

communication is assumed, either as an outcome to be desired or as something already achieved. It gives the lie to such assumptions, questioning the familiar ground on which debates take place and it therefore changes the nature of those debates, inveigling its way inbetween opponents not only to show that the divisions between them are not as obvious as they would seem, but also to show that all positions are unavoidably fissured. Thus new 'borders' are inscribed and old borders are shifted, redefined. Deconstruction maintains its 'position' somewhere between the two (but it is never neutral and is uneasy with the structurality of a 'between').

In his writing Derrida would appear to breach the limits of communication, in a manner which would be denied to the public press, not only because of a lack of time or space but also because it operates within an institution which has its own ideas about communicability. Deconstruction is similarly limited at the point at which it comes into contact with the public press. When each comments on the other it appears that borders are being crossed, that communication is taking place. As we have seen in this chapter, this is not the case. The most Derrida can do in the context of the public press, on those occasions when he writes in it, is to reiterate the differences, the conditions of the medium and that media have conditions. The possibility of impassability - its necessity even - is all that can be communicated. It is what Derrida offers when he defines the writer's task, quoted previously, as "the duty, the categorical imperative, I would say, as much for the academic as for the journalist, and for both of them when they are the same person, is to mark humbly and clearly that things are still more complicated and that the reader ought to be aware of that" ('Work of the Intellectuals' 429). Communication, then, becomes a 'marking,' a gesture that does not exhaust the message. How to do this "humbly and clearly" remains to be explored. The next chapter examines Derrida's own enactment of the rôle of academic and journalist in his interviews. That he takes on the duty repeatedly to remind readers that things are more complicated cannot be in doubt when one considers the large number of interviews he has taken part in. The interview itself is an explicatory genre. People are interviewed in light of their previous work, otherwise they would not be worth interviewing. The mark of public discourse, of the wider audience, is on all interviews even when they take place in a small seminar room or are published in an academic journal. It seems, then, that interviews, situated as they are on the hinge between the reader and the text, the academic and the public, and the writer and his or her work, are particularly suited to a deconstructive 'position.' If any form of writing purports to be humble or clear it is the interview. It has a lowly status in the canon of an author's works, it is supplementary to those works, and it appears to be marginal. In that case, it becomes perversely necessary that it be examined.

They are have this day, this categorical importive which is equally applicate when the action of the formalist both sign the same taxt the interview. Nor all Derida's interview are with journalists, but there is a standard format that imports a formalistic role, on the microlever even if site is a fellow nontenue. As we see in this charter format has anatted this double role in an interview with houseff wherein the categorical importance of the played out and where its complecity could be marked. Usually, when we fulled of an interview, we carried as a mounter which would be excluded if has we achieve the fully of the fully of the interview with houseff wherein the categorical importance of the played out and where its complecity could be marked. Usually, when we fulled of an interview, we carried as mounters which would be excluded if has we achieve in a faile state interview with houseff wherein the state of the fully of the faile is mounters which would be excluded if has we achieve in a faile state in the state of the state of the state is mounters which would be excluded if has we achieve in a faile state is an exclude a state of the state of the state of the state is an exclusion of these excludes it has we achieve in a state of the state of the state of the state is interview, then the inclusion of these exclusions is a state of the state of the state of the state, then the inclusion of these exclusions is an exclusion of these exclusions is a state of the state of the

## CHAPTER THREE

## THE POOR RELATION: DERRIDA'S INTERVIEWS

## i. Introduction

In which genre do the academic and journalist approach each other, working together, if not as one, at least as co-authors of a text? When Derrida assigned "the duty...to mark humbly and clearly that things are still more complicated"<sup>1</sup> to the academic and journalist, he was not only speaking of those academics who write articles for the public press and therefore become journalists, he was also speaking of the two separate entities, the academic and the journalist. They too have this duty, this categorical imperative which is equally applicable when the academic and the journalist both sign the same text: the interview. Not all Derrida's interviews are with journalists, but there is a standard format that imposes a journalistic rôle on the interviewer even if she is a fellow academic. As we see in this chapter Derrida has enacted this double rôle in an interview with himself wherein this categorical imperative could be played out and where its complexity could be marked. Usually, when we think of an interview, we envisage a recorded one-to-one conversation. I take a looser definition because of the number of Derrida's encounters which would be excluded if this was adhered to. This chapter, therefore, includes some references to roundtable discussions and conference question sessions as well as the more conventional semi-private conversation generally regarded as an interview. If one takes improvisation as an essential feature of what comes under the title of interview, then the inclusion of these exchanges is not only justified but unavoidable.

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Work of the Intellectuals and the Press (The Bad Example: How the *New York Review of* Books and Company Do Business),' *Points* . . . *Interviews*, 1974-1994, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 429. Referred to as 'Work of the Intellectuals.'

Derrida's attitude to the interview genre is ambivalent; this becomes evident as we see instances of his references, during interviews, to the interview as inherently weak and lacking. It is a form of publication with which Derrida must contend, but is explicitly uneasy about. It is part of his 'rôle' as an academic who has had a widespread influence, as praised as he is criticised. In his 1986 interview, "There is No One Narcissism," Derrida was asked about his aversion to being photographed, especially in the early years of his career. The question also referred to the small numbers of interviews Derrida had given up to then. In his reply, Derrida talks about his antipathy to being framed or portrayed as a writer in the traditional manner in front of his bookshelves. Yet he also alludes to the allure of the attention inherent in such displays and does not exempt himself from "a certain desire to appear."<sup>2</sup> It seems that, with time, Derrida has become more willing to give into the desire and necessity for interviews. They have become part of the canon of his debates and controversies as he uses them to speak to and against absent critics. He also uses them to speak to the "bad reader" and there may or may not be some overlap between these two audiences. Derrida defines his idea of the "bad reader" in The Post Card giving us an important signpost with regard to his ideas about the reception of his work.

Because I still like him, I can foresee the impatience of the *bad* reader: this is the way I name or accuse the fearful reader, the reader in a hurry to be determined, decided upon deciding (in order to annul, in other words to bring back to oneself, one has to wish to know in advance what to expect, one wishes to expect what has happened, one wishes to expect (oneself)). Now, it is bad, and I know no other definition of the bad, it is bad to predestine one's reading, it is always bad to foretell. It is bad, reader, no longer to like retracing one's steps.<sup>3</sup>

Derrida is not merely speaking of bad reading in general here but of the kind of response his writing has received, a response which demonstrates that the reader has only read Derrida's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, "There is No *One* Narcissism": (Autobiophotographies), trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Points*, 196.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987) 4. Original Emphasis.

work in order to confirm preconceived notions about it. Such reading ignores or annuls anything that might begin to unsettle its certainties. It is against such readers, sometimes embodied in his interlocutors, that Derrida pits himself in his interviews.

Derrida has been interviewed many times, in diverse conditions and in different languages. The interviews are varied in scope and this diversity usually depends on the context of the interview and the publication in which it will appear. However, there are some common concerns which echo throughout. Issues such as the place of philosophy in education frequently arise, especially in interviews conducted in the 1980s when Derrida was involved in setting up the International College of Philosophy. Another common theme is the varying fortunes of deconstruction and the linking of his name with it. A third preoccupation is with the interview genre itself, its limitations and weaknesses and a fourth is the notion of reading, the reader and the audience. These last two themes will form the focus of this chapter because they embody Derrida's ongoing interest in questioning genres, disciplines and borders and the form communication takes when it is between the university and the non-university thus raising questions about such designations. Two interrelated terms will be used as guides in approaching this aspect of Derrida's work: interview as *pharmakon* and interview as improvisation.

Derrida's analysis of the translation of the term *pharmakon* as it is used in the myth of Theuth related in the *Phaedrus*, is centred on its meaning both remedy and poison. In the myth, it is writing that is represented as a *pharmakon* and in his early essay, 'Plato's Pharmacy,' Derrida expands the ambiguity of this term to perform, or bring to the fore, a foundational division in Western metaphysics between writing as absence and speech as presence. It would seem somewhat contrary to use *pharmakon* to describe the interview genre, a genre that has traditionally been represented as a point of access into an author's work, a remedy for density or an interpretation for what seemed unreadable. The interview appears to be an open, honest and unmediated exchange between two people, one which aims to get at the truth of the

matter in a short text the purpose of which is to clarify the interviewee's 'main' work or attract readers to new work. The basis of an interview after all is that there is other work about which to talk, work which is apart from the interview and to which the interview frequently aspires to act as an explicatory supplement. Using pharmakon to describe an exchange that seems to be as close as one can get to the full presence of the author - when the term has been used to describe what is absent and potentially dead according to Theuth - appears to go against its figuration as an acceptable metaphor for writing. However, pharmakon becomes a more suitable and even unavoidable term to use with regard to the interview and its improvisatory nature when the reasons for conducting interviews, their aims, content and constraints are taken into account. It is necessary to remember moreover that when the term pharmakon is extracted from the myth (and from the Phaedrus and 'Plato's Pharmacy') it brings with it the remnants of its meanings and uses. It cannot be cleansed to a degree where it is 'simply' used as that ambiguous amalgam of remedy and poison (it is too easy to think of pharmakon as a drug which is curative if taken in the correct dosage but poisonous if overindulged in - this type of moderation does not do justice to what Derrida is saying in 'Plato's Pharmacy' and neither does the dualism which dictates that it has to be one or the other). Using the pharmakon to talk about interviews also serves to prohibit us from carelessly acquiescing to the translation of the term 'writing' into what appears on a page. Any objection which says that interviews are carried out orally and in writing and therefore one cannot apply the concept of pharmakon to them all has not taken into account the nuances of what Derrida has said with regard to taking writing in a literal sense. I use pharmakon to describe Derrida's interviews in order to gather together the diverse elements of Derrida's interviews, their oral and written contexts and their rôle for good and ill in his oeuvre. They are simultaneously as dangerous as a poison and as necessary as a cure.

Improvisation occupies a strange place in discursive analysis. On the one hand, it is represented as a form of honesty; a communication straight from the heart, not learned off by heart, taken from the top of one's head or off the cuff. Improvisation is an immediate response

and therefore ought to be taken as the most honest, unmediated answer to a question from another person. The psychological technique used during interrogation in the belief that the truth is inadvertently expressed when the subject is not given time to think is merely an extreme form of the kind of pressure acceded to when one agrees to be interviewed. The hope, implicit in all such encounters, is that when taken on the hop, the respondent will divulge their 'true' thoughts, beliefs and nature. Improvisation in this sense carries with it all the values attached to immediacy and transparency. On the other hand, improvisation is what comes about when one lacks one's normal tools. In this sense it begs the audience's sympathy and forgiveness. One is doing what one can in limited circumstances and all one can do is gesture towards the more polished and professional work carried out normally. Improvisation, then, is an aberration which demands a certain amount of goodwill. Not knowing where one is going is, of course, the mark of improvisation – although one usually has some idea.

What place do interviews occupy in the body of Derrida's work? What do they allow or make possible and what are their constraints? How do these freedoms and limits differ from those of his other texts? Can an interview be called a text 'by' Derrida, included in a bibliography of his 'writings'? They *are* included in bibliographies, and their strange position in his work which is one of the concerns of this chapter - is highlighted in an annotated bibliography by Julian Wolfreys who recommends the interview format. He refers to a book which gathered twenty-two of Derrida's interviews over a twenty year period.

[*Points* is a] significant and wide-ranging collection of interviews... This collection which is highly accessible because of the interview format, is one possible 'entry' point into Derrida's thought.<sup>4</sup>

Why is the interview format deemed by Wolfreys (and by others such as Jonathan Culler – quoted below) to be accessible *per se*? Why does Derrida's work seem to require an 'entry point' which seems to be different from, or at one remove, from that work? One of the aims of

<sup>4</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Deconstruction*•Derrida (London: Macmillan, 1998) 213.

this chapter is to show that while an interview might seem to be a point of accessibility to the author's 'main' work, it is really only accessible to itself. It is not necessarily a point of access to Derrida's 'other' work. It may stimulate a reader to further exploration but much of the effort of reading remains to be done. Interviews are signposts, not shortcuts (although - and because - they are full of shortcuts). However, this perception of the interview as a surface point, a door or window into the main edifice sets it apart from Derrida's work, a separation to which he accedes. We will see how he can refer, in interview, to the "texts themselves" as being apart from the interviews. It is not only in this brief reference that Derrida reveals his perception of the interview genre. It is in his unremitting reminders that interviews are necessarily constrained by time and space limits (and in this they resemble the papers he delivers at conferences and the conditions of the public press) and in his constant gestures towards his own and others' texts as necessary support. In the interview Derrida is forced into making concessions to the format which are anathema to his 'normal' style of writing and reading. In this they are somewhat alien to his main body while being a part of it. This is what makes the interviews worth examining. They are like the newspaper articles referred to in the last chapter in that they quite often show Derrida at his most 'public,' that is, as a visiting professor at a university, speaking to large audiences of experts, non-experts, students, professors and people from outside the academy. This is even more clearly the case when he is interviewed for newspapers and magazines with a wide public circulation such as Le Monde or Le Nouvel Observateur. These occasions are enhanced points of friction between Derrida and his interlocutor, between Derrida and his readers (or non-readers or putative readers) and frequently between one institution and another, that is, between the university and the press. They are points at which the differences in perception are at their most acute as they are displayed in the traditional format of the question and answer, where terms so painstakingly explored in Derrida's other texts are used as tools to hand in the name of convenience and speed. In agreeing to so many interviews Derrida exposes himself again and again to a danger of which he is well aware. Two questions should be asked at this point: Where is the danger in an interview? And why does Derrida grant interviews so frequently?

#### ii. Walking the Tightrope

Interviews are dangerous and carry with them the seed of confusion and controversy by virtue of their limitations and the nature of improvisation. They give the author an opportunity to explain his or her position with regard to certain issues. Sometimes, far from drawing a line under a controversy they fuel it further. It is this which makes interviews so chancy – and possibly this is why Derrida mentioned the danger of "all this" in his brief phone interview with Colin Campbell quoted in chapter two. "'As you can imagine,' he says amiably, 'all this is very controversial, very dangerous really'."<sup>5</sup> All what? In the context of Campbell's article one could assume that Derrida is of course referring to deconstruction and the reaction to it. Yet Derrida in his refusal to answer more complex questions on the phone is also referring to the danger of the interview itself, the possibility for misconstrual and misappropriation. What gives interviews their strangeness as well as their danger is that they are also seen as a solution, a clarification of previous conflicts where clarification carries with it the concept of remedy.

#### maistern

The very format of the interview seems to bring with it a level of superficiality (sometimes public press interviews are flagged as 'in depth' to offset this perception), which precludes spending time and attention on them. This is borne out rather than undermined by the publication of *Points*... *Interviews*, *1974-1994*, which has the briefest of introductions and no interview with Derrida on the topic of the interview – although it is possible that all Derrida's interviews are, to some extent, on the interview as he never fails to draw attention to the context. *Points* goes some way towards decontextualising the individual interviews not only by relegating the circumstances in which the interview took place – the date, the language and the publication in which it originally appeared – to the endnotes but also by erasing the names of the interviewers so that each interview appears to have taken place

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Colin Campbell, 'The Tyranny of the Yale Critics,' New York Times Magazine 9 Feb. 1986: 48.

between Jacques Derrida and "Q." For instance, when the interview with Jean Luc Nancy was originally published in *Topoi* it included Nancy's name throughout.<sup>6</sup> The note which accompanies the first version of this interview states that "Due to time constrictions, Jacques Derrida was unable to write a text for this issue. However, he did propose to have an interview with us" (*Topoi* 121). This note was written and signed by Jean-Luc Nancy and shows something of Derrida's attitude towards the genre. The interview can be given in place of 'a text' because it is written as one speaks. Its improvisatory nature releases its 'author' from the necessity of giving close argument, careful reading, citation, reference (although that does not mean of course that he can say anything at all). Scholarly standards of the type described in chapter one cannot be wholly ignored and must at least be acknowledged. However, such standards also demand a lot of time and effort and when time is short an interview is offered by Derrida as a quick solution. Here, instead of refusing to contribute to the journal he is willing to offer something in lieu of a 'text.'

Improvisation and the interview are therefore examples of a *pharmakon* offering a solution to a problem (and the problem is not always lack of time, it could be the 'unreadability' of Derrida's other texts as we will see below), a solution which carries with it its own dangers. When Derrida is improvising, whether in interview or at a conference, in the course of postpaper discussions or at round-tables, he always refers to that fact, using it as an apology for the extent to which his speech must necessarily differ from the more carefully and slowly argued points which are a mark of his more densely written texts. These references to the

<sup>6</sup> Not only that but the title could momentarily mislead the reader. In *Topoi*, it is 'Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy' with Derrida's name printed in italics to one side. This leaves the reader in some doubt as to who is interviewing whom. The doubt continues into the beginning of the interview which goes against the norm of the interviewer having the first word. "*Jacques Derrida*: From the question which introduces this interview one might pick out two phrases..." (*Topoi* 7. 2 (1988): 113). *Points* replaces Jean-Luc Nancy with "Q" and alters the opening line thus doing away with any ambiguity. "*Jacques Derrida*: From your question one might pick out two phrases..." ("Eating Well," or the Calculation of the Subject,' trans. Peter Connor and Avital Ronnell, *Points* 255). Referred to as 'Eating Well.' unprepared nature of his responses are also a mark of his politeness and a way, as he admits, of disarming his audience, making of improvisation a possible solution for hostility or confrontation.<sup>7</sup> Improvisation is also dangerous. This is a danger Derrida acknowledges in an improvised answer to an audience whom he no doubt simultaneously disarmed in his recounting of an anecdote which was somewhat self-deprecating.

A moment ago, I was speaking with my friend Ken McMullen who reminded me of the moment a few years ago, when he asked me to answer a question before the camera, while he was shooting the film, *Ghost Dance*. The question was: 'What is improvisation? is an improvisation possible?' I had to improvise of course, and I said 'No, an improvisation is absolutely impossible,' and I went on speaking for half an hour, I think. And today, I remembered this when you asked me to say something, and I agreed on condition that it would be totally improvised; that was the contract. I did not want to come here with a prepared lecture, merely to impose something already elaborated on you. I have been wondering why I wanted to avoid preparing a lecture, which would have been a safer thing for me to do of course. It's a very dangerous situation here...<sup>8</sup>

In this situation, improvisation is represented by Derrida as both a solution and a problem; it is, in his opinion, in this context, *better* than a prepared lecture which would be an imposition on his hosts and on his audience and, simultaneously, a dangerous choice to make when he could have done the "safer thing" and prepared a lecture. Why is it safer to write a prepared speech and deliver it? It is possibly because one can better control what is said than if the floor is 'thrown open' to questions which can come from different directions and can enact different strategies, strategies which the interviewee might not be aware of. Why is it better to come unprepared to this event? Is it so that others can ask the questions that they want answered thus giving back some of the control from the podium to the audience? Possibly it is better because it gives Derrida a chance to consider new directions and perspectives, a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See Jacques Derrida, 'Du tout' in *The Post Card*, 500-01 in which he uses the vocabulary of confrontation and disarmament in the context of a session published in *Confrontation*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> '*As if* I were Dead: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,' *Applying: To Derrida*, eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbin and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996) 213.

dialogue the end or direction of which he cannot predict, so that for a time at least he will not know where he is going (or being taken) or where he will end up. This might give us a clue why he does so many interviews. It is always possible that a question from somebody who is not necessarily a colleague will set off a sequence of thought. Questions might catch him off guard, the questioners might be better prepared than he might be, therefore he frequently reminds his listeners of the handicap under which he labours.

There are other examples of instances when Derrida used the interview format as a solution to a problem. In two such cases Derrida was involved in highly publicised controversies and he chose to conduct interviews as a way of giving his side of the story. In this situation, the interview becomes testimony, given in front of a witness who doubles as benign or hostile inquisitor. While the power might seem to reside in the questioner, the fact that the interviews were conducted in writing rather than face-to-face precludes immediate exchange, reaction, criticism or requests for further clarification. It is clear, however, at least in the first example, that there was more than one exchange. The notes for the interview tell the reader that it was "commissioned for the present volume [*Points*]" and was conducted by Peggy Kamuf. The footnotes combine notes from Kamuf and from Derrida, one of which he writes, "upon rereading this interview" (*Points*, 482 note 4). It is therefore clear that the interview involved more of an exchange than simply sending answers to questions.<sup>9</sup> It should also be noted that although these interviews appear to be immediate, that they were conducted in writing alters the nature of the improvisation involved to an extent which cannot be known.

The first example is an interview conducted in the wake of the Heidegger 'affair.' This controversy is bookended by two interviews given by Derrida and it spanned a number of forms of publication. It began with Victor Farías's book on Heidegger's war writings and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Derrida has said that he has reviewed all his interviews before publication. He said this in conversation.

speeches, published in 1987, as was Derrida's short book on Heidegger, Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question.<sup>10</sup> In this context Derrida was interviewed for Le Nouvel Observateur, and the interview was translated and published without his knowledge or approval by Richard Wolin in *The Heidegger Controversy: A Reader* in 1991.<sup>11</sup> The translation was a poor one and the book was prefaced with an introduction by Wolin which, according to Peggy Kamuf "sought to be an overview of all the essays collected but . . . at least with respect to your interview, tends to repeat the sort of ill-informed or bad-faith understandings that 'The Philosophers' Hell' [the title of Derrida's interview in the book] had tried to dispel as concerns the ongoing interest in Heidegger and the effort to think critically about his adherence to Nazism" ('Work of the Intellectuals' 423). In other words, if the interview is conventionally held to be an instance of clarity and readability this is not the case here as Wolin, clearly, was not able to read what the interview 'actually' said. Derrida came across Wolin's book "on a trip to New York, not believing my eyes, almost by chance, in a bookstore" ('Work of the Intellectuals' 436). The bad translation, the misreadings in the introduction and the omission of any attempt to get his permission to publish the interview prompted Derrida to instruct his lawyer to write to Wolin requesting him to remove the interview from the next edition of his book. This letter and what was becoming an 'affair' was the subject of an article by Thomas Sheehan in the New York Review of Books which sparked off an exchange of letters between Derrida, Wolin and Sheehan in subsequent issues. The lawyer's letter carried with it the threat of legal action. This threat, and the ensuing gap in his book, became the subject of Wolin's preface to the second edition, published in 1993. Finally, or not, the interview was retranslated for Points which also includes an interview with Derrida that casts a retrospective eye over the whole series of texts. According to Derrida, the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Victor Farías, *Heidegger and Nazism*, trans. Paul Burrell, Dominic Di Bernardi and Gabriel R. Ricci (Philadelphia, 1989); Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989. First pubd. 1987).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Le Nouvel Observateur 6 Dec. 1987; Richard Wolin (ed.), The Heidegger Controversy: A Reader (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991, 1993)

danger does not lie in what he said in the original 1987 interview; he states that he has "never deemed it necessary either to change or to dissimulate anything whatsoever of this interview [in Le Nouvel Observateur], in particular as regards its philosophico-political content" ('Work of the Intellectuals' 435). The danger lies in the career of the text, how it is read and translated. Derrida can exert some control over the translation but not over misreading. This is the case with any text, of course, but more so with an interview because while an interview might seem to be a secondary text a lot is expected of it because it seems to promise the inside track on the subject being discussed. That Derrida subscribes to this is evident in the interviews he has given in times of controversy and in his decision to use that genre to defend himself in the Heidegger 'affair' even though, as he acknowledges, many more readers will have read the exchanges in the NYRB than will ever read Points. Derrida's interview with Kamuf was conducted in writing yet it reads like a dialogue. He directly addresses her in her absence, he asks questions, he exclaims, his emphases are frequent and the tone is argumentative. There is an impression of the spontaneity of expostulation. Derrida chose this method to set the record straight and to respond to his critics by answering Kamuf's questions. He could have written a long article or a book as he did in similar controversies over Paul de Man or speech-act theory. It is clear, then, that Derrida has some regard for the interview as a means of communication albeit a dangerous one.

THE REAL

The second example is another instance of academic conflict appearing in the pages of the public press. In 1992, Derrida was nominated for an honorary doctorate at Cambridge University. There were objections and the decision was put to a vote which favoured the proposal but not before the controversy was publicised in the pages of the *Times* in the form of a letter signed by nineteen analytical philosophers. The signatories vehemently and unfairly criticised Derrida and displayed a remarkable ignorance of his work. In October of that year the *Cambridge Review* gave most of its pages over to the 'affair' and asked Derrida to

contribute. Derrida chose to do an interview rather than send an article.<sup>12</sup> The editors introduced the interview by saying that "M. Derrida preferred not to contribute to our symposium by writing an article, but asked if we could send him some questions to which he could reply" (*Honoris Causa* 481). Here again, Derrida uses the questions which others direct at him to shape his response to conflict, his final word on the matter. It is a strategy that works well and goes some way towards disarming his antagonists (although probably not the signatories of the *Times* letter) as he opens himself up to examination in place of a self-justifying tract.

Derrida is concerned, in this interview, with the rôle the media played in the unfolding controversy over his honorary doctorate. For him, the media did not represent a debate that was going on elsewhere, the debate took place in the pages of the newspapers. The rôle of the media was, therefore, "a determining one" (*'Honoris Causa'* 400). It is in the course of this interview that Derrida speaks of the "*temptation of the media*," which is

the compulsion to misuse the privilege of public declaration in a social space that extends far beyond the normal circuits of intellectual discussion . . . [It] encourages [certain] intellectuals to renounce the academic discipline normally required 'inside' the university . . . This is an old problem (it was already a problem in Kant's time, as you know) but it's getting worse today, when the public space is being transformed by new developments in the structure of the media. (*Honoris Causa* 401-2; original emphasis)

The difficulty lies in how one, as an intellectual and speaking from the context of the university, communicates in the media without compromising the standards one habitually works with. It can be seen here in Derrida's "as you know." He is speaking to the editors of the *Cambridge Review*, the readership of which would, presumably, comprise academics and students. He footnotes his reference to Kant, explaining that because of space and time restrictions he can only refer the reader to his collection of papers *Du droit à la philosophie*,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> 'Honoris Causa: "This is also extremely funny" Points 399-421; endnotes 480-481. Referred to as Honoris Causa.

especially 'Mochlos' and 'The Principle of Reason.' The question (which gave rise to an eight-page answer from Derrida) was about the rôle of the media in the controversy and the depiction of stereotypes. How would he answer such questions if they were put to him by somebody writing for a newspaper? It is unlikely that he would refer either to "Kant's time, as you know" or to his own writings by name. *Could* such questions be put to him by a newspaper? Later examples of interviews in this chapter might help to demonstrate the difficulties experienced in such a situation and the discursive differences between questions from an academic environment and from that of a newspaper.

Much as Derrida would appear to rely on interviews to set records straight his ambivalence towards the genre is obvious. The interview necessitates improvisation and brevity, two properties which are not characteristic of Derrida's work but which he combines when referring to the limitations of the interview genre. It is of course necessary to keep in mind that there are different levels of improvisation. Derrida is not asked to speak on subjects about which he knows nothing - or if he is, he is quick to point out that he does not know and will not attempt to answer. His reminders about the nature of the answers that he gives are also reminders of what is missing - the texts wherein his approach dictates a close adherence to the work he is writing about. This is the major difference between the interviews and Derrida's other work: in his other work Derrida concentrates on analysing either institutions such as those of philosophy or the university, or on analysing other writers' texts. In his interviews he reads his own texts through others' readings or misreadings. When he refers to improvisation in his non-improvised texts it is ostensibly in the negative sense of something which is the hallmark of ignorance or a lack of polish. However, in the two examples taken from Of Grammatology and 'Plato's Pharmacy,' examined briefly here, we see that the alternatives are not ideal either. These take the form of rehearsed answers which display no evidence of reflection or hesitation. Such answers are as thoughtless as those which are immediately improvised.

Derrida's answers are not entirely from the top of his head, he is not the layman who takes a chance on answering a question he knows nothing about; the layman to whom Isocrates refers comparing him favourably with those who would teach political discourse. In 'Plato's Pharmacy' Derrida finds a resemblance between Isocrates and Socrates in their attitude towards such teachers who "are themselves so stupid and conceive others to be so dull that, although the speeches which they compose are worse than those which some laymen improvise, nevertheless they promise to make their students such clever orators that they will not overlook any of the possibilities which a subject affords."<sup>13</sup> Such teachers never improvise, they merely pass on what they have learned without thought, development or critique. They add nothing and are therefore worse than the improvising laymen because by nature of their profession they should know better. They believe that they can "transmit the science of discourse as simply as they would teach the letters of the alphabet" thus degrading both pedagogy and their audience/students. They are thus like the bad readers who have decided all before they read and are not open to the unknown. There are two forms of improvisation then, that of the layman and that of the professional who, although speaking without textual support, can argue and reason by drawing on his or her knowledge, thus enriching the process. The layman is *aware* that he speaks from a position of ignorance and this is what elevates him above the unthinking rote-teacher in Derrida's opinion.

Even so, improvisation is something to be avoided when one is in uncongenial surroundings, when it causes an audience to lose respect. This is the dilemma as experienced by Rousseau and described by Derrida in "...That Dangerous Supplement..." as he quotes Starobinski's observation that Rousseau confesses that his person makes a poor impression. "How will he overcome the misunderstanding that prevents him from expressing himself according to his

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy,' *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: The Athlone Press, 1981; First version published in *Tel Quel* 1968) 113-114 note 49, quoting Isocrates. Referred to as 'Plato's Pharmacy.'

true value? How escape the risks of improvised speech? . . . Jean Jacques chooses to be *absent* and to *write*."<sup>14</sup>

It would be unreasonable to over-emphasise these instances of references to improvisation in Derrida's non-improvised texts, such as *Of Grammatology* and 'Plato's Pharmacy.' However, the rôle of improvisation in any academic career cannot be disregarded. If Rousseau would prefer to absent himself to write this is not an option for an academic, although this is the conventional assumption with regard to professors who are traditionally depicted thus in order to sustain the image of the ivory tower (for example, in the stereotypical photographs of writers in front of their bookshelves which Derrida wanted to avoid). Even before he was ever worthy of being interviewed Derrida was well practised in improvisation. This practice, however, does not do away with the element of chance.

Improvisation is an unavoidable feature of academic exchange but its non-directional character is also an element in fundamental as opposed to end-oriented research. If Derrida sometimes chooses to improvise, he always reminds his audience of the deficiencies inherent in speaking (or writing) without having one's reading and research to hand. Thus it is that improvisation, which has an important and traditional function in the university, is stripped of all the garb of the institution, the scholarly standards which, as we saw in chapter one, allow Derrida and others the space in which to conduct improvisatory work. Academic improvisatory work is experimental. It demands the kind of forbearance and space which is at the base of the demand for academic freedom. On the one hand, there is a need to be allowed to do work the outcome of which cannot be predicted. On the other is the assurance that this work is supported by scholarly principles and standards. The element of trust inherent in the demand for academic freedom is analogous to that which is invoked in any improvised

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976) 142. Original emphasis.

exchange. The interlocutors have to trust each other. Those who answer questions must be supported by props that are not visible. They should be taken in good faith and must not perjure themselves.<sup>15</sup> Its apparent weakness demands good will; academics might not know where their research will take them, and this makes it difficult to justify. Improvisation, then, is both an attenuated, impoverished form of discourse, bereft as it is of supporting documentation and thus marginal, *and* an essential and thus a central element of the academy.

At a question and answer session at a conference, Derrida prefaced his responses with a warning and a disclaimer. The editors of the book of the event introduce the piece thus:

The following is a minimally-edited record of the responses given by Jacques Derrida, in a necessarily improvisatory fashion... Derrida began by pointing out that he could not possibly give full answers to such questions in an hour, and that we would have to give some of his responses the forms of the ellipsis, the aphorism, the thesis without premise or demonstration. 'Serious questions,' he observed, 'should not be posed, much less answered, at such speed. If I have a categorical imperative in all discussions, it is 'Decelerate.' So I apologise for the way I am going to avoid questions and answers in this session.'<sup>16</sup>

The answers, then, will be lacking fullness because of their immediacy and because there is so little time in which to pursue all possible options. Derrida has three strategies to deal with this problem, none of which, he would acknowledge, overcomes it. The first is to answer in the

<sup>15</sup> Derrida lectured on the theme of perjury at a conference, 'Life after Theory,' at Loughborough University in November 2001. In the course of a question and answer session at the end of the lecture, he spoke of the status of academic discourse saying, "There is no room left in a seminar or lecture for a lie or perjury . . . although one could say something *wrong* or *not true* (which does not mean to lie)." I take this to mean that although professors *could*, of course, teach in bad faith, although they might knowingly lie about something, they would no longer be members of the academy. This is borne out by Derrida's later observation at the same event, "Today I could have lied [about a private conversation with Paul de Man]. . . am I inside or outside the academy?" Much of what Derrida was saying in this vein refers to the notion of witnessing and testimony which he explored in *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>16</sup> 'Some Questions and Responses,' *The Linguistics of Writing*, 16. The conference took place in Glasgow in 1986.

form of ellipsis or aphorism, hoping to indicate without demonstration while simultaneously marking the difficulty (this obeys the injunction of humility and clarity which opened this chapter and closed the last). The second is to shout, "decelerate" - contradicting the first solution which dictates speed and cuts corners. The third option is not to answer some of the questions at all. Two of the three solutions are at odds with the qualities Derrida extols in his ideal readers, qualities such as rigour, care, and most of all, readiness to be questioned.<sup>17</sup> In order to fulfil pedagogical commitments, in order to reach an audience Derrida must betray his principles. The third – deceleration – is not really possible in the given situation. It might be his "categorical imperative in all discussions" but one would be hard pushed to call this question and answer session a discussion and Derrida is being self-effacing (or disingenuous) by calling it that. In the introduction to the published proceedings of the conference Nigel Fabb and Alan Durant refer to the dissatisfaction voiced by attendees at the lack of opportunity for them to participate.<sup>18</sup> This was not aimed at Derrida in particular, but it is the case that the only person answering and not asking here is Derrida. He cannot do more than simply allude to an ideal of deceleration in these circumstances rather than enact it in the course of a one-hour session at which he is obliged to answer a number of questions. Therefore, on such occasions he must use convenient shortcuts with all the inadequacy that that implies. For instance, Derrida can use the word 'deconstruction' "for the sake of rapid convenience" before an audience who must allow him that convenience yet must also be

<sup>17</sup> While saying that he cannot answer such "difficult" questions as are lobbed at him at conferences, and that, in fact, it is irresponsible to do so, Derrida still attempts a reply. For instance, prefacing a four-page answer with "these questions cannot really be dealt with in such a forum, because they are difficult. Really to do justice to them you have to read texts, to revive a number of traditions, so it is very brutal to address these questions in such a way. If I were more responsible, I would simply say 'No, I won't, I won't participate in this game.' Nevertheless, sometimes it is not a bad thing, at least if you do not do it too often" in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 16.

<sup>18</sup> Nigel Fabb and Alan Durant, 'Introduction: The linguistics of writing: retrospect and prospect after twenty-five years' *The Linguistics of Writing*, 5.

aware of the massive history of the word from which, in the circumstances, Derrida must turn away in the interests of going somewhere else.<sup>19</sup>

There are legitimate reasons for Derrida to avoid certain questions, and it is possible that such lacunae are no loss. For instance, in a situation where Derrida is being questioned by an audience (when the proceedings are opened to the floor) the dynamic of the discussion dictates that it becomes a form of public interview - public in that it takes place before an audience and there are multiple interviewers, and an interview rather than a discussion because of the nature of the situation. The occasion is the visit by a big name philosopher to an institution and the discussion usually takes the form of student (or colleague) interrogation of the oracle. For the questioners it is often the single opportunity to ask a question of Derrida and this allows them the chance to display their knowledge of his work. This can take the form of a prepared question, replete with references, quotations and connections to which Derrida invariably and politely replies that it is impossible to answer given the circumstances - although he will often try, while protesting the inadequacy of his response. The dynamics of such colloquia, exhibiting as they do the traditional structure of the institution and the competitive and ambitious need to impress, cannot be lost on Derrida given that the institution he helped found – the Collège International de Philosophie – is based on a form of equality which precludes institutional props such as titles and chairs. What is also clear on these occasions is that the length of time Derrida spends answering such questions indicates his opinion of their worth.

For Derrida, improvisation in most – but not all – circumstances leads to a certain superficiality. Some subjects cannot be improvised upon, subjects such as questions of truth or the institutionalisation of literature. Areas that require close argument and demonstration

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations,' *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 44.

cannot be covered in interviews and Derrida is aware that if he attempted to do so he would be misconstrued or at least quoted out of context. Certain allowances have to be made in the case of improvisation and Derrida is careful to claim his. At the end of a seminar for teaching and research on women he is quick to call for deceleration.

As is the case with... any discipline, at a certain moment one can no longer improvise or hurry. You have to go slowly, look at things in detail. At a certain point it is necessary to stop; one cannot improvise on a question of truth.<sup>20</sup>

This, of course, is at one with the tradition of learning which dictates that one must know what one is talking about before one begins to speak, that is, that one should not improvise as a layman does. At the same time, there is the necessary turn to the unknown. The "certain moment" is that time when one cannot go too fast because the terrain is unknown. If it is unmapped a route must be improvised. If improvisation is unsuited to the question of truth, it is also necessary *along with* the pause. This has always been the way with any experimental work. Improvising means heading into the unknown using the tools to hand. It does not necessarily entail haste or carelessness. As Derrida would himself put it, haste and carelessness are more likely in areas where everything is known and taken for granted and where improvisation is not called for. To examine this more carefully and to justify the use of *pharmakon* to describe the interview, it is necessary to take a brief detour into 'Plato's Pharmacy.'

This essay deals with classical attitudes towards writing and speech as demonstrated in the *Phaedrus* and allows Derrida to warn his readers that "only a blind or grossly insensitive reading could indeed have spread the rumour that Plato was *simply* condemning the writer's activity" ('Plato's Pharmacy' 67) which, of course, is an attempt to forestall his own "blind and grossly insensitive" readers. This awareness on Derrida's part of his readers' reactions is expressed in diverse ways throughout his work. No reader wants to appear to be "blind or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> 'Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida,' *Men in Feminism*, eds. Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (New York: Methuen, 1987) 203.

grossly insensitive," neither would one want to be a "bad" reader, especially if one's business is that of reading. Thus Derrida addresses his readers and speaks about those 'other' readers, the less than ideal readers. The interview is another form in which these warnings can be voiced. Readers become eavesdroppers on a conversation about themselves and hear nothing good spoken of them.

In Derrida's analysis of Plato's work writing becomes a *pharmakon*, a remedy and a poison; it allows for the absence of the author and will cure loss of memory but is accompanied by death ("For it goes without saying that the god of writing must also be the god of death" ('Plato's Pharmacy' 91)), and alienation ("It comes from afar, it is external or alien: to the living, which is the right-here of the inside, to *logos* as the *zoon* it claims to assist or relieve" ('Plato's Pharmacy' 104)). These are the attributes of the *pharmakon*; it *simultaneously* carries with it its properties of remedy and poison. It is not a question of alternating between the two as if a choice could be made. The *pharmakon* in leading one astray, away from the law and the city, exerts both its charm *and* its danger.

Operating through seduction, the *pharmakon* makes one stray from one's general, natural, habitual paths and laws. Here [in the *Phaedrus*], it takes Socrates out of his proper place and off his customary track. The latter had always kept him in the city. ('Plato's Pharmacy' 70)

It is in the familiar surroundings of the city or the institution that one conducts one's work safe from surprise. Once one is led astray one finds oneself going down unknown paths towards unknown destinations (even so, this may lead to the opportunity of going slowly or even stopping in the manner in which Derrida counselled the participants in the 'Women in the Beehive' seminar to do and as Plato describes Socrates and Phaedrus doing as they spend time in discussion under the shade of a tree). The *pharmakon* beguiles and elicits responses, leading one by the nose, possibly into danger.

Derrida allows us to make a connection between the *pharmakon* and the *supplément*. "With a few precautions, one could say that *pharmakon* plays a role *analogous*, in this reading of Plato, to that of *supplément* in the reading of Rousseau" ('Plato's Pharmacy' 96 note 43). Later, he says, "The *pharmakon* is that dangerous supplement" ('Plato's Pharmacy' 110). The *supplément* may be dangerous but it too works like a charm to lead one astray.

The dangerous supplement, which Rousseau also calls a "fatal advantage" is properly *seductive*; it leads desire away from the good path, makes it err far from natural ways, guides it towards its loss or fall and therefore it is a sort of lapse or scandal. (*Of Grammatology* 151)

The supplement comes into play when there is a lack. It adds to and replaces that which it supplements. In the body of Derrida's work the interview acts as both supplement and *pharmakon*, an addition to the main texts, sometimes used to replace those texts, often seen as the gloss which is added to a work to explain it in more simple and concise terms. The interviews are of necessity secondary works conducted as they are in the wake of Derrida's other work, referring constantly to that work as Derrida gestures again and again away from the interview and towards his other texts. He uses the interviews as a standpoint from which to view his other work. It is in interview that he tells readers in what order his books should be read. It is in interview that he repeatedly speaks about the misrepresentation of deconstruction by commentators and critics thus aligning himself ever more firmly with that word. The interviews are a space that allows him the opportunity to speak in a different way about his work. It leads him away from the institution, even when it takes place within it. For Derrida, interviews are as necessary as they are dangerous. Yet, they are lacking, and this lack can only be made up by reading the texts to which they refer while simultaneously allowing the reference to take place.

#### iii. The Power of the Question

This brings us to the second question: why does Derrida grant interviews so frequently? A quick bibliographical survey shows us that the frequency of Derrida's interviews to a certain

extent mirrors the publicity which deconstruction underwent as described in the previous and next chapters. Derrida's first published interview took place in 1967 and in the preface to the book, Positions, in which it was later collected with two other interviews, Derrida is careful to announce that the interviews are "the only ones in which [he has] ever taken part [and] concern ongoing publications."<sup>21</sup> An element of control is at work here as if Derrida is aware that the interviews will soon proliferate both in number and in scope. The three interviews in Positions took place in 1967, 1968 and 1971.<sup>22</sup> Between 1968 and 1976 Derrida took part in ten interviews. In the 1980s he took part in fifty-two and between 1990 and 1994 alone there were twenty-eight interviews.<sup>23</sup> The totals are not definitive because it is seldom made clear what is meant by an 'interview.' Thus in the Points bibliography the 'interviews' have titles which include the designation 'discussion' (as in "Discussions of The Post Card with Marie Moscovici, Jean-Claude Sempe, Didier Cahen et al.""), 'conversation' ("'Conversation with Jacques Derrida (I), L'école a été un enfer pour moi' with B. Defrance"), 'debate' ("Controverse sur la possibilité d'une science de la philosophie' debate with F. Laruelle"), or even 'triologue' ("'Deconstruction: A Trialogue in Jerusalem' with G. Hartman and W. Iser") (Points 496-97). However, 'roundtables' such as the two published in The Ear of the Other

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: The Athlone Press, 1981 [1972]) vii.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida seems to have forgotten an interview, listed in the *Points* bibliography which was published in *Norôit* in 1968. This interview is not included in Joan M. Miller's *French Structuralism: A Multidisciplinary Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1981). This bibliography has a section on primary and secondary sources of Derrida from 1962 to 1979 and includes his translation and review work which the bibliography compiled by Albert Leventure and Thomas Keenan in *Derrida: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992) does not.

<sup>23</sup> These figures shift somewhat between the years if one takes into account the year in which the interview took place rather than the year of publication. For instance, the 'Canons and Metonymies' interview which was published in *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) took place in 1988. However, the point remains: the number of interviews which Derrida has granted has dramatically increased over the past two decades and more than half of one of his more recent books, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), is in the form of an interview. A recently translated book, *Echographies of Television* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), consists mainly of an extended interview recorded on film.

are not included in the *Points* interview bibliography.<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to know where the interview genre begins and ends given the varying circumstances and the numbers and status of interlocutors. If one was to identify a single characteristic of such discourses it might possibly be the very ambivalence displayed by Derrida in these situations, his submission to the questioning process coupled with his resistance to it which comes in the form of the aforementioned protestations. Thus, he can say in an interview,

contrary to what certain people might think, I love to *talk* philosophy... I don't particularly like improvising, except in very favorable conditions (which is not the case here!), but I do like a certain manner of talking philosophy which, for me, is a way of writing. ("There is No *One* Narcissism" 197-98)

Derrida does not specify how "favorable conditions" for improvisation might come about but from the evidence of his interviews and post-paper sessions they are not to be found in the kinds of discussions that are later published and one can surmise that he is probably thinking about the closed classroom or seminar session. Improvisation at its best possesses an element he values: the opening up of things to the future and the unknown destination. Sometimes, the lay improviser is better than the institutionalised teacher who knows everything off by heart and is not interested in experiment. It is thus that improvisation in its most literal sense plays out what Derrida has always said about hospitality, the gift and the decision – that once one knows where one is going or what decision is to be made, one is already there, the gift is no longer a gift, it is an exchange rather than an opening to the unknown.<sup>25</sup> That this is the unknowing which has been a characteristic of Derrida's work since the beginning is clear when we recall, from chapter one, an improvising Derrida who said "I was wondering myself if I know where I am going" and later added, "[This] surely did not mean that I *never* see or

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf and Avital Ronell (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Derrida deals with these ideas in a post conference paper discussion in 'Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility, a Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,' *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, eds. Richard Kearney and Mark Dooley (London: Routledge, 1999) 65-83. He has

*never* know where I am going."<sup>26</sup> Thus Derrida chooses the word 'aporia' as manifesting the problem of not knowing where one is going.

I keep the word *problem* for another reason: so as to put this word in tension with another Greek word, *aporia*, which I chose a long time ago as a title for this occasion [Cerisy-la-Salle, 1992], without really knowing where I was going, except that I knew what was going to be at stake in this word was the "not knowing where to go."<sup>27</sup>

If Derrida at times 'admits' to not knowing where he is going but also sees that as in some way a necessary condition before one can begin to go anywhere, we can see how important an examination of the rôle of improvisation in his work and in the work of the academic institution can be. The 'not knowing where one is going,' the idea of 'going' anywhere at all and of having a path mapped out is a starting (and thus central, given the topography) point of Derrida's concerns and is there in his 'trademark' terms of *différance*, dissemination and undecidability.

In chapter two, I quoted a *Newsweek* article which stated that Derrida was "the most discussed thinker on either side of the Atlantic" and I noted that in the same year Derrida's name was absent from a poll which requested "six hundred French intellectuals to identify three living French-writing intellectuals whose writings exercised the deepest influence on the evolution of thought, letters, the arts and sciences etc."<sup>28</sup> Pierre Bourdieu includes the poll in his book, *Homo Academicus*, and points out that because of the judges chosen ("intellectual-journalists

examined them at more length in books such as *Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money, On the Name* and *Of Hospitality.* They are, moreover, habitual themes for him and can be found throughout his work.

<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' post-paper discussion, *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, eds. Richard Macksey and Eugene Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972) 267 and Jacques Derrida, 'The time of a thesis: punctuations,' *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 36-7.

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, Aporias (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) 12.

<sup>28</sup> Kenneth Woodward, 'A New Look at Lit Crit,' *Newsweek* 22 June 1981 and Jeffrey Mehlman,
'Writing and Deference: The Politics of Literary Adulation,' *Representations* 15 (Summer 1986).

and journalist-intellectuals"), certain names could never have appeared in the poll of influential intellectuals.<sup>29</sup> He mentions

the *hurry* of journalists, which along with the press itself, constantly behind the journalists, who are themselves readers of the press, prevents reading and analysis in depth, and tends to make immediate readability one of the prerequisites tacitly required of cultural productions, excluding the 'discovery' of works and authors of low readability and profile (as witness the almost total absence in the hit parade of either the literary avant-garde or that of the social sciences). (Bourdieu 260-61)

That potential readers have a problem with Derrida's readability is one of the accusations levelled at him by a journalist and a reason for an interview, as we see below when his interview with Catherine David is examined. In France, if Derrida was to be considered as one of the most influential writers it would only be in the context of the academy and, as Bourdieu pointed out, he was on the margins there. The reasons for requesting interviews from Derrida only came about in the 1980s and this holds true for both academic and non-academic journals. Derrida's profile became more marked as a result of responses, both positive and negative, to his writing and to the controversy surrounding deconstruction. This prompted interest in his work and the associated requests for appearances at conferences and for interviews. These appearances further fuelled interest leading to a much more public profile for Derrida in the 1980s and 1990s. This publicity must of course be put into perspective. There is a large proportion of the public who will never hear of Derrida and would never be given the opportunity to do so given the nature not only of his work but also of the publications in which it appears. Then again there is probably a large proportion of the population which would not have heard of many of the names on the *Lire* hit parade.

Even so, arts editors of broadsheets consider him worth interviewing and the opening lines of a 1998 interview in the *New York Times* echoes the *Newsweek* accolade, naming Derrida "the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, Homo Academicus, 1984, trans. Peter Collier (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988) 257.

world's most famous philosopher," a somewhat dubious award given the addition of "if not the only famous philosopher."<sup>30</sup> The interviewer, Dinitia Smith, introduces her subject by telling the readers of the warning she received from "[a] scholar (who considers Mr. Derrida's work deliberately obscure)," not to ask for a definition of deconstruction when she told him she was about to interview Derrida ('In Defense' B7). There are echoes of Colin Campbell's description of the 'Yale critics' as she describes the setting, what Derrida is eating, what he is wearing and his hairstyle. It is customary for interviewers in the 'arts' sections of broadsheet newspapers (and this interview was published in the 'Arts and Ideas' section of a Saturday edition) to refer to their subjects' reluctance to be interviewed and their comparison (unfavourable) with other ordeals to which one is subjected (such as root canal treatment). The interviewers then usually find their subject to be 'surprisingly' open and affable. This is the tone frequently adopted by interviewers of Derrida (Imre Salusinszky is another example of an interviewer who approached Derrida with trepidation but found him to be friendly) with the result that a sense of relief and gratitude for the answers granted them pervades the resulting article. This interview fits in with the general pattern of such pieces.

It is illustrated with two photographs of Derrida one of them captioned "Deconstruction's father" ('In Defense' B7). It might be a description with which he would quibble but it is one that follows him, a 'convenient' method of identification. Yet his agreement to be interviewed by the *New York Times* is a sign of his acceptance of a certain responsibility for the concept of which he has been named 'father.' He never disowns deconstruction but spends a lot of time and energy attempting to correct misunderstandings about it. He cannot slough it off at this stage in his career.

Clearly, Mr. Derrida spends a lot of time pondering weighty philosophical questions, but does he ever do anything *normal*, like watch television or go to the movies or play sports ...? "I watch TV all the time," he continued. Movies? The

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Dinitia Smith, 'Philosopher Gamely In Defense Of His Ideas,' *New York Times* 30 May 1998: B7-B9. Referred to as 'In Defense.'

news? "Anything," he said. And does he deconstruct them as he is watching? "Everything!" Mr. Derrida cried. "I am critical of what I'm watching. I am trying to be vigilant. I deconstruct all the time." ('In Defense' B7-9)

It is difficult to know if Derrida is being wholly serious in his approach to this interview – although it does raise questions about what it might mean to deconstruct "all the time." Despite references to "weighty philosophical questions," he is depicted as something of a travelling showman, a "dandy" whose "lectures are sometimes compared to Elvis sightings by fans" and he accedes to a certain degree to this portrayal pointing to his crowd-drawing potential as a defence against accusations of difficulty: "if deconstruction is so obscure, why are the audiences in my lectures in the thousands? They feel they understand enough to understand more" ('In Defense' B7). Derrida might attract the crowds but this does not necessarily mean that he will fully accede to the rôle of a performer and become a crowd pleaser. He is critical of the uses of deconstruction in films such as "Deconstructing Harry" about which, Smith comments, his "voice grew heated, as if he were defending his own child from assault" ('In Defense' B7). Smith rehearses the various "scandals" which are associated with deconstruction and with Derrida; she mentions Heidegger, Paul de Man and the Cambridge controversy.

Such bruising battles provide a backdrop for Mr. Derrida's ruminations about his role in society as "the world's most famous philosopher," a description he doesn't dispute.

"I have been given this image," he said in his fluid and fluent English. "And I have to face some responsibility, political and ethical. It is as if I am indebted to -I don't know to whom - to thinking rigorously, to thinking responsibly. I am in a situation of trying to learn to whom, finally, I am responsible." Mr. Derrida seems to be thinking out loud. "To discover... who is hidden, who gives me orders. It is as if I have a destiny which I have to interpret and decipher." ('In Defense' B9)

Derrida may appear to be "thinking out loud," unaware of his audience but his "ruminations" are not as undirected as they would seem. Here, he portrays himself and his career in both passive and active mode. His reference to a destiny seems to veer towards a form of

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determinism quite foreign to his ideas about decisions, the event and the future to come. He has been given a title "the world's most famous philosopher" and an image that goes with that. What made him famous? It is implied that it was a combination of controversy, scandal and obscurantism. Obscurity was also a factor and Smith mentions Derrida's reluctance to be photographed in the early years of his career, "which added to the sense of Mr. Derrida as a Delphic presence, issuing enigmatic utterances that can be decoded only by a select few" ('In Defense' B9). What difference a photograph would have made to this is not explained. Can one better understand Derrida if one knows what he looks like? A second portrait of Derrida which accompanies this piece bears the caption, "Jacques Derrida has attempted nothing less than to overturn the idea that there is such a thing as absolute truth" ('In Defense' B9). This comment is at once respectful and flippant; it announces the scale of Derrida's project but the use of the phrase "nothing less" suggests that it is overambitious and therefore unrealistic. Smith's article portrays Derrida as at once a showman and a professor cut off from the concerns of the real world. The work which goes on in the academy is that of the "queer ducks" as Mitchell Stephens termed them in his article entitled, 'Deconstruction and the Get Real Press.<sup>31</sup> It is thus that the press contributes to and maintains the distance between the university and the 'outside' world.

One of the consequences of being "famous" is that Derrida is *invited* to participate in interviews and conferences. This is an important element of his work and nearly all his publications first see light as conference papers, usually on a topic Derrida has been considering in seminars. Invitations are important to him and it would be hasty to reduce their rôle in the course and direction of his career. If an element of improvisation is appropriate in the work of a philosopher who insists on the necessity of chance and the opening to the event, then the reasons for Derrida's acceptance of so many invitations to speak become apparent.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Mitchell Stephens, 'Deconstruction and the Get-Real Press' *Columbia Journalism Review* (Sept.\Oct. 1991): 42.

That Derrida is a teacher, and thinks of himself as a teacher, explains much about his willingness to answer questions. He accepts the traditional rôle of the teacher but is quick to acknowledge his debt to his students and readers. The rôle of the questioner is played by an interviewer who is in some way 'present' in the interview (even if it is a written one) and directs Derrida's thoughts in such a way as to extract what s\he thinks a reader (who might not be a Derrida reader) might want to know. These exchanges can take on a pupil\teacher dynamic where the teacher is obliged to fulfil his or her rôle by bridging the gap between the student's 'ignorance' and the teacher's 'knowledge.' Interestingly, Derrida has likened Phaedrus, as he appears in his dialogue with Socrates to "an assistant... a sparring partner - or interviewer."<sup>32</sup> As all teachers (and probably interviewees) would acknowledge, the questions asked give them a new perspective on their work and force them to explain or paraphrase themselves in ways that are more comprehensible to their readers. Thus the interviews can be commentaries on the 'texts themselves,' a form of metadiscourse removed from the body of the text rather like a preface albeit one that is written for the second edition of a book in the light of responses to the first.

#### iv. Helping with Inquiries

In many interviews Derrida addresses himself to new audiences who might hope to find a way 'into' his work through the interview. This does not only apply to the non-academic reader. For those academics and students who are not familiar with his work, who have only heard that it is 'difficult,' the interviews are an opportunity to get to grips with it. On the back cover of *Points*, Jonathan Culler states,

[This] is a book that a large number of readers who do not usually read Derrida will want to acquire, because of the brief and accessible discussions of many different subjects, particularly those involving contemporary social and political issues.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, A Taste for the Secret (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001) vii.

Interviews open up work to new readers *because* they are brief and accessible. The recommendation is on the grounds of clarity and brevity, drawing attention away from lengthy difficult texts which might be on subjects more obscure than contemporary social and political issues. In other words Culler is attracting readers by promising topics which might appear to be more socially or politically relevant than deconstruction. This echoes Michael Bérubé's concerns with explaining deconstruction to the public in socially relevant ways as we saw in the last chapter. Interviews attract readers because, as the blurb writer on the *Points* cover says, "[t]he informality of the interview process frequently leads to the most succinct and lucid explications to be found of many of the most important and influential aspects of Derrida's thought." Yet Derrida would be the first to point out that the interviews are not sufficient in themselves and that lucidity and succinctness do not always go hand in hand.

In certain cases, the interviews may orient someone toward a reading of the books. For the greatest majority, however, they "take the place of"; an image is constructed that gets along very well without texts, without books. And I find that worrisome.<sup>33</sup>

(Derrida said this in the context of an interview which comments on a previous recent interview with which he was clearly dissatisfied. Both are discussed below.) While some readers, hoping for a shortcut, search for the final answer to all their questions, so that the interview marks the *end* of their reading, for Derrida, the interview is useful if only for its ability to name and mark other texts (not always his own) which should be read. Derrida is aware the interviews might act not only as a point of access to his texts but might actually eclipse the texts.

It is significant and another sign of the interview's supplementarity that Derrida frequently and unavoidably refers to his own and others' texts in interview but rarely mentions his interviews in his other texts. His persistent remarking on his use of shortcuts and convenience under the constraints of the interview allows him to prescribe the required reading. Derrida's oeuvre now comprises so many publications in different genres and on varying subjects which frequently refer to other texts, that it is difficult to know where to start. He continues to be prolific, each text promising another as he tries to keep up with promises and questions raised always in the knowledge that the possibility of end or closure is denied. His work is not linear, it is not a chronological series of pieces to be read in order of publication. It proliferates, branching out and circling back. No student of Derrida could read his books in order of publication, following his thought as it builds itself up into some type of philosophical edifice. To attempt that would be to show that one has not read Derrida at all.

The general perception that interviews solve the problems of reading, therefore bypassing the need for the care and rigour which Derrida demands, is well illustrated in Catherine David's opening question in an interview for *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

Q: "An interview with Derrida? At last maybe we are going to understand something about him!" That's what some people said when I announced I was preparing this work with you. It is said that your texts are difficult, on the limit of readability. Some potential readers are discouraged in advance by this reputation. How do you live with that? Is it an effect you are seeking to produce or, on the contrary, do you suffer from it?

JD: I suffer from it, yes, don't laugh, and I do everything I think possible or acceptable to escape from this trap.<sup>34</sup>

"Some people," "it is said" and "reputation"; it is with such vague yet undeniable phrases that a form of folklore builds up around Derrida or around any public figure. This entails a prereading of him before a word of him is read. It means that expectations are brought along to a reading of this interview which, if fulfilled, will allow the conclusion, 'He is not so difficult after all.' The difficulty must be done away with so that the prereading which *limited* the scope of reading or even prevented it now becomes a prereading which *allows* reading.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Dialanguages," with Anne Berger in Points 154. Referred to as 'Dialanguages.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Unsealing ("the old new language"),' with Catherine David in *Points* 115. Referred to as 'Unsealing.'

That is the express task of this interview but it is frequently the task of other interviews too. Not only that, but the spontaneity that appears to be the defining feature of an interview is, in this case, according to Derrida, a sham.

I realize that for the reader that interview [with Catherine David], and I very rarely give them, might seem to have been in fact spontaneous or improvised; but one should know that, however perfunctory the content of what I say there, however limited it is in its scope, it is totally artificial. These things have to be said, one must not pretend to believe that interviews published in the newspapers are real interviews; it is an extremely artificial device, one that I tried to get through, while adhering to the rules of the genre, so as to put across what you said you heard, that is, the voice, a certain "spontaneity," which, I think, is most audible in the little remarks I made about the malaise I felt in that situation. ('Dialanguages' 133)

This statement about newspaper interviews and commentary on the David interview is made in an interview which took place two weeks after the David interview was published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* in September 1983. It was published in December of that year in a journal called *Fruits* to which this note is appended:

This conversation took place on September 27, 1983. It was understood that Jacques Derrida would improvise. Nothing was prepared and nothing has been reworked. We wanted to leave untouched what was a present of friendship. ('Dialanguages' 467)

What Derrida and the editors of *Fruits* are saying is that the 'pure' untouched improvisation of their interview makes it a more "real" interview than that which is published in the magazine. Derrida struggles to make his "voice" heard and can drop hints which only those who can hear him will recognise. That is, only the readers of Derrida can read through the artificiality of the magazine interview to see his "malaise." It is not improvisation that is the problem here; in fact improvisation is valorised as something which should remain untouched. The problem lies with the medium, the magazine which "dropped, and not by my choice [some things] which concerned the media – and what was at stake with *Le Nouvel Observateur*" ('Dialanguages' 133).

David reports the remarks of those who learned that she was to interview Derrida. These remarks may or may not have been made, but they form a convenient opening (to a text which is also deemed to be an opening) which might plausibly echo, or even produce, the reader's opinions. This is a similar move to that made by the editors of Liber with regard to their decision to publish Derrida's 'The Other Heading' (examined in the previous chapter), where they forewarned the reader about the length and difficulty of Derrida's piece. Either the reader has a preconception of Derrida as difficult, or the reader has never heard of him and has now learned that he is considered difficult. In either case, Derrida has a charge to answer and, in this interview at least, he is quick to agree that, yes, he may be difficult to read but that is something he tries to remedy in ways that are possible and acceptable to him. One of the places in which this remedy can be described is the interview. He appeals to the interviewer (and to the reader) not to laugh at his suffering but to take seriously his attempts to take his readers into account when he writes. This is on the assumption that the potential readers who are put off in advance by the difficulty of his writing are now reading him, this different Derrida in a different format who is suffering himself to be interviewed. He accepts this accusation and the question "how do you live with that?" How can he, a philosopher and a teacher, go on living (with himself) in the knowledge that he is almost unreadable? Does this make him a failure as a writer, philosopher and teacher? Here, we must keep in mind the attempts, examined in the last chapter, to simplify and clarify for the sake of a wider, less read audience and the compromises entailed in attempts to justify and publicise one side in a conflict by reflecting the unnuanced language of the other side. This is not something that Derrida could ever do - if he did he would have to go by another name, not his own to which he is so attached.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that he should be true to his name or his self, that that which signs his name always says the same thing, thus making a monolith of that name. But it is to say that it is not possible for Derrida to become somebody else by saying that it is all

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> "I love this name, let me tell you... I love this name, which is not mine of course (the only possibility of loving a name is that it not be yours)." Jacques Derrida, 'As if I were Dead' 219.

very simple really. Derrida has never said that what he and others do is simple or straightforward. To seek simplicity in a nutshell is to have already stopped reading before one has even started. Nevertheless it remains a problem, this question of readability, even though it does not appear to extend to interviews, situated as they are to one side of the other texts and apparently readable in the traditional sense of the clarity of 'everyday' language. This apparent transparency should not be left unquestioned as Derrida has demonstrated in his comments on the David interview.

If the interviewer has a rôle which ventriloquises others' objections to Derrida's readability, the interviewee's rôle is equally complex. Is 'this' Derrida more 'real,' more 'true' to a 'self' than the Derrida who writes always with a book in one hand? Ideally, guard-railed by the situation and the question and answer format, the interview should become a preface to reading, a preface Derrida's potential readers might be able to get through. It ambushes readers from the pages of a public journal and before they know it they are readers of Derrida. This is the purpose of interviews such as David's – not only to attract more readers. The books but also to attempt to bridge the abyss between Derrida and his putative readers. The difficulty which cannot be evaded is that to be a reader of Derrida one must be a reader of those he writes about. Not only that but, as David points out, to read Derrida one must have read Derrida. To this Derrida exclaims "But that's true for everyone!" ('Unsealing' 117) and by this confirmation of David's accusation, he leads the reader to the beginning of a labyrinth, or, at least, indicates that one is already within a labyrinth of reading which leads to more reading without hope of finding the centre or the way out. The interview provides a promising, if false, trail.

Derrida referred to the concept of infinite referentiality, akin to the endless labyrinth, when he quoted Husserl as an epigraph to his essay Speech and Phenomena: Introduction to the

Problem of Signs in Husserl's Phenomenology,<sup>36</sup> an essay which is as difficult as any Derrida has written and for which, in one of his first interviews, he expresses his fondness. If Derrida's interviews can be a form of introduction to his writing, a suitable anteroom prior to the entry into his labyrinth, then this interview, one of his earliest, could be said to preface the preface.<sup>37</sup> The labyrinth extends outwards, an invitation to the first-time reader who has yet to enter the maze of texts, be they texts 'on' Derrida by others, texts by Derrida 'on' others, or texts by originating others (such as Husserl). The interviews seem to skim along the surface of Derrida's work while indicating the depths. Because there is no time to get too deep it seems that interviewer and interviewee can only posit some signposts even if they don't know where they are going. Attempting to stay on the surface, therefore, in this early interview, Henri Ronse asks Derrida in what order his books should be read - at that time there were only three. A good starting point one would have thought. Within seconds, the interviewer, in his rôle as the reader's guiding thread, is lost. Derrida, referring to his books, which, he insists are neither one Book nor one, two, three books, refuses to give a starting point. While insisting that by going 'in' one has gone too far, one has assumed too much, Derrida prescribes staying on the edges or border, stopping in the anteroom. Yet when one picks him up and starts reading, one is already in the middle of something because one cannot be quite outside either language or context or the book. Reading has neither a beginning nor an end, although one can force one on it. This is explicitly illustrated by Glas which begins and ends in mid-sentence and refuses the comfort of opening and closure, introduction and conclusion. Glas also makes readers aware of the passive manner in which they might normally read as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> "A name on being mentioned reminds us of the Dresden gallery and of our last visit there: we wander through the rooms and stop in front of a painting by Teniers which represents a gallery of paintings. Let us further suppose that the paintings of this gallery would represent in their turn paintings, which, on their part, exhibited readable inscriptions and so forth." Edmund Husserl, *Ideas* I, epigraph to Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: Introduction to the Problem of Signs in Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Implications,' interview with Henri Ronse in *Positions* trans. Alan Bass (London: The Athlone Press, 1981). Hereafter referred to as 'Implications.'

they are left doubting whether they are correct in choosing one column over the other or allowing their eyes to skip from one to the other. At the very least it forces its readers to reassess their reading habits.

It is necessary to note at this point that the labyrinthine metaphor, so easy to use and to understand as it unravels before us, to illustrate and simplify and also to show how complex things are, is one that may be set aside but cannot be escaped. Our traditional metaphors of reading, of searching and seeing the light are all centred around some form of mystery solved, of answers achieved. Even when the answers turn out to be further questions we are quite comfortable in this labyrinth. It may be used to show that things are complex and everreceding, like Husserl's picture galleries within picture galleries but still it posits the reader or viewer as a single point making his or her way along in a journey which always seems to promise knowledge, light and clarity. Somehow the reader becomes identifiable and passive, entering into a pre-formed maze with a defined objective. Yet Derrida repeatedly states that he cannot know his reader, the destination of his texts – he is unambiguously clear about this in *The Post Card* – and that the reader is as unknown and labyrinthine as the text itself. In any case Henri Ronse is reduced to using the concept of the labyrinth as he grapples with the map for reading which Derrida presents to him:

[JD:] Under these titles it is solely a question of a unique and differentiated textual "operation," if you will, whose unfinished movement assigns itself no absolute beginning, and which, although it is entirely consumed by the reading of other texts, in a certain fashion refers only to its own writing . . . it would be impossible to provide a linear, deductive representation of these works that would correspond to some "logical order" . . . You know, in fact, that above all it is necessary to read and reread those in whose wake I write. ('Implications' 3-4)

Ronse calls Derrida to order. On behalf of the reader, those who have read Derrida and those who have not but would like to do it right first time like the earnest student who pesters the professor for the right, the only, correct way of going about things, he asks, "But *de facto*, if not *de jure*, where is one to make the first incision into such a reading?" Derrida replies by

ripping his books up, first stapling *Writing and Difference* into *Of Grammatology* and then inserting *Of Grammatology* into *Writing and Difference*. When Ronse reminds him about *Speech and Phenomena* Derrida responds by binding *Speech and Phenomena* onto the "strange geometry of the two other books which are clasping each other" and he reminds Ronse of his *Introduction to Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry*.' Ronse protests, "I asked you where to begin, and you have led me into a labyrinth" ('Implications' 5). The interviewer has lost his foothold at the edge of the labyrinth, the light has gone out. Not only that but Derrida completes his destruction of a reader's hopes by calmly stating that the main body of his work, the dark centre to which the interview was to act as a preface, is *itself* only a preface. Thus the receding pictures are glimpsed.

Derrida: All these texts, which are doubtless the interminable preface to another text that one day I would like to have the force to write, are still the epigraph to another that I would never have the audacity to write, are only the commentary on the sentence about a labyrinth of ciphers that is the epigraph to *Speech and Phenomena*. ('Implications' 5)

It is with such rapidity, within minutes of the opening of the conversation, that the interview which might have acted as a preface to Derrida, has itself become a labyrinth, while the books 'themselves,' those texts on the edges of readability are merely the preface to another text still to be written and still to be read.

Catherine David's opening questions echo Ronse's but carry with them the weight of all the texts written by Derrida in the meantime. When Ronse interviewed Derrida in 1967 it was still possible quite 'easily' to read everything Derrida had published to date. By 1983 when David interviewed him, this was no longer practical, given Derrida's output. Guidance is therefore even more urgent. In this interview it comes in the shape of Derrida's responses, easily assimilated by David's pre-digestion – twice she prefaces her questions with a summary of what Derrida has just said, introducing this with the phrase "in short" as if even in this confined space Derrida is still too voluble and needs to be abridged. Derrida answers his own somewhat petulant question when he expostulates to her:

Why is it apparently the philosopher who is expected to be "easier" and not some scientist or other who is even more inaccessible to the same readers? . . . In truth – here is another complication – I believe that it is always a "writer" who is accused of being "unreadable," as you put it, that is, someone who is engaged in an explanation with language . . . The accused is thus someone who reestablishes contact between the corpora and the ceremonies of several dialects. If he or she is a philosopher, then it's because he or she speaks neither in a purely academic milieu, with the language, rhetoric, and customs that are in force there, nor in that "language of everyone" which we all know does not exist. ('Unsealing' 116)

Derrida, as always, situates himself neither within the academy nor within that arena where the "language of everyone" is (not) spoken. If he is a bridge ("someone who re-establishes contact") between the two, it is a bridge which is not made up of materials recognisable to both 'sides.' He wishes to hold onto his own idiom, not immediately or easily identifiable but not entirely alien either. He also wishes to limit the interview by designating what can and what cannot gain admission. His opening answer is firm about what he believes to be suitable interview material. "It is out of the question to analyze this . . . while improvising in front of this tape recorder, at this speed" ('Unsealing' 115). As we saw in chapter two, Derrida is concerned with analysing the media within the media. That for him is where the real difficulty lies.

[JD:] It is [the existent devices of culture] that must *also* be transformed. And that is very difficult, the very definition of 'difficult.' One could try, for example, to understand why *Le Nouvel Observateur*, why me, why now rather than yesterday or tomorrow, why you, who are leading me in this direction among so many other possible directions, why the fact of occupying this platform counts perhaps more than what one says there or reads there in a cursive fashion and so forth...

Q: One could pose the question differently. If you accepted to give an interview to *Le Nouvel Observateur*, it is with the idea of transmitting something. For a professor of philosophy, the natural site of transmission is the lecture hall. Can one, in your opinion, talk about philosophy in a newspaper? Or is the message necessarily distorted?

JD: A message, if there is any, never remains intact... ('Unsealing' 125)

The difficulty a reader who finds Derrida on the borders of readability experiences is the notion of a message which might not exist, or which changes with each reading or each reader. It is not that Derrida does not have anything to communicate but he is at pains to point out that there is no final message, no unified and unifying revelation for his readers. Messages disperse, disseminate, mingle and become contaminated before they are even read or written. They return to their author in recognisable and unrecognisable form (Derrida refers to this as "a very pleasant or a very unpleasant experience"<sup>38</sup>). This message about the multiplicity of levels and tones in his texts he rather sweepingly describes rebellion and acquiescence. The rebel appeals to his audience not to listen to the norm-maintaining establishment while the heir exhibits "a kind of filial lack of piety" towards those who came before him, "a bizarre mixture of responsibility and disrespect" ('Unsealing' 130). Derrida's attitude to his forebears is therefore more complex than the kind of 'them' and 'us' singularity he slips into when speaking about discursive practices in the media and elsewhere.

[F]or this multiplicity of levels or tones, one would have to invent still other forms, other kinds of music. How is one to get them accepted when the 'dominant' demand always requires, or so people want to make us believe, more linearity, cursivity, flattening. A single voice on the line, a continuous speech, that is what they want to impose. This authoritarian norm would be like an unconscious plot, an intrigue of hierarchies (ontological, theologico-political, technico-metaphysic), the very ones that call for demonstrative analyses . . . since one may presume that the *whole* of tradition is at stake there, I don't know where such upheavals are situated. They situate us. ('Unsealing' 130)

Derrida is calling for a new form of music, for multiple voices on multiple lines, not a singularity making its way along the monorail of a labyrinth. In his use of phrases such as "people want to make us believe" or "they want to impose" he is guilty of uncharacteristic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Roundtable on Translation,' *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Christie V. McDonald (New York: Schocken Books, 1985) 158.

generalisation. The "they" here can only refer to Derrida's critics, those who play out an unconscious plot to impose norms, flat lines and single views. There is a "they" and there is an "us" – they impose norms on us. There are two problems here. If the whole tradition is at stake how can the "they" impose on "us"? Must "they" not also be at some distance to be able to impose anything on anybody else? The "whole" tradition is not all that whole, but it needs to be for Derrida's purpose here in his closing statement. Secondly, if the authoritarian norm is "unconscious," can it be a "plot" or an "intrigue"? Is strategy not always consciously adopted with an end in mind, for instance, the imposition of norms? There is no time, David does not ask these questions but goes along with Derrida to the point where she gives him back his own words as an example of what can undergo and instigate an upheaval. These upheavals, Derrida suggests, do not always need a labyrinthine or complex typography, such as that of 'Tympan' or *Glas*.

JD: It can cause to tremble a very simple sentence, a word, a timbre of the voice...

Q: Like the 'Come' that resonates at the end of 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone' ...?

JD: Exactly. This 'Come' is a call anterior to any other discourse... But it was agreed that we would not talk today about the texts themselves, not directly...('Unsealing' 131)

What is the initial "it" to which Derrida refers? It appears to be the deconstructive analysis which causes simple sentences or words to resonate. This coincidence of "Come" with the idea of simplicity and the end of an interview calls on the reader or invites them ("come") to become readers. His invitation requests that readers do not respond too precipitately but stay open in the opening out of this "come" which comes before reading. That the discourse is practically simultaneous with the opening up of the space is an added difficulty. How can a reader respond to this invitation to come when they are already there? How can they become readers of Derrida when they are already his readers having read the interview? The agreement not to talk about the "texts themselves" struck between the interviewer and the interviewer and the interviewee in some other place anterior to the interview and not revealed until the end leaves

the reader out of the contract. An interview which opened up in good faith and hope ("at last we are going to understand something about him") including readers by quoting them, closes by stating that an agreement was reached before even those almost-readers were quoted, an agreement which precluded the understanding which seemed to be promised. If the interview has been pre-excised from "the texts themselves" it occupies a position which cuts it off from those texts. Here we see how Derrida puts limits on the interviews, opening up a gap between them and his other work in such a way that any chance that the interview would necessarily lead into the text is precluded before the fact.

The promise of simplicity – the resonance of the single word "come" – may yet prompt some hope of ingress into the "texts themselves." The labyrinth reopens. If Derrida's potential readers having at least approached him by reading to the end of the interview feel encouraged enough to go further, they might do worse than go to the essay he mentions, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy.' Here they might skip to the end to find the reference to "come." They will find that 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone' was originally delivered as a speech in 1980 in Cerisy-la-Salle. As usual Derrida needed more time and used the word "come" "for want of time"<sup>39</sup>. If he had had more time he might have used more than just a word or a motif. "Come" is inadequate but it must suffice. Not only that, but in the same breath the reader is led further 'into' Derrida's "texts themselves" as he mentions 'Pas,' 'Living On: Borderlines' and 'At This Moment in This Work Here I Am' and away down another path into others' work: Levinas, Blanchot and St. John's Apocalypse.<sup>40</sup> Within each of these, of course, there is another text but it is to the text in John's Apocalypse that Derrida

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Newly Adopted in Philosophy,' *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> 'Pas,' *Parages* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1986); 'Living On: Borderlines,' *Deconstruction and Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979); 'At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,' *Psyche: inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Editions Galilée, 1987) and extracted in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf.

turns his attention. Within this text there is a sealed volume which no one "in heaven, on earth, or under the earth" but "the Lamb" can open. As the seals are broken the witnesses call "Come" and by the end of the book the interchanging voices of "Come" are no longer those of call and response. In other words the invitation is no longer issued by those who are privy to the revelations of the book to those who are not. In the voice of all, "come" becomes an opening up. Thus the reader is no longer invited to partake but made to say "come" too, that is, to take active responsibility for their reading. At this point the reader is given the opportunity not to be the "bad" reader who is "decided upon deciding" (*Post Card* 4). The only decision or responsibility now becomes that of not being prematurely decided about what the text says. The message is that there is no message to be given and received in a one-way transaction. Derrida is telling his readers to "come" only to put everything back in their own hands. They cannot come as supplicants to him, the book will not give answers – at least in any immediately recognisable form. Neither will the interview give them answers and the expectation that it would give sufficient answers absolving readers from further reading is what Derrida finds "worrisome." Derrida speculates on his audience's reaction to this.

Perhaps you will be tempted to call this disaster, catastrophe, apocalypse. Now, here, precisely, is announced – as promise or threat – an apocalypse without apocalypse, an apocalypse without vision, without truth, without revelation, *envois* (for the "come" is plural in itself, in oneself), addresses without message and without destination, without sender or decidable addressee . . . Do not seal, that is to say, do not close, but also do not sign.

The end approaches, now it's too late to tell the truth about the apocalypse. But what are you doing, all of you will still insist, to what ends do you want to come when you come to tell us, here now, let's go, the apocalypse, it's finished, I tell you this, that's what's happening. ('Of the Apocalyptic Tone' 66-7)

His audience and readers wait for the end (or even skip to the end), for the point, for the revelation which will answer their questions, which will make the text readable at last. If they still seek that at the end of the text, Derrida says, they have not read the text. It has happened, the opening up is all the message there is. Are they disappointed, has he betrayed the implied contract which says that there should be a conclusion, a rounding off, a summary at the end?

The end should close the book, not open it, and the closure is the signature of the author or the movement of the reader. This is a contract Derrida will always refuse to sign.

Derrida refers to his interviews in other interviews and in a way they form an annex to his work rather than an anteroom. In the Fruits interview he refers to his Le Nouvel Observateur interview and in both he refers to the ultimate in uncomfortable interviews, the television interview he gave in 1982 while on the move, and the police interview which sparked the television interview. The interview to which Derrida refers was conducted on a train platform on his arrival back in Paris from Prague after he was released from Czech police custody having been arrested on suspicion of drug smuggling. After twenty-four hours the French government intervened to have him released. This of course raises questions about the treatment of a 'public' figure, the threat of international outrage at the arrest of a well-known philosopher and the favourable treatment Derrida received – aspects of the situation to which he was not immune. In this instance, it was a certain renown which extricated Derrida from a tense situation. Interestingly, the Fruits interviewer, Anne Berger, identifies this incident as the point at which Derrida became a "public person" to which Derrida somewhat ruefully assents "yes, the first time my name was seen on the front page of the newspapers was when I was imprisoned, that is, when I was as passive as it is possible to be" ('Dialanguages' 153). The incident made a good news story and a television camera crew tracked him down on the train and asked for his reaction. When giving the exclusive to David the following year Derrida explains that he cannot do the incident justice, even she will not get the full story.

All of this [the experience of an unjust arrest] is part of such a common experience, alas, that it would be indecent to tell it unless I could recapture some absolute singularity, which I cannot do while improvising in front of a microphone. The very first time I spoke before a television camera, I had to be silent about what *my* experience was, which at that moment didn't hold any great interest... But how can you expect me, in that situation, to say to someone from Channel 2 who puts a microphone in front of me: "You know, I am asking myself certain questions about the State, the foundations, and the function of the discourse on human rights today?" Or else: "The essential thing is what was said

there in the outlawed seminar about the political question of the 'subject' and other related things"? Or else: "What I really lived through there would demand a completely different form of narration, another poetics than that of the evening news"? Just imagine the look on the faces of the reporters and the TV viewers. ('Unsealing' 129)

Derrida cannot articulate his real reaction to his misadventure, not because he is too overcome and shocked to be able to speak before the camera, but because he recognises that the situation is not appropriate for voicing the questions that are going around in his head. The interviewer demands answers not more questions but Derrida is in the business of asking questions so any reaction by him which does not include some of the questions he voices above can only be in order to rise to the occasion and perform as expected by others, a performance which should be acceptable to their audience. On the other hand, it is possible that the interviewer and the viewers might be aware enough not to expect a conventional reaction from a philosopher such as Derrida. Derrida might have underestimated the scope of the evening news. In any case, neither the original impromptu interview on a train nor the more considered conversation with David suffice. There is a sense in which Derrida's differing reaction to Berger and David in some way reflects all the problems of the academy and the mass media and the problems between them when they come into contact with each other. Each interview refers to the one before, David's to the television interview, Berger's to the David interview and to the television interview. Yet the interview with Berger allows Derrida to express the malaise which he felt with the David interview and in it he expresses his desire to "retreat" back 'into' the academy. Public interviews are something to be undergone but they are not, Derrida states, "real interviews" ('Dialanguages' 153).

To save the time of the analysis that we cannot take up again here, let's say that I am not at all at ease in this character, on this stage, with these interviews. Having done what I thought had to be done for "ethico-political reasons," on this stage, as quickly as possible [after the Prague incident], my desire is to retire in order to continue to do what I have done up till now: to write in obscurity, from a certain retreat. ('Dialanguages' 153-54)

Derrida is reiterating his belief that he can only engage with institutions such as the university or the mass media on his own terms, otherwise he considers the exchange to be flawed or artificial. Yet, having done his duty "as quickly as possible" he wishes to retreat so that he can talk about it in more conducive surroundings. Different media demand different forms of discourse and when one finds oneself in a particular environment one adapts one's discourse accordingly, it is part of the conditions of communication. For him, the academy is a type of refuge. He would not, of course, go as far as to say that it should be inviolable (although as we will see in the conclusion he has argued for an ideal university which operates as if it was inviolable) but he does insist that what happens in it should comply with its specific discursive practice. This is not to say that he is making a case for pedantic, sterile texts. As he says, the university is probably the only place left in society where one can play – play with ideas and even play with acceptable forms of discourse. However, as we will see below, when Derrida is given the freedom of the press he uses it in a way that calls for careful reading. His interview with himself appears to be a model of journalistic clarity as it accedes to the laws of the medium but its point is to put notions of clarity into question. In this, it appears to be quite different from the two articles published in Liber and Le Monde de la Révolution française. All three texts 'fit in' to the newspaper mould, yet they are all complex in their own way and in each of them Derrida persists in thickening the medium by calling attention to it. If he is not permitted to at least do that, he reserves the right to silence. Speaking about the "popularization" of philosophy he says, "[w]hen the norms imposed by the media demand too high a price, then silent retreat remains sometimes the most philosophical response, the wellunderstood strategy."41

<sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Language (*Le Monde* on the Telephone)' in *Points* 171-180; (177). Hereafter referred to as 'Language.'

# v. One voice on the line

There is one 'interview' in Points which is possibly misplaced because in it Derrida interviews himself. 'Language (Le Monde on the Telephone)' came about when Derrida was asked by Le Monde to contribute an article on language. Derrida typographically acts out an interview in 'Q' and 'JD' format and produces a phone conversation between himself and an unnamed interlocutor 'from' Le Monde. Clearly, Derrida was able to ventriloquise the voice of a newspaper writer well enough for it to be necessary for the editor of *Points* to specify in a note that the piece was solely Derrida's work. The 'phonecall' is not actually an interview, merely the preparatory conversation with a view towards getting Derrida to write the article. This becomes an interview, as a conversation about how the article should be written expands to encompass his writing style in general. Derrida takes this premise – no doubt based on the actual phonecall from Le Monde or other requests for articles that he must frequently receive - and uses it as the basis for the article. He is of course cleverly demonstrating his argument about the difficulty in strictly distinguishing performative and demonstrative statements. In this article Derrida is making a point which 'anybody' can understand - provided, of course, that they keep in mind that it is not a real interview. (And here he is being consistent to his assertion, "one must not pretend to believe that interviews published in the newspapers are real interviews" ('Dialanguages' 153).) The interview is no different from many others; Derrida purposely reproduces the kind of questions that a newspaper writer might ask, in order to keep the illusion of a genre at work while alerting the readers to the idea of genres, of expectations and of the language used in different contexts. A similar point to that made in the David interview is expressed here. At what stage does one become a reader of Derrida? The 'interviewer' warns Derrida, "But the majority of your readers will not be trained philosophers" to which Derrida asks whether it is possible to name a reader in advance. "Does the addressee exist? Does he or she exist before a reading which can be active and determinant (in the sense that it is only then that the reader would determine himself or herself)?" ('Language' 172). By the time (or even long before) readers of the article get to this

point, they have become readers, they have determined themselves, trained philosophers or not.

Derrida knows that potential readers can be invited or called into reading such an article by the use of the layout of the interview format and the promise of the Q and A. How much 'easier' it is to read an article written by two people, broken up by questions which interrupt the flow, which demand expansion or elucidation, than to read a univocal, monotonous piece in straight paragraphs of "nine pages of twenty-five lines each" (the length specified by Le Monde) by Derrida 'himself' ('Language' 180). Derrida has previously and frequently written using different voices thus throwing doubt on the notion of an 'own' voice. Again, his point is to show that the voice of the interviewee may seem to be more genuine than the voice of, say, Glas or of The Post Card, but that cannot be assumed. If the interviewer here sounds like the 'real thing' but is not, where does that leave the interviewee? How is a reader 'supposed' to react to a fake interview, an article in the guise of the interview that tricks its audience by a sleight of hand? Thus Derrida can rebuke his 'interviewer' for assuming knowledge about the readers. The readers themselves do not know who they are or what they are reading. What he is demonstrating is that the article has been written before he even agrees to do it (in his imaginary phone conversation), it is being read before the addressee can be defined, while the reading of it demonstrates how the addressee can never be defined nor can the article ever be written. The reading and the writing are being determined, the reader and the writer come into being, as they go along (there are shades of improvisation here too). Derrida is writing the article simultaneously with his speech and in the manner in which he speaks. A lengthy quotation is necessary here to give some idea of his argument with himself.

Q: Up to now, you have indeed been speaking to me about languages and it's clearer than what you usually write. I'll give you some advice: dictate your books over the telephone. Your article should stay in this register, don't go back to the isolation booth.

JD: You think I have been all that clear? For whom? What I have just outlined would remain quite inaccessible for a mass of readers . . . I am thinking of some

of those who never open Le Monde, and of certain readers of this newspaper who play an important and singular role in the (prescriptive) formation of a rather cultivated public . . . For another fraction, for whom you have assumed the role of ambassador by asking me to aim my remarks precisely in their direction, what I have just attempted would no doubt be easy, clear, but would have no interest except on the condition of being unwrapped in one fashion or another . . . it is this fraction that is already annoyed by this manner of backing up and slowing down. I should get on with it, say things instead of asking myself how to say them without saying them, in view of what, on what conditions. Doing the latter philosophical, redundant, is already too uneconomical, insufficiently "informative." ('Language' 174-75)

On the basis of previous experience Derrida constructs the reading pool, and divides it into fractions (or factions): those who will not understand what he is doing or who have a fixed idea about what he should be doing and those who understand but think that it is a trivial gesture and should be elided or at least stepped over quickly so that the 'real' philosophy of a certain type can begin. What Derrida says here is something that is left unsaid but implied by many of his interviewers and indeed is characteristic of the interview genre and the mark of a 'successful' interview. That is that he should speak 'normally,' in a language which 'normal' people can understand, which is "the same vaguely aggressive demand, the dictate of a threatening desire: 'So talk like everybody else...'"('Language' 176). He superficially accedes to this demand here, both in the 'interviewer's' voice and in his 'own.' This wins approval - why don't you always talk or even write this way? is the 'interviewer's' reaction (here Derrida allows the 'interviewer' a more robust approach than is normally the case). Derrida pretends to succumb, feigning a lapse into a world of mutually understood and unquestioned meanings, coming in from the cold of difficulty and rigour to the hearth of an intercommunicative community where there is no barrier to the flow of reason, its production and reception, as if he is momentarily abandoning the time and place where he said that "everyday language' is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system.<sup>342</sup> In the community which assumes transparency as a given and ignores the 'knots,' a question is asked, a comment is made and the hearer waits and responds. The hearer comes *after* the initial communication. Conversations have beginnings and ends and the participants are able to point to the beginnings and the ends. Such conversations call for a form of linearity, of mutual agreement even before communication begins, a telephone call which asks for an article but does not form part of the article because that would breach the contract by including the contractual negotiations in the contract itself. When Derrida uses the telephone conversation (which is not a telephone conversation) as his article he breaches the borders of what an article should be 'about.' He was asked to write about language and he writes about the scenario which was only supposed to mark out the boundaries of the article. He makes the preface into the text, the frame into the picture, the anteroom into the labyrinth.

Derrida refers to the demand that he should "talk like everybody else," that he should be recognisable, predictable, seamlessly comprehensible. In the ideal communicative situation of speaker and listener, the rules are mutually and implicitly understood. There is no need to reiterate them every time. In well-known manoeuvres the speakers follow 'lane discipline' to get to where they are going. There are signs of progress which can be marked because the destination is known and the passage is smooth and uneventful. Derrida's communicative activity is one of crashes and accidents, of scraping along guardrails and, especially, of breakdowns and delays. His communication can only progress if each participant agrees to rules in a momentary, temporary and singular fashion. Mention of progress should alert us to warning signals with regard to the use of metaphors. Roads and labyrinths have in common the notion of progress, of closing in on a previously defined and agreed upon destination. This is contra to Derrida's explicit warnings about destination and deceleration (although the temptation to turn Derrida into the traffic police should be avoided). Using metaphors to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Semiology and Grammatology,' interview with Julia Kristeva, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987) 19.

illustrate and simplify might merely set new boundaries, diverting readers' attention away from what is around them to focus them on the black and white line ahead of them – especially when using a metaphor which attempts to clarify notions of clarity and difficulty. Derrida's warnings serve to remind his readers that the simplest explanation is neither the best nor the most complete and that joining "everybody else" might entail acceding to an unexamined and unacceptable rule. The duty for the reader, according to Derrida, is to bring other texts to the texts, to remember previous lessons. One cannot be forever explaining things in language "everybody" knows.

Why not allow [the philosopher] what is allowed to everybody, beginning with the professional journalist: the right and the duty to superimpose on his sentence the encoded memory of a problem, the formalized allusion to systems of concepts. Without this economy, he would have to redeploy at each moment an infinite pedagogy. This is impossible and paralysing: how many lines would he need? ('Language' 176-77)

Journalistic codes (such as that of the interview) are instantly recognisable to the reader. In making his protest in an interview Derrida is pointing out to the readers that what they accept as comprehensible is so only because they have had access to this encoded memory. What he is asking for here is not the imposition of mutually acceptable rules leading to two-way communication, but the decision to read the code (for example, the code of philosophical, historical or literary genres) with a view towards questioning rather than accepting it. Allusion and memory are necessary properties that a reader needs to bring to the text and which allow the writer to 'get on with it.' Otherwise one never gets past the basic steps. And for Derrida, of course, getting past means stepping backwards, withdrawing to the area anterior to and on the edge of the territory marked by the codes his reader has so painstakingly familiarised him/herself with.

The alternative to interminable repetition is intermittent reminders, and this 'interview' serves as such an instance. When Derrida repeats in interviews and post-paper conference sessions that, for instance, deconstruction is not a method that can be applied, he does so to stop his interlocutor in his or her tracks either as a reminder of something they already know or as a critique of their reading. He should not, he says, have to say it every time – even though he does say it many times. That he has to say it so often is a measure of how much work is still involved in deconstruction; there is nothing intuitive, nothing of the order of 'common sense' about it. This means that even its initial premises – which take the form of questions rather than assertions – are easily forgotten as Derrida's less vigilant readers proceed according to what appears to be a natural or even rational response to his work. This forces Derrida to repeat his warnings about what deconstruction is not, even though he would have thought that they could be passed over in certain circumstances. Neither should he have to 'explain' the philosophical tradition nor philosophical language each time he speaks. He should be allowed his shortcuts (allusion and reminder). In other words his readers should do their work either before they read him or before they venture a critique of him.

The interview as *pharmakon* is a remedy in that it is necessarily short (brevity is next to clarity in the pantheon of 'everybody's' language) and it has been predigested by the interviewer, but it is also a poison in that it cannot fulfil its promise, it leaves dissatisfaction in its wake and asks for the impossible – that all Derrida's books be dictated down the phone into the passive receiver of the reader's ear, a painless transfusion upon which the reader must do no work. When Derrida interviews himself in *Le Monde*, the result is a complex text which appears simple in its content and in the clarity of the questions and answers, but which raises all the doubts and uncertainties about language which are common concerns in Derrida's work. However, in order to realise that this is what is going on in the text one would have to have some idea of Derrida's concerns. Once one has some knowledge of Derrida one is already at a point not quite outside his texts. He is not a complete stranger, unheard of and obscure in both senses of that word.

### vi. The Poverty of the Interview

Given its constraints the interview will never do much more than expose its own lack. At the same time it is a popular method of getting messages across to audiences. The message that is transmitted may never quite fit either the intent of the interview nor the desire of the reader but this does not deter further interviews, in fact it encourages them. Any 'event' be it the launch of a book or a film, the signing of a treaty or the arrest of a philosopher attracts media interest which relays the story, at least partly, using the format of an interview with the protagonists. More detailed analysis, at least on television, often takes the form of a further interview with an expert who maintains some distance from the main event. Interviews are part of each of these events but appear to be separate from them – a postscript which concludes by including the final outcome and/or a review of the process which led to it. The interview seals off the package summing things up, appearing to be the definitive analysis thus giving the interviewer the opportunity to say 'we're running out of time, we must move on to something else' or to complete the number of words allotted to the article. This is done in the knowledge that despite appearances the interview is rarely, if ever, the final word on any matter.

That the interview's promise is never fulfilled does not disturb the perennial hope that the definitive interview will take place. Such an interview might not be the chronologically final one, but it would be the one which most completely and finally answers the questions covering most readers' concerns with regard to Derrida. This idealised interview can never take place given the logic of Derrida's work. He insists that he will not always give the same answers to the same questions. Paradoxically, it would be inconsistent of him to do so especially when it comes to political questions. The consistency which is usually portrayed as a mark of integrity can often be a refusal to respond to changing circumstances. Answers are not final, and to quote, say, Derrida's support of the Sandinistas one would have to take into account how he continues to court danger with this rider:

As such, every political question implies an extremely complicated, consistently readjusted strategic analysis, and I have no fixed response to the question you are asking me.<sup>43</sup>

Derrida thus reduces the strength of the question and answer format from within by saying that even when he 'knows' the answer to a question, even when it is not too difficult and when there is sufficient time, his answer will necessarily be a passing thing, something that he may disown at another time when the circumstances which shaped his answer have changed. His answer is not something to hang on to and take away.

I mistrust the formulas I've just used. Taken in themselves, alone, without any other contextualisation, without supplementary discourse and precautions, they can become politically quite dangerous and compromised with that which should have been avoided... I would not want what I have just said about the subject of the impossible and of the other to be simply assimilated to the discourses I have evoked. I will thus, for lack of time, space, and the appropriate situation, keep in reserve a great number of precautions necessary for avoiding these confusions – precautions that would also be, to a certain extent, political. I believe that those interested in this can find the principle and the development in several of my texts, for example, those on Heidegger and on Levinas. ('Politics and Friendship' 227)

The reference to other texts in an interview is therefore in deference to their supporting arguments, their solidity and confirmation, to all that the interview lacks. It is not as if those other texts will provide the answers, they too lead one ever on. Yet they are of a different order, in them the formulas can be explored, the precautions taken and confusions unravelled.

For Derrida, the interview is a displaced text, neither in the body of his 'main' work nor entirely external to it. It is neither preface nor afterword. He states (in interview) that questioning is often perceived as attack but is really a form of repositioning:

(because of course when you ask a question about reason, about the principle of reason, your question is not ruled by reason - it's not irrational either, but, at the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> 'Politics and Friendship,' interview with Michael Sprinker, *The Althusserian Legacy* (New York: Verso, 1993) 217. Referred to as 'Politics and Friendship.'

moment of the question, it's not ruled by the principle of reason in a determined form).<sup>44</sup>

Questioning, then, takes one aside, separates one from the main business. Derrida's texts "themselves" are made up of such questions which he has always asked. If questioning displaces one from what is being questioned and the attempt at an answer produces a text, it would appear that the interview which entails an intercession by an 'outsider' (no matter how 'inside' s\he is, the questioner is always an other who calls on the writer to answer for him\herself) displaces even further so that it becomes a displacement of a displacement.

However, there are questions and questions. When Derrida says that a question about reason is not ruled by reason he is not saying that the question is dictated by ignorance of what reason is or should be. Is the question which asks 'what is reason?' therefore unreasonable, out of the question? Are questions about deconstruction, such as, "could you tell me, in a nutshell, what deconstruction is?" similarly ruled out because there has been no reading as such?<sup>45</sup> To ask a question, it would appear, one must have done the reading to the extent that one recognises whether the answer is reasonable or not. No published interview with Derrida will ever ask him 'what is your name? what do you do?' By the time he gets to the stage where he is 'worth' interviewing he is already in place, an established figure if not 'of' the establishment. If his work is produced as an attempted answer to questions addressed to himself in the light of texts read, those questions seem to differ from those which are explicitly addressed in the interview situation.

Thinking of Derrida's interviews as a form of *pharmakon* allows us to answer the questions put into play at the beginning of this chapter: where is the danger in the interview and why does Derrida grant so many of them? The danger is that the poverty of the interview might not

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> 'Some Questions and Responses,' The Linguistics of Writing, eds. Nigel Fabb et al.255.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Derrida, quoting a journalist, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* ed. John Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997) 16.

be recognised, that it might be accepted as a substitute for the "texts themselves," that in its very shape and tradition (that questions can be answered in a symmetrical fashion which elides ambiguity, misunderstanding, surprise, iterations and the future) the interview does not acknowledge its rôle as supplement to those texts. When Derrida says, in an interview that "[t]he improvised speech of an interview cannot substitute for the textual work" all his own ambiguity towards the interview form is exposed.<sup>46</sup> The interviews may be poverty-stricken but according to Derrida so is deconstruction.

Deconstruction offers nothing in itself: it is not a philosophy, not a method, not a toolkit. It depends on text, on context and on politics... This is the essential poverty of my work. Deconstruction is a poor thing.<sup>47</sup>

Derrida takes part in many interviews and interview situations in the knowledge that these will become part of the poverty of his work. Interviews may not be a substitute for the texts but they are a supplementary form, adding to and making up for a lack in the texts even though they too are lacking. It is this perception, that something needs to be added, that the texts are not sufficient which leads to the use of interview as a form of remedy. I have given some of the instances where Derrida has used the interview in the place of texts. The controversial nature of his career and the perceptions of deconstruction as a threat have attracted publicity and requests for interviews. He has accepted these invitations a sufficient number of times for an important archive which traces the difficulties surrounding deconstruction to develop. Interviews are inescapable for both Derrida and his readers. It is undoubtedly true that to read Derrida one cannot simply read his interviews, but it is also true that to read Derrida one must pay due attention to his interviews themselves should not be excluded from this. They are that dangerous supplement, the *pharmakon* which twines itself

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> 'Positions,' interview with Jean-Louis Houdebaine and Guy Scarpetta, *Positions* trans. Alan Bass (London: Athlone Press, 1987) 67.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> 'Unreconstructed Deconstructionist,' interview with Robert Whelan, *Sunday Tribune* [Dublin] 16 Feb. 1997: 7.

throughout his work while maintaining the position of an annex to it. The interviews have played a rôle shaping the course of Derrida's work and his career if only as the embodiment of all that he disallows from his other texts. They perform an asymmetrical task, the other but unequal side of his texts. It is this view of the interview that makes them a necessary and inescapable element in any reading of Derrida's work.

The interview genre has functioned in this chapter as a link, bringing together and separating academic and non-academic discourse. Derrida's interviews have elements of both. The examples used were chosen because they were instances when Derrida clearly articulated the difficulties in relaying certain questions in an alien medium. These were the difficulties also experienced in speaking about deconstruction during the culture wars, discussed in chapter two. However, in the interviews, because of the interviews, Derrida's authorial voice has become reinforced. His is the public face of deconstruction. This is the direction his career has taken. This is not to say that Derrida is a mouthpiece for all that goes under the name of deconstruction. In this, his pronouncements on what it is or is not are as much a defence against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' and 'apply' it, as against those who think they know 'what it is' apply' it, as against those who think they know 'w

Derrida, as always, is in a perilous position. The more he insists, at conferences, in interviews, in academic journals and in the newspaper, that deconstruction is not a school or methodology, the more it begins to look like one, *because* of the spread of his authorial voice. At the same time, he cannot not speak about deconstruction. His responsibility to it is the responsibility of the author to his or her work. Once an author has signed, there is a duty to defend it even if the dispute around it could be deemed 'illegal.' What Derrida recognises is that one must pay attention to the 'illegal' conflicts, which set "into opposition, *and in public*,

various opinions, feelings and inclinations.<sup>348</sup> Derrida recounts how, in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant tried to exclude illegal conflict from what is proper to the university, to keep the trial and arbitration which are the characteristics of the legal conflict *inside* the university and away from "an incompetent public that would change it back into an illegal conflict" (Mochlos 28). This, Derrida points out, is not possible; the legal is always contaminated by the illegal. At the end of 'Mochlos' Derrida puts it to his audience that they may have three possible hypotheses about where he is "coming from": from the side of either illegal or legal conflict, *or* shuttling between the two in the name of peace or in order to stir up further disputes. All those options, he says, leave the original distinctions in place. He had already answered the question about where he is coming from in the opening questions and answers of this paper.

Where are we? And who are we in the university where apparently we are? ... Are we responsible? For what and to whom? If there is a university responsibility, it at least begins with the moment when a need to hear these questions, to take them upon oneself and respond, is imposed. ('Mochlos' 3)

Interviews are the most obvious embodiment of that responsibility to respond to the other. Derrida's decision to answer questions is a responsibility to his own definition of what the institution in which he places himself is.

The discourse of the public press and the interview is limited and constricting. Improvisation, a feature of both academic freedom and the interview is an enabling force in the academy, but is a disabling restriction in the interview. The public press is limited by its own discursive practices. Yet one cannot deny its influence. This is again taken into account in the next chapter, a consideration of another dispute which drew deconstruction into its ambit. For many critics the Paul de Man 'affair' sounded the death knell for deconstruction. For Derrida,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Mochlos; or, The Conflict of the Faculties,' trans. Richard Rand and Amy Wygant *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties* ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) 27; emphasis added.

despite his personal dismay, it was an opportunity to draw attention once more to the necessity for asking questions about the motives of the public press and his critics, and to answer questions which foreground his relationship with deconstruction. Thus the scene of conflict examined in chapter two is re-entered. This time the emphasis is on a specific event. In light of the level of criticism aimed at deconstruction during this and other disputes the necessity, the imperative, for Derrida's interviews becomes clear.

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#### **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **RSVP**

# i. Introduction: What happened to Derrida?

Derrida and deconstruction have made each other's name. In this chapter, I argue that although Derrida has at times voiced uneasiness with the word 'deconstruction,' it seems that the more 'his' term has been attacked and misunderstood the more ready he is to acknowledge it. This is evident in Derrida's reaction to a controversy which flared up over the discovery of Paul de Man's wartime journalism where many of the arguments over deconstruction in the academy were highlighted in the public press.

At times Derrida has regarded the word 'deconstruction' with some suspicion, reluctance and even distaste and at other times – in the specific circumstances which make up the context of this chapter – he has embraced and proclaimed the word. 'Deconstruction' is now being quite loosely used in the general lexicon, either to denote a form of minute analysis or to imply the use of innovative methods. In the university and in the press when the subject is deconstruction (that is, when it is being mentioned rather than used) reference is inevitably made to Derrida as its source. This suggests that persistent misrepresentations of deconstruction will in some way implicate Derrida. For somebody who has spent much time insisting on rigorous standards of scholarship when it comes to making assertions, voicing opinions or deriving definitions, it must be difficult to see one's name associated with such misinterpretation. How has Derrida responded? The temptation might be to dissociate one's name from a word that seems to have taken on such a life of its own as to be unrecognisable to its progenitor. As this chapter progresses it becomes clear that if, in the eyes of the world, Derrida is deconstruction's 'father' this does not necessarily entail that deconstruction is his child. Derrida at times demonstrates a desire to have done with the word (if not the work) but in the main has responded to misreadings with painstaking corrections at carefully chosen occasions.

The misreadings by professors, journalists and interviewers gives Derrida the opportunity to claim the word and explain it in his own terms whereas the 'deconstructions,' that is, the positive readings and adaptations of deconstruction have made him uneasy with its success. Writing about John Searle in 'Towards an Ethic of Discussion,' Derrida reiterates his attitude towards his bad readers.

For I have come to understand that *sometimes, certain* bitter and compulsive enemies of deconstruction stand in a more certain and more vital relationship, even if not theorized, to what is in effect at stake in it than do *certain* avowed "deconstructionists." In any case, the field here is unstable and turbulent.<sup>1</sup>

Derrida has long recognised that his sharpest critics are aware of the implications of his work whereas those who are not made uncomfortable by it absorb it with equanimity and continue as before. As far as he is concerned the anxiety or nervousness exhibited by his critics is a measure of its efficacy. Readings of deconstruction which have adopted it and 'used' it in a positive way do not call for responses from him. Derrida might not be entirely happy with some of the uses to which deconstruction has been put (or even the idea that it can be 'put to use') but most of his effort has been directed towards those who, for whatever reason, have reacted negatively or irresponsibly (and to Derrida that amounts to much the same thing) to that word. His unease at references to a deconstructive 'school' is manifest in remarks he made in his 1986 paper 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials.'

[T]oday, for example, those who still denounce "deconstruction" – with its thinking of differance [sic] or the writing of writing – as a bastardized resurgence of negative theology are also those who readily suspect those they call the

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion,' *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, II.: Northwestern University Press, 1988) 140. Referred to as 'Ethic of Discussion.'

"deconstructionists" of forming a sect, a brotherhood, an esoteric corporation, or more vulgarly, a clique, a gang, or (I quote) a "mafia."<sup>2</sup>

Although Derrida has been invited to speak 'on behalf of' deconstruction, as if he were spokesman for it, he does not see himself as the authorised voice for a group.<sup>3</sup> He can only speak for himself and even when he is defending deconstruction from critics it is solely on the basis of his own texts. This is the limit of what he believes he is authorised to do. He cannot defend 'deconstructionists' as such because he does not believe that there is such a school. At the same time, in defending the word and the work of deconstruction Derrida includes the practices of others when he speaks of 'deconstructions.' The rôle of spokesman has fallen to him for better or worse and by virtue of retaining the term he is being both inclusive and singular. He can only take responsibility for his work but when that work has spawned such a 'movement' he has to answer for that too, all the while disclaiming any specific mandate.

Taking responsibility means answering for something and Derrida has always seen deconstruction as answering to a call which comes from without – the affirmation with which deconstruction opens. At one with this is his assertion that he produces all his work in answer to another's call.

What exonerates me, in part, from [a] suspicion of presumption is that I was *asked* to come, I was *asked* a question, and so I feel less ridiculous, less presumptuous, because I was 'answering' an occasion – I was responding politely to an invitation. (*Secret* 65)

It might appear that we are at our most active when we make a decision, but Derrida points out that decisions are already part of a sequence put in motion by some outside event such as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,' *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 88. Derrida does not indicate the source of this characterisation of deconstructionists as mafia.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> "I do not define myself on the basis of elementary forms of kinship... I am not part of any group... I do not identify myself with a linguistic community, a national community, a political party, or with any group or clique whatsoever, with any philosophical or literary school." Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001) 27. Referred to as *Secret*.

an invitation to speak, a summons by which one is interpellated.<sup>4</sup> The space one is granted on foot of an invitation, the silence allowed by the questioner still remains – to a certain extent and never purely – untrammelled by possible responses. The questioner\host may have certain expectations, they may think they know what Derrida is about to say, but the guest\respondee retains the right to answer according to his or her own responsibility. It is something Derrida insists upon while maintaining his good manners as a guest. "*I insist on improvising*," he says as he opens the discussion on the discovery of Paul de Man's wartime journalism, "*For the last two months, I have not stopped thinking in a quasi-obsessional fashion about this, but I preferred not to prepare what I was going to say.*"<sup>5</sup> How much improvisation can take place when one has thought long and hard, in a "quasi-obsessional" way about an issue? Where does preparation begin if not with all that thinking? Derrida is telling his audience that he is not quite sure what he will say. It is not a prepared script, but neither is it off the top of his head; a thoughtless reaction, an *immediate* reaction which would be a form of irresponsibility. There may be a rupture with knowledge when a decision to speak is taken but that does not mean that the decision is made in ignorance.

The de Man affair put deconstruction in the spotlight in both the academic and the public press and, for a time, many of the misunderstandings and confusions about it were aired. It gave all who wrote about it a single focus around which to express their own ideas of what deconstruction was and gave a new impetus to a controversy which had never been laid to rest. Derrida was faced with articles and essays by people who felt that they knew enough about deconstruction to write about it. It must have come as something of a shock to observe the spurious connections so quickly forged between indefensible politics and deconstruction,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> "A decision has to be prepared by reflection and knowledge, but the moment of the decision, and thus the moment of responsibility, supposes a rupture with knowledge, and therefore an opening to the incalculable – a sort of 'passive' decision" (*Secret* 61).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War,' trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988) 634. Original italics. Referred to as 'Like the Sound.'

together with misrepresentations of what the word entailed and the belief in its pernicious influence.

Published over the course of a year or two, the articles on the Paul de Man affair foregrounded the problems critics had with deconstruction. There was no point in Derrida asking them to read what he and others had already written – although he did. If he wanted to defend deconstruction he would have to make a case for asserting that deconstruction *cannot* and *should not* be used as a neutral tool for any purpose whatsoever, including the rewriting of history or the dismissal of history, the kind of historical relativism which has seen it become associated with attitudes at the opposite end of the political and ethical spectrum from Derrida.<sup>6</sup> In other words, Derrida had to be clearer about where he stood on more public political and social issues while remaining faithful to all his previous work and to a style which refuses to be direct and straightforward. Geoffrey Bennington points out, "[s]ince the late 1980s, the Heidegger and de Man 'affairs,' in which Derrida's interest in thinkers seen as tainted by involvement with Nazism was taken by many as a sign of political culpability, have exacerbated a sense of political trouble around Derrida, and it is perhaps not coincidental that most of Derrida's more explicit political reflections have appeared since that time."<sup>7</sup> In this chapter, I approach the de Man controversy by examining how the term 'deconstruction' was

<sup>6</sup> Derrida does however take a risk at a later stage when he stated that "I would insist that everyone can use this [almost empty] motif [deconstruction] as they please to serve quite different political perspectives, which would seem to mean that deconstruction is politically neutral. But, the fact that deconstruction is apparently politically neutral allows, on the one hand, a reflection on the nature of the political, and on the other hand, and this is what interests me in deconstruction, a hyper-politicization. Deconstruction is hyper-politicizing in following paths and codes that are clearly not traditional." 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,' *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe, 85. What Derrida means by "hyper-politicization" is a form of deconstructive thinking whereby one is *already* thinking beyond the traditional positions of left and right. Thus deconstruction *cannot* be used to serve the ends of either form of politics.

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, 'Derrida and Politics,' *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 194. used in the press and academic articles and in the books published at the time. The second part of the chapter analyses Derrida's approach to this term in light of these events. The word 'deconstruction' thus becomes an overdetermined marker for all that has happened to Derrida.

Derrida is a public intellectual to the extent that he is concerned with what goes on in institutions such as the public press. In its turn, certain elements of the public press believe that what goes on in the academy is sometimes worthy of report. Derrida takes the media seriously because he believes their rôle is serious. The media are the embodiment of the institution which, according to Derrida, is in possession of "democracy's most precious good," namely, "the 'freedom of the press.""8 Note that it is the freedom which is democracy's most precious good, not the press itself and that by inserting the phrase into quotes Derrida is reminding his readers that it is not a freedom which can be taken for granted, neither its meaning nor its implementation. Although he recognises the localised nature of an 'affair' such as the debate over de Man, the thoughtless nature of the reaction in the press – what Derrida calls "journalistic haste" and "stupidities" ('Like the Sound' 592 and 604) – is, in his opinion, symptomatic of a widespread lack of knowledge and reflection.<sup>9</sup> If it is so easy to make up one's mind in a moment about something like deconstruction, or to pass on unquestioningly some 'expert' definition, the question of how one bases one's decisions with regard to 'larger' issues necessarily presents itself. Derrida's concern, then, is to highlight both the power the media possess and the responsibility entailed.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Call It a Day for Democracy,' *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992) 98. Referred to as 'Call It a Day.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Derrida also accuses Allan Bloom of stupidity when the latter writes in the *Wall Street Journal* that debates in America over original intent are the fault of the work of Derrida and Foucault. See 'Politics and Friendship: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' *The Althusserian Legacy*, eds. E. Ann Kaplan and Michael Sprinker (New York: Verso, 1993) 230-31.

In 'Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion' in *Limited Inc*, Derrida answers Gerald Graff's questions about negative perceptions of deconstruction. This was in the context of the debate between Derrida and John Searle but was written at the time of the de Man controversy and Graff's concluding question refers to this. It merits the briefest answer of the piece because, as Derrida says, he has written about it elsewhere. Derrida ends by criticising what has been written about the de Man 'affair' in the press and, indeed, he criticises Searle's article on deconstruction in the *New York Review of Books* throughout this written interview. The medium in which Searle published his critique is repeatedly mentioned by Derrida so as to draw the reader's attention not only to the inherent inadequacy of the form but also to the extent to which the form influences what is written 'in' it. He notes how Searle's tone becomes more polemical when he is writing in the *New York Review of Books*.

I certainly do *at times* disapprove of the politics of this practice, of certain of its moments in any case: to insult an author instead of criticizing him through demonstration . . . and above all, to attempt in newspaper articles for instance to turn gossip into an argument in order to accuse me . . . of 'terrorist obscurantism.' This style, or at least the style of this particular manifestation (and nothing indicates that Searle is always in such a state apart from when he polemicizes against deconstruction, with Culler or with me *in a newspaper* – although the question remains why deconstruction, Culler or I cause him to so lose control), seems to me indeed to have broad political implications. ('Ethic of Discussion' 139-40; emphasis added)

"This particular manifestation," that is, the writing of an article for publication in the *NYRB* is the occasion of Searle's losing control. He loses control because he is writing in the public press. Thus he gives in to "the temptation of the media" which Derrida warns against.<sup>10</sup> Derrida regularly points out that when professors write in the public press they become something else. While retaining professorial status they work according to 'journalistic' standards so that an unbalanced or polemical piece which appears to be objective will assume disproportionate authority – because written by a professor – but will be practically

<sup>10</sup> 'Honoris Causa: "This is also extremely funny," Points, 401.

impossible to rebuff in that medium – because the essence of journalism is immediacy and succinctness as well as topicality.

Derrida criticises Searle's article on the basis of "haste" and, interestingly, "improvisation." It seems that writing in the press necessarily implies haste. There is, of course, no way of knowing how hastily Searle produced this article or whether he wrote it off the top of his head with an eye on a deadline. For Derrida, haste means more than simply an accelerated rate of going about one's business. It means hastening in the direction of a particular end because one has already decided where one is going, in other words, one is drawing hasty conclusions. These two elements, speed and decision with regard to direction, are implicitly combined in the public press so that haste becomes an alibi for decision and allows those who would normally be expected to take more time, both literally and figuratively, to hasten towards their conclusion. Throughout 'Toward an Ethic of Discussion' Derrida singles out the *New York Review of Books* and it is, of course, typographically highlighted. Its rôle in the debate between Derrida and Searle is, therefore, emphasised.

Indeed, Searle's article in the *New York Review of Books*, an article of unbridled resentment (written *after* "Limited Inc..." and without the slightest reference to my discussion of his theses), seems to me to testify both to the incoherence I have just recalled and to a reading of the texts concerned which at the very least is hasty.<sup>11</sup> ('Ethic of Discussion' 125)

I have already drawn attention to the complex nature of improvisation in Derrida's work including his insistence that he be allowed to improvise at the conference in the University of Alabama on de Man's wartime writings. However, when it comes to criticising Searle – and the *New York Review of Books* – Derrida appears to put improvisation in the same category as haste as a target for justified critique. Discussing Searle's account of literary critics who

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> 'Limited Inc...' was originally published as an article in *Glyph* 2 in 1977 in reply to Searle's 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Jacques Derrida,' published in the same issue. It was collected with Derrida's essay which gave rise to Searle's response, 'Signature, Event, Context' (from *Glyph* 1, 1977) and 'Afterword: Towards an Ethic of Discussion' in *Limited Inc.* 

believe that "unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise it isn't really a distinction" Derrida asserts, "I had in effect already suspected that this was an assumption that Searle himself did not share continuously, rigorously enough, even before he let it be known in such a highly improvised manner in the New York Review of Books" ('Ethic of Discussion' 126). Searle has revealed in the public press something about himself which Derrida had "already suspected." Why should Derrida think that Searle's "manner" in this part of the article at least, is "highly improvised"? And what is the significance of mentioning (again) the New York Review of Books?<sup>12</sup> Despite the confirmation of his suspicions (that Searle did not wholly believe that if a distinction cannot be made rigorously it is not really a distinction), Derrida is not quite convinced, and it is the medium in which Searle's views are stated which prevents this conviction. Searle will have to repeat himself in another medium, presumably an academic one, before Derrida will be satisfied that he really believes what he says about distinctions. Derrida, therefore, is making allowances for the fact that Searle might not really mean what he says when he is writing in the press because he is writing in the press. Derrida, it should be noted, borrows all the terms which were at stake in the debate between himself and Searle over Austin's work as he challenges Searle to repeat what he has just said. Derrida himself is often asked to explain what he means in terms like these.

If Searle declares explicitly, seriously, literally that this axiom [about rigorous and precise distinctions] must be renounced, that he renounces it (and I will wait for him to do it, *a phrase in a newspaper is not enough*), then, short of practicing deconstruction with some consistency and of submitting the very rules and regulations of his project to an explicit reworking, his entire philosophical

<sup>12</sup> Some time later Derrida had occasion to mention, somewhat cryptically, his many encounters on the pages of the *New York Review of Books*. Accused in the *New York Times* by a 'professor-journalist' of not being sufficiently involved in French public affairs Derrida said in the course of a paper on the concept of the lie, "This is not the first time that newspapers bearing the name of New York in their title have said whatever they please and lied outright about me, sometimes for months at a time over several issues." 'History of the Lie: Prolegomena' *Futures: Of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Richard Rand (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 84.

discourse on speech acts will collapse even more rapidly. ('Ethic of Discussion' 123-24; emphasis added)

Derrida accuses Searle of doing something in the public press which is the opposite of what he says in his books. "When [Searle] has to retreat into journalistic polemics, he resorts to denials and pretends to have renounced trenchant distinction" ('Ethic of Discussion' 124). Searle is retreating, resorting (that is, ceding a certain amount of ground) and pretending. He is not himself. Derrida grants him a chance of redemption in a form that is not a newspaper. If he does not repeat his belief in a medium other than a newspaper then, it is implied, he did not really mean what he said. It is noteworthy that Derrida refers to the *NYRB* as a newspaper when it would more accurately be described as a review or journal. This may be because of the 'illegal' (in the Kantian sense) element of the controversial article Searle wrote. Derrida's argument is that the same article would not (or could not) have been published in a different medium. Derrida brings to his readings of newspapers a pre-existing suspicion which is only confirmed by his experiences. This is why in the course of answering Graff's question about de Man's early writings, he concludes a piece which orients itself towards a (possible, future) ethic of discussion with a call for a better public press.

And since I have already alluded above to the intervention of the press in the debate with Searle, I would still want to raise the very serious problem of the responsibility of the press in its relations to the intellectuals or in politicalintellectual, philosophical, cultural, or ideological debates. And above all the problem of the responsibility of intellectuals in their relations to the press. Not in order to recommend retreating into the interior of the Academy, even less to accuse the press in itself or in general, but on the contrary to call for the maximal development of a press that is freer and more rigorous in the exercise of its duties. In fact, I believe that professional journalists are more demanding in this regard than are those intellectuals who make use of newspapers as instruments of a power that is immediate and subject to few controls. ('Ethic of Discussion' 154)

Although Derrida begins by adverting to the responsibility of the press in its relations to intellectuals, he ends with the assertion that it is the intellectuals themselves who need to examine more closely their responsibilities when writing in the newspapers. (It is worth

noting that he wrote this critique in 1988, that is, not long prior to the two articles examined in chapter two which were published in January 1989 and October 1990.) Derrida does not want to "accuse" the press itself for what was written about deconstruction during the de Man controversy, yet it was there that the worst accusations were levelled at deconstruction – the worst because the most widely and most 'easily' read. There were worse things said about deconstruction during this period, most notably in Roger Kimball's book, *Tenured Radicals* and in David Lehman's book *Signs of the Times*. These books were aimed specifically at a non-academic public but would never have reached the readership of the articles Derrida singles out in his 'Afterword' including the unsigned *New York Times* piece which 'broke' the 'news,' Jon Wiener's article in *The Nation*, Lehman's *Newsweek* piece and Walter Kendrick's piece in the *Village Voice*. It is to these that I will now turn before going back to Derrida's reaction to the press and to his academic critics as manifested by his subsequent use of the term 'deconstruction.'

## ii. What It Said in the Papers: Responding to de Man

With the discovery in the Summer of 1987 of Paul de Man's wartime articles for *Le Soir*, by Ortwin de Graef, Derrida faced one of the most challenging periods in his career and was called on to respond appropriately. To read Derrida's work, subsequent to 1987, without taking into account the devastating effect of the revelations about de Man had on him is to turn a blind eye to his own experience as an author. In a way such a reading would be guilty of what many of Derrida's critics have accused him of, that is, a certain self-incarceration in the realms of textuality without reference to the 'real' world.

At its most basic the de Man controversy allowed critics to associate deconstruction with fascism.<sup>13</sup> That they did this in the public press which had consistently portrayed

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Jon Wiener, writing in *The Nation* refers to de Man as having become "something of an academic Waldheim" ('Deconstructing de Man,' *The Nation* 9 Jan. 1988: 22). David Lehman in the *Los Angeles* 

deconstruction as a paid up member of the politically correct thought police meant that deconstruction faced the most serious charges of totalitarianism with little or no recourse to a form of adequate response. Derrida's ambivalent attitude towards the public press makes for a response which avoids direct rebuff in the pages of the newspapers although it could be argued that his essay in *Critical Inquiry*, 'Like the Sound of the Sea Deep Within a Shell: Paul de Man's War,' indirectly addresses the press, from its title – which refers to the indifference of the future rolling over newspapers – to its footnotes. Derrida's concern with the issues which emanated from this episode continued beyond its temporal limits (which measure approximately from October 1987, the date of the conference at the University of Alabama where photocopies of de Man's articles were distributed, to 1989-1990 when the books appeared) and, to a certain degree, still continues.<sup>14</sup> Much of Derrida's work since 1987 cannot avoid either explicit or implicit references to the de Man controversy. When Derrida speaks or writes about being Jewish, the public press, politics, history, Europe or war there is a glimpse of the spectre of the controversy which raged over de Man. When he speaks of

*Times* reports the same association. "The de Man scandal has also made people wonder again about the attractions fascism evidently held for upper-class European intellectuals in the 1930s" and recounts the "grim joke making the rounds of American faculty clubs... Why didn't de Man own up to his guilt? He couldn't remember, goes the bitter punch line, because he had a severe case of 'Waldheimer's Disease'" ('The (de) Man Who Put the Con in Deconstruction,' *Los Angeles Times Book Review* 13 Mar. 1988: Endpapers). Wiener, an example of what Derrida calls a "professor-journalist," is, we are told at the end of his article, a contributing editor to *The Nation* and a professor of history at the University of California, Irvine. Lehman is, according to the note appended to his article, a poet and critic.

<sup>14</sup> These books include: Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, Revised edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz and Thomas Keenan (eds.), *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz and Thomas Keenan (eds.), *Paul de Man, Wartime Journalism, 1939-43* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989); Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991; *Logomachia: The Conflict of Faculties* ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

friendship, the lie, justice and perjury the example of de Man cannot be quite effaced.<sup>15</sup> In recent years Derrida has written text after text emphasising both the unknown event which happens and the possibility of recognising the unknown event, a paradoxical approach which leads him to the point of making such arguments as only the unforgivable can be forgiven.<sup>16</sup> This could not have been written without some consciousness of the de Man controversy where Derrida had used the term "*unpardonable*" in writing about the display of anti-Semitism ('Like the Sound' 623). What happened to Derrida was not a simple process whereby his late friend could be forgiven or not. His crime was not against Derrida, nor was it against Derrida's critics. Derrida can neither forgive him nor apologise for him. Equally, he cannot repudiate or efface him. What he must do is respond.

In the de Man controversy it is the press and its ability to make spurious connections, quick judgements and ill-informed decisions *and* those critics who complain at the thought of having to read de Man again (or for the first time) as Derrida insisted they should, who come in for the most scathing criticism from him. His own response clearly did not please very many people, but the controversy followed along predictable enough lines even if it was an unexpected event which gathered to itself all the difficulties pertaining to perceptions of deconstruction.<sup>17</sup> People respond as expected even to the most surprising events. Thus, when

<sup>15</sup> Derrida has lately spoken more explicitly about de Man, for example, in his November 2001 paper, 'Perjury,' at the Loughborough University conference, 'Life After Theory.' Derrida focused on Henri Thomas's novel *Le Parjure* which de Man once directed Derrida to read if he wanted to know something about his personal history. *Le Parjure* deals with an academic who commits bigamy, and Derrida used it as an example of the complex relations between fiction and bearing witness.

<sup>16</sup> "Forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable." Jacques Derrida, On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001) 32.

<sup>17</sup> Roger Kimball, for instance, was particularly displeased with Derrida's *Critical Inquiry* article and awarded it "first prize for mystification." He describes it as an "extraordinary sixty-page eulogy *cum* jeremiad" and quotes the opening paragraph and a piece from the end of Derrida's essay (Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990) 99). Kimball has a problem however, and this might explain why he gives so little space to Derrida asks (and marks his emphasis) "What is happening?" ('Like the Sound' 591) early in his response to the discovery of de Man's wartime journalism, he does so in the knowledge that what is happening is taking its shape and its future in that moment in his performance when he asks what is happening.

In August 1987 something happened to Derrida (a telephone call, a postal delivery and some reading). This event demanded an almost immediate answer, the urgency of which is apparent in the chronology that unfolded in the space of a few months. Derrida makes the pace of his own response and his insistence that the archives be opened for publication into part of his defence against his critics while simultaneously cautioning against any form of immediate or mindless *reaction* which would castigate not only de Man's early writing but also his later work and, by association, the work of deconstruction and Derrida himself. Derrida endows his response with the qualities of immediacy and openness. He did not delay and he did not try to prevent the publication of de Man's articles. If anything, he facilitated their publication, he insisted on it.

For my own part, I was quickly convinced . . . that what had just been discovered could not and should not be kept secret. As quickly and as radically as possible, it was necessary to make these texts accessible to everyone. ('Like the Sound' 632)

"Quickly" in Derrida's terms is the time it took to read and assess the articles he had been sent by de Graef and to distribute and discuss them at the already scheduled conference at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa in October 1987. In contrast to Derrida's account of

Derrida in this chapter entitled 'The Case of Paul de Man.' He admits that he doesn't understand what Derrida is saying. He refers to "[w]hat Derrida seems to be saying..." and says that "the vast majority [of contributors to the *Responses* volume] seem to come down squarely on the side of de Man and against his condemnation by the press. I say *seem* here because in typical deconstructivist fashion, many of the essays are models of obscurantist obfuscation." Although he cannot penetrate their meaning, Kimball is sure enough about what is going on in those essays to himself come down squarely on the side of the opinion that the academy "rallied... vigorously to excuse, explain, and extenuate the wartime journalism of Paul de Man" (Kimball 100-1). events, Roger Kimball implies that it was only "when the news of de Graef's discovery had begun to leak out [that] a summit meeting of about twenty deconstructionists... convened in Tuscaloosa" (Kimball 98).<sup>18</sup>

In December 1987 the editors of *Critical Inquiry* invited Derrida to write a piece about his reaction to de Graef's findings. Derrida accepted, producing a complex and lengthy article which raises many questions about the issue of reading. When Derrida wrote this article for the Spring 1988 edition of *Critical Inquiry* he had still only seen some twenty-five of de Man's articles and, as he points out, "all the sensationalist 'information' delivered in great haste by the newspapers and by those who fed them their information remained marked by this same limitation," but did not acknowledge that fact ('Like the Sound' 598). It was because de Man was viewed as the foremost practitioner of a certain form of literary deconstruction that some saw this as an opportunity to quash deconstruction. A series of transferrals took place from one explicitly anti-Semitic article to the 170 articles in *Le Soir*, from there to de Man's later writings, from there to deconstruction and from there to Derrida. In his preface to the revised French edition of *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, Derrida characterises this reaction as "hate-filled and expedited trials on the part of enemies who rushed to exploit an 'advantage': against a person and, through him, they hoped, against

<sup>18</sup> The proceedings of this conference were published as *Logomachia: The Conflict of Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992). The subject of the conference was Kant's essay, 'The Conflict of Faculties' and Derrida's reading of it in 1980 in 'Mochlos.' 'Mochlos' is included in *Logomachia* as is an interview with Derrida which took place in May 1988, that is, seven months after the conference and after many of the reactions to the de Man controversy had been published including Derrida's 'Like the Sound of the Sea.' Derrida's contribution to the Tuscaloosa conference was a reading from *Of Spirit* as well as the "improvised" response to the de Man articles after the scheduled portion of the conference had ended. In a note to his Preface, Rand states "as a matter of record" that the conference had been organised two years previously. He goes on to detail the sequence of events which led to the discussion of the de Man articles after the symposium had closed and asserts that "[p]apers appearing in this volume are not connected to those discussions" (*Logomachia* xi-xii).

others, and against currents of thought"<sup>19</sup> The "others" and the "currents of thought" were, of course, Derrida himself, other 'deconstructionists' and deconstruction.

Derrida responded passionately to the reaction to the discovery of De Man's anti-Semitic writing, but not simply in order to defend his friend and colleague. What disturbed him most was the opportunism and point-scoring on the part of critics of deconstruction, particularly in the medium of the newspapers who reported the matter. De Man was deemed to be "far and away the most influential proponent of the deconstructionist methods in criticism."<sup>20</sup> His book of essays, *Blindness and Insight*, is characterised by the editors of *The Yale Critics* as "the beginning work of 'deconstruction in America'."<sup>21</sup> However, although de Man credited Derrida with introducing him to the word, he also said that Rodolphe Gasché was right when he said that he and Derrida were closest when he did not use Derrida's terminology in his work and farthest apart when he used "terms such as *deconstruction*."<sup>22</sup> De Man's essay, 'The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau' in *Blindness and Insight* is not a critique of Derrida in the oppositional or confrontational sense. Nor could it be, seeing as de Man's purpose in his essays was to address the issue of criticism, as it is traditionally understood. However, it pushes at Derrida's reading of Rousseau, and Derrida said of it that "never has any criticism appeared to me so easy to accept" (*Memoires* 126). De Man's essays

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, revised edition, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989) xii. Referred to as *Memoires*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> John Sturrock, *The Word from Paris: Essays on Modern French Thinkers and Writers* (London: Verso, 1998) 82. Referred to as *Word from Paris.* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge: 1983; First pubd. 1971).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Paul de Man, Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust (New Haven: Harvard University Press, 1979) ix. Stefano Rosso, 'An Interview with Paul de Man' in Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) 118. Original emphasis. Referred to as 'Interview with Paul de Man.' In this interview for Italian radio, De Man

were a demonstration, according to Wlad Godzich in his introduction to *Blindness and Insight*, "that we do not know what reading is," and in this at least his project is not dissimilar to Derrida's.<sup>23</sup> His relation to Derrida is one of coincidence and crossing over rather than blind parallelism or opposition. De Man, "notwithstanding his debts to Derrida, is no disciple" as Robert Bernasconi points out<sup>24</sup> and Vincent Leitch goes even further by saying that, "de Man avoids ontology and metaphysics . . . he offers no programmatic statement . . . One gets the impression, almost genuine, that Derrida need not have existed at all for de Man to carry out his work."<sup>25</sup> There are significant differences of emphasis and subject matter between Derrida and de Man, not least in their approach to institutions. Derrida is perennially concerned about the grounds on which categories such as those of literature or philosophy come about. De Man worked in a more circumscribed area. He taught literature and even though his work was influenced by Heidegger and Nietzsche, he said of himself, "I am a philologist and not a philosopher: I guess there is a difference there [between myself and Derrida]" ('An Interview with Paul de Man' 118).

As noted in chapter two, the perception among critics of the 'culture wars' such as Cary Nelson was that, "American deconstructive critics like Paul de Man were inclined to avoid larger moral issues. But Jacques Derrida, the founder of deconstruction, has for years regularly written about apartheid, nuclear war, racism, and the politics of academia."<sup>26</sup> In general, whatever the implications of his work, de Man was seen to be a more 'private' critic than Derrida, in that he was interested solely in analysing the rhetorical nature of literary texts. It is this difference which shaped the course of the de Man 'affair.' According to John

agreed "to try to be as 'perspicuous' as possible, since he had to be understood by listeners and not by professionals." (115).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Wlad Godzich, 'Introduction: Caution! Reader at Work!' Blindness and Insight, xvi.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Robert Bernasconi, 'No More Stories Good or Bad: de Man's Criticisms of Derrida on Rousseau' Derrida: A Critical Reader, ed. David Wood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 138.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Vincent Leitch, Deconstruction: An Advanced Introduction (London: Hutchinson, 1983) 48-9.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Cary Nelson, Manifesto of a Tenured Radical (New York: New York University Press, 1996) 51.

Sturrock, De Man "never [wrote] about the mass media, ultra-fastidious man that he was" (*Word from Paris* 86). Derrida, of course, has frequently written and commented on the mass media. Derrida is meticulous and careful but he is not fastidious. The de Man controversy was another occasion (albeit a very significant one) on which Derrida could again address an issue which had regularly occupied him: the discursive practices of the public press and the critics of deconstruction.

However, Derrida did not choose to respond in the public press. His publications on this issue are confined to the pages of *Critical Inquiry* and the lecture rooms of a conference in Tuscaloosa. In a later article on the same subject, Derrida characterises this initial response thus: "what I wrote on this subject was *complicated* enough, *divided*, tormented, most often hazarded as hypothesis, *open* enough to discussion, *itself* discussing *itself* enough in advance ... for me to be able to welcome questions, suggestions, and objections."<sup>27</sup> Derrida says this in response to what he calls the "monolithic" criticisms to 'Like the Sound of the Sea.' He is also describing his essay in these terms in order to contrast it with the "precipitous and compulsive publications" produced by "so many confused hurried and rancorous professor-journalists" ('Biodegradables' \$17). Their writing might be "confused" while his is "complicated [and] *divided*" but these characteristics are not synonymous and, for Derrida, the difference is that he is aware of his own difficulties with the issue to such an extent that his text discusses itself whereas the professor-journalists in the public press show no such self-consciousness and neither do those critics ranged against him in *Critical Inquiry*.

One of the first to 'break' the news to the wider public was the *New York Times* which on 1 December 1987 published an unsigned piece entitled, 'Yale Scholar Wrote for Pro-Nazi Newspaper' with the subheading, 'A late professor's writings from the 40's are being

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Biodegradables: Seven Diary Fragments,' trans. Peggy Kamuf Critical Inquiry 15 (1989) 819-20. Referred to as 'Biodegradables.'

debated.' The 'debate' is partly enacted in the few inches devoted to de Man with quotations from supporters such as Shoshana Felman who says that he was "almost entirely without prejudice" and that he "took an ethical stance in all his daily life."<sup>28</sup> The piece *seems* to be balanced in that it includes observations like these but the authoritative tone of the 'disinterested' journalist as opposed to the reactions of "shocked scholars" must at the very least cast doubt on their remarks.

When commenting on the public press it is necessary to distinguish between the kind of articles that appear in it. The *New York Times* piece was a news 'item' rather than an article. Like the piece entitled 'The Stanford Mind' (examined in chapter two), it was placed in the 'news' part of the paper, not in the 'arts and culture' section or the magazine as has been the case for other articles considered. It appears to be a factual report but once it begins to quote de Man's friends and critics it slides into the form of an opinion piece, not the explicit opinions of its author, but the opinions of those who are quoted. The order in which this is carried out in this short piece is worth looking at. The opening (after the headline) is the attention-grabber.

In a finding that has stunned scholars, a Yale professor revered as one of the most brilliant intellectuals of his generation wrote for an anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi newspaper in Belgium during World War II, documents have disclosed. ('Yale Scholar' B1)

It then goes on to identify de Man and give biographical details: his age and date of death, his title and place of work and the attribution of "originator of a controversial theory of language." Continuing in this informational mode the piece then sketches the discovery of the wartime journalism and repeats how these findings have "shocked scholars." Unless one knew better one would be inclined to accept the definition of deconstruction given at this point as a continuation of the facts previously itemised. We are told that "Professor de Man's

<sup>28</sup> New York Times 1 Dec. 1987: B1+. Referred to as 'Yale Scholar.'

theories and method [are] dubbed 'deconstruction.'" On the next line the reader is given the following statement:

Deconstruction views language as a slippery and inherently false medium that always reflects the biases of its users. ('Yale Scholar' B1)

The piece goes on to report what the president of Yale said at de Man's memorial service and quotes Neil Hertz, Shoshana Felman and others. Derrida is not mentioned but even so he refers to this particular article in 'Towards an Ethic of Discussion' and singles out its treatment of deconstruction for criticism.

The biases of the particular user of language who wrote the NYT piece (or of the sources of his or her information) are not the only problem here. The problem is that the definition given imputes a relativism to deconstruction and stamps it with the seal of someone who seems to have no opinion on it one way or another. The writer appears to be supplying information which would flesh out the story and add depth to his or her report. Yet despite the direct quotations from named sources the article also includes references to what "some scholars" said and to unnamed "critics of Professor de Man" ('Yale Scholar' B 6). The mixture of correct facts with incorrect ones makes this small piece "slippery" if not quite "inherently false." Derrida refers to this piece in a footnote to 'Like the Sound of the Sea' in the context of its reproduction in present-day Le Soir which took issue with its American colleagues for depicting it as a collaborationist newspaper. Derrida applauds Le Soir for reminding another newspaper of "journalistic rigor" but questions its rigor when it comes to reproducing the definition of deconstruction. Repeating Le Soir's paraphrase of the New York Times' definition Derrida says somewhat wearily, "It is true that after reading such stupidities over and over again, one might end up believing them" ('Like the Sound' 604). It is to offset not only these misrepresentations of deconstruction as well as those which associate it with nihilism and amoralism, that Derrida in his two Critical Inquiry essays gives a lesson in reflective and patient reading (in 'Like the Sound of the Sea') and a reminder (in 'Biodegradables') that what remains might be such misrepresentations rather than their

correction. Thus he reminds himself of what the future might hold for him and he hopes that by demonstrating his reading of de Man he can show others how they might read *him*.

One of the problems with the NYT article is its intermingling of quotations from named and unnamed sources. This alerts us to one of the more apparently trivial differences between academic and journalistic writing, that is, footnoting. It is sometimes the case that once the standards demanded by scholarly publication are left in abeyance writers publish articles based on tenuous or even non-existent links. In April 1988 Derrida spoke at a conference on annotation and marked out a space for "journalistic polemic" as a form of publication which, along with "sacred or poetico-narrative-literary texts" has "as a rule, no footnotes."29 Given the timing of this paper and the strange coupling at work here it would seem that Derrida is making a point about the possible fictionality (but this opens up a whole series of questions about the status of fiction in Derrida's work) of sacred or journalistico-poetico-narrativeliterary texts as opposed to academic texts. In this paper there is also a possible answer to the question about why Derrida did not embroil himself in the public press war which broke out over de Man. He says, "in a polemical context, if I wanted to be sure that my reply or my attack would be read and not passed by - indeed, read before the main text - I would put it in a footnote, conferring on it the principal rôle, so that what is apparently the main text would become an auxiliary pretext for the footnote" ('This Is Not an Oral Footnote' 198).<sup>30</sup> Does this imply that in a polemical context, if Derrida wrote for the newspapers his main point

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'This Is Not an Oral Footnote,' *Annotation and Its Texts*, ed. Stephen A. Burney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 199.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Derrida indicated his regard for footnotes quite early on. Writing about the "textual graft" in 'The Double Session' he says, "Among other things this would help us to understand the functioning of footnotes, for example, or epigraphs, and in what way, to the one who knows how to read, these are sometimes more important than the so-called principal or capital text." *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981) 202-03. This also supports the suggestion in chapter two, that the polemic Derrida enunciates in 'The Principle of Reason' and supports with footnotes in the

would get lost in the footnotes which never (or, as he is careful to say, only "in exceptional cases") appear? That, if he wants his polemic to be read it *cannot* be read in the newspapers? An example of what Derrida is talking about here is the polemical footnote he added to the second edition of *Memoires: for Paul de Man*. The article Derrida had written for *Critical Inquiry*, 'Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War,' was added to the second edition of the book. There were few changes to the text as it had appeared in *Critical Inquiry*, but one massive one is the invective Derrida pours on Jon Wiener ("and others like him" *Memoires* 256) in a footnote expanded from a single paragraph in the footnotes of *Critical Inquiry* to a six page footnote in the book. This may have been what Derrida was thinking about when he spoke of his "reply or attack" being included in the footnotes – and thus guaranteed to be read – rather than in the main text. It gives his attack the widest possible audience in his own terms, but still nothing like the audience Jon Wiener writing in *The Nation*, or Frank Schirrmacher writing in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, whom he also strongly criticises, would have achieved.

## recounts how he received two phone calls, one than harmer Weber I

When the professor-journalists, such as Wiener, are out of school they are free to make connections, draw analogies and quote unnamed sources. Writing in a generally well-regarded paper such as the *New York Times* they have the legitimacy of "the conjoined force of the presumed authority of an academic expert and a newspaper with a massive and international distribution" as Derrida says.<sup>31</sup> While a prerequisite for academic writing is the acknowledgement of all quotations, the opposite holds true in the press. Its freedom is based on the legally upheld right to *withhold* information about its sources. This necessary right is the foundation stone of the freedom of the press (and, to a certain extent, of democracy) but, on occasion, it has been used to prop up unfounded myths and rumours, bestowing on them a

published version may not have been a departure from the main argument of the paper but very much part of it.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> 'History of the Lie: Prolegomena,' *Futures: Of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Richard Rand (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001) 85.

form of legitimacy by way of publication in the institution that is the public press.<sup>32</sup> Distortions of deconstruction such as those committed during this period take their place in the archives and remain unanswered in their own medium. As Derrida demonstrates in 'Biodegradables' there is no way of knowing what will survive of all this – the cheap connections made in the pages of the *New York Times* or *Newsweek* (which have a good chance of going down in history as records of repute in the public press arena) or the pages of *Critical Inquiry*, or neither, or both. Even if everything survives into posterity, whenever that might be, they still only tell part of the story and may only ever be partly or partially read.<sup>33</sup>

Derrida feels that his response to *Critical Inquiry*'s invitation to write about de Man comes "too quickly to be sure" but is "without journalistic haste," that is, "without the excuses it sometimes gives the journalist but should never give the academic" ('Like the Sound' 592). How quickly is "too quickly"? There is a sense of urgency in Derrida's outline of the sequence of events which occurred leading up to his agreement to write the article. He recounts how he received two phone calls, one from Samuel Weber in August 1987 and one from *Critical Inquiry* in December 1987. What Derrida chooses to tell us of those

<sup>33</sup> Derrida admits to being curious as to what might survive of his work and got a glimpse of such an eventuality when he attended a conference, 'Applied Derrida,' on *him*. "You can imagine that when one comes to a conference entitled 'Applied *You*,' you experience the situation in which it is *as if* you were dead. Finally. Now, amongst the various reasons why on many occasions I do agree to attend conferences on me is because, after a lot of hesitations, a lot of inner contradictions, I would like to see what it looks like *as if* I were dead, listening to what people are saying." '*As if* I were Dead: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' *Applying: To Derrida*, eds. John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999) 215. Referred to as '*As if* I were Dead'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> An indication of the nature of David Lehman's book *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall* of *Paul de Man* is the reference on his acknowledgement page to "professors, students, writers and critics who allowed me to interview them, in some cases on condition of anonymity to protect them from the wrath of their academic adversaries." This adds a frisson of daring to Lehman's book but is also an indication of its journalistic rather than academic nature. The reader is left with the impression that these anonymous sources are risking their careers by talking to Lehman. This is the image Derrida was referring to when he spoke about the "mafia" associated with deconstruction (p. 207 above).

conversations shows a certain relation between the two. Weber informed Derrida of de Graef's discovery and his desire that Weber should ask Derrida's "advice." However, this information was not confined to the three of them. Derrida goes on,

[b]ut - to an extent under conditions, and in a form that I still today do not know

- he has already communicated, by that time, his research and discovery, as well

as his desire to make them public, to several persons in the United States, notably

at Yale. ('Like the Sound' 597)

It is, therefore, only a matter of time before these articles become public knowledge. Derrida and those who took part in the Tuscaloosa conference in October of that year have been characterised as a group engaged in "damage control."<sup>34</sup> Here Derrida is caught in the bind of responding too quickly, which not only would go against everything he has written up to this point but would also appear to pre-empt others' reactions as if he had a right before all others to make his opinions on the matter known. He shows how that right was conferred upon him in the phonecall from *Critical Inquiry* when he was told by "a friendly voice... 'it has to be you, we thought that it was up to you to do this before anyone else'" ('Like the Sound' 596). On the other hand, if Derrida had not responded by circulating photocopies of the articles he had received it would look like he was trying to limit them to selected readers, that is, to censor them. His response would always be inadequate or too adequate, which is the same thing.

<sup>34</sup> Jon Wiener, 'Deconstructing de Man,' *The Nation* 9 Jan 1988: 24. Referred to as Wiener. "In late October, Jacques Derrida, the renowned French philosopher and literary theorist who founded deconstruction, brought copies [of de Man's articles] to the United States to a meeting of deconstructionists. At this conference, held in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, in late October and attended by some twenty persons, they discussed how to handle the material. Critics of the school describe this meeting as an exercise in 'damage control'." (According to Derrida this discussion took place on October 10<sup>th</sup>.) Roger Kimball reprises this phrase in *Tenured Radicals* referring to the Tuscaloosa "summit" meeting "convened to examine copies of the offending articles and decide on a policy of what many writers have subsequently termed 'damage control'" (Kimball 98). Neither the "critics" nor the "many writers" are named.

For Derrida, to not spend time with de Man's writing would be to respond to de Man's injustice towards Jews with further injustice which is why, in the knowledge of how he will be received, he writes "[b]ut one must have the courage to answer injustice with justice" ('Like the Sound' 623). (Derrida's demonstration of the link between deconstruction and justice in a paper given in response to the negative attitudes of the time is examined below.) In all justice Derrida could not have written his response differently. Neither could he have written it for the press. There is a sense that despite the controversy's origins in the press, the nature of the press does not lend itself as a forum in which writers can best respond to de Man's journalism. (We are reminded here of Derrida's subsequent question "Can one speak seriously of the press in the press? Yes and no, in contraband." (The Other Heading 97).) Thus, Werner Hamacher, eventual co-editor of the Responses book and its companion volume of de Man's wartime articles, can say to Jon Wiener, "I don't think this is a matter for journalists and newspapers" (Wiener 24). On one level it obviously and overwhelmingly is a matter for journalists and newspapers, but that does not mean that it can take place in the public press in its current manifestation which is why Derrida says both yes and no. The whole event from beginning to end is all about newspapers and not being able to address it in newspapers is an indication both of the failings of that medium and of those professorjournalists who choose to write in it.

Another critic who published widely-read but irresponsible pieces on the de Man affair was David Lehman who wrote a piece on it for *Newsweek* and for the *Los Angles Times Book Review* early in 1988. Not only that but Lehman subsequently wrote a book, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man.*<sup>35</sup> This book is aimed at making the "pernicious" phenomenon of deconstruction "intelligible to the common reader." Lehman sees the de Man debate as "the most significant academic controversy of our period," but if

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> David Lehman, Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man (New York: Poseidon Press, 1991). Referred to as Signs of the Times.

that is the case it is Lehman's goal not to use that controversy as a way forward but as a weapon with which to kill off deconstruction.<sup>36</sup> He had already signalled as much in his press articles of 1988. Both of them end in the hope that deconstruction will be destroyed as a theory under the weight of its scandal:

How peculiar and how poetically just it would be if so anti-biographical a theory of literature should be vanquished by the discovery of a ruinous biographical fact.<sup>37</sup>

Opponents of deconstruction think the movement is finished. As one Ivy League professor gleefully exclaims, "deconstruction turned out to be the thousand-year Reich that lasted 12 years." What next? Berkeley professor Frederick Crews sees the rise to the "new militant cultural materialism of the left." That school prescribes the study of books not because of their moral or esthetic value but because they permit the professor to advance a political, often Marxist agenda. Crews contends that there is more than a trace of deconstruction in "the new historicism" – which is one reason traditional humanists hope that it, too, will self-deconstruct in the wake of the de Man disgrace.<sup>38</sup>

This reference to deconstruction as the "thousand-year Reich" is printed above a photograph of a Nazi rally replete with Swastikas and the caption "Anti-intellectuals: Nazis on the march." The unremarked association of deconstruction with both left- and right-wing politics is echoed in reverse in Lehman's book where he finds that

[o]ne of the curious things about the resistance to deconstruction in the United States is that it unites critics from both ends of the political spectrum. Leftists who regard literature and criticism as potential agents for social change, contend that the purer forms of deconstruction promote quiescence not activism...None of this brings any comfort to literary traditionalists [who] detect [in deconstruction] the impulse to undermine institutions and ideas by asserting that they undermine themselves. (*Signs of the Times* 79)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Signs of the Times, Acknowledgements.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> David Lehman, 'The (de) Man Who Put the Con in Deconstruction,' Los Angeles Times Book Review 13 Mar. 1988: Endpapers.

 <sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> David Lehman, 'Deconstructing de Man's Life: An academic idol falls into disgrace' Newsweek 15
 Feb. 1988: 54

As always deconstruction proves impossible to position. It is both *on* the left and the right and rejected *by* the left and the right.

Lehman appears to believe that he is delivering a death blow to deconstruction when he charges it with "[problematizing] concepts without proposing anything new to take its [sic] place" (Signs of the Times 78). Derrida would probably have no problem with this characterisation of deconstruction. He has never promoted it as a manifesto or programme to replace that which it "problematizes." Similarly, in the course of considering the de Man case and the rôle of press-writers such as himself in it, Lehman seems to think that it is enough to state that deconstruction "makes no provision for moral action" (Signs of the Times 219). One could counter that by arguing that not making provision for moral action is itself a form of moral activity. The programmes of the groups of people whom Lehman gathers under names such as "traditional humanists" or "leftists" might provide for moral action but too often the course of that action is mapped out in advance. This is the basis on which Derrida criticises the assumptions associated with identification or group-naming. Another of the claims common to all de Man's critics is that deconstruction rejects the reality of history. Lehman, for instance, states that "the deconstructionist view of the past was ably stated by automobile magnate Henry Ford: history is bunk" ('Deconstructing de Man's Life' 54). If ever there was an example of careless, bad faith journalism this must be it and it is little wonder that Derrida and others protest at this travesty of their thought. Lehman refers to his Newsweek piece (and Jon Wiener's piece in The Nation) and the reaction to it in his book but says that the objections focussed on "inflammatory statements made by Lentricchia, Mehlman and various others, identified or not" and does not mention his own "inflammatory" statements (Signs of the Times 214).

It is because deconstruction has no programme of its own, except perhaps that there should be no programme, that it has to remain attentive to history, to morality, to ethics and responsibility. If it made provision for moral action it could afford to go unthinkingly forward. This does not imply that it is paralysed nor does it bestow a non-foundational relativism on it. That its numerous critics could so clearly and unanimously assert that the practice of deconstruction allowed de Man to cut himself off from his past because he confined himself to the textual rather than the 'real' world where one's words have effects, where history takes place in the form of the deaths of Belgian Jews, could not have been lost on Derrida. He was at the centre of the maelstrom, mentioned in almost every article on de Man and singled out by the editors of *Critical Inquiry* as the one who should respond "before anyone else" ('Like the Sound' 596). It was his advice de Graef sought and his decision that the articles should be circulated. These were the events that situated Derrida at the heart of the unfolding controversy even if he did not address the issue to any great degree in the public press at least in America.

In France, two letters from Derrida were published in 'public' journals, in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* in February 1988 and in *Libération* in March 1988.<sup>39</sup> Derrida wrote to *La Quinzaine Littéraire* to protest at its use of Jon Wiener's January 1988 article in *The Nation* as the basis for the short piece entitled '*Une nouvelle affaire*.' He does not name the Wiener article but it is quite clear from what he says that *La Quinzaine Littéraire* took its information from it. Derrida's letter is quite brief and restricts itself to four points. 1. Paul de Man was not a philosopher but a literary critic and theorist. 2. The article by de Man cited in *La Quinzaine's* piece requires "cautious" [*prudente*] reading and they omitted to say that they were reproducing the quotation from an American journal. In doing this they reproduced the errors of the American article which quoted 'anti-Semitic' phrases from a de Man essay, phrases which he employed in order to condemn them. 3. Bringing in de Man's invitation to Robert Jauss to speak at Yale (Jauss, Wiener reminds his readers, was later exposed as a former

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> The letter to *Libération* could not be found so I can only comment on the one to *La Quinzaine Littéraire*.

member of the SS<sup>40</sup>) was yet another instance of La Quinzaine blindly following the American journal. Jauss had been invited to many prestigious universities and Derrida had met him at a colloquium at the Bibliothèque Nationale "surrounded by the so-called most eminent of my French colleagues." 4. The decision to publish the wartime articles of de Man in French was not a bid to discourage reading as Wiener (and La Quinzaine) had suggested but to "make such reading possible without delay and to facilitate a wide and rigorous discussion." The texts, says Derrida, merit a patient, honest and complex approach. He finishes by mentioning his own "long text" ('Like the Sound of the Sea') to be published soon.<sup>41</sup> Constrained as he is by the letter format Derrida can only use the opportunity to make specific points which indicate a lack of standards of reading and of citation. It is clear that he is suggesting that La Quinzaine conducted no primary research but was content to reproduce Wiener's bias and errors. Derrida is careful to maintain that he is faulting La Quinzaine in this particular instance only for doing what certain other journals or newspapers (journaux) do. He wrote his letter because the issue was serious, he said, and because La Quinzaine had mentioned his name twice in a short piece. Derrida maintains his distance from the press however. His letters and interviews mark his outsider status, and the two pieces gathered in The Other Heading were written for special supplements. His article for Le Monde is a selfinterview which points out the tacit assumptions of that form. In all cases he is careful not to become that hybrid creature, the professor-journalist.

He may maintain his distance but even so Derrida has to deal not only with his own shifted perception of his friend, but with the fallout from the published exchanges in some fashion.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Jon Wiener, 'Deconstructing de Man' *The Nation* 9 Jan. 1988: 22.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>41</sup> 'Lettres à la Quinzaine,' *La Quinzaine Littéraire* 16–29 Feb. 1988: 31. Translation mine. Derrida maintains his limited reaction *in* the press not caring to comment in any depth. Mention of the de Man and Heidegger controversies in the course of his 1998 interview with the *New York Times* "caused Mr. Derrida to bristle. 'Vicious,' he said, looking pained" ('In Defense' B9).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> He has been strategic in relaying his reaction. During the roundtable at the Loughborough 2001 conference, 'Life After Theory,' he spoke about how death is the test of friendship ("[de Man] was my

It cannot be fortuitous that the weight of his work since the end of the 1980s has become more explicitly concerned with politics, ethics, history and religion. He must have been somewhat shocked by the *NYT* article's cool assertion that "[c]ritics of Professor de Man have labeled deconstructionism a nihilistic philosophy that makes moral or political beliefs impossible." The article goes on to say that "Dr. Hertz, like other supporters of Dr. de Man called the nihilism charge 'foolish' and said it is based on an oversimplification of Mr. de Man's theories" ('Yale Scholar' B6).<sup>43</sup> Brushing aside charges of nihilism in this manner does nothing, of course, to undo the damage done by the introduction of the word in the first place.

Consideration of political questions was never absent from Derrida's work, but it seems that he has felt called upon to bring his (and thus deconstruction's) concerns with ethics and justice more to the fore in light of assertions such as that of the *New York Times*. After all, the waves of indifference await him also in the future, as he is only too aware in 'Biodegradables.' Responding to that insistent invitation from *Critical Inquiry*, Derrida wrote 'Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War,' its title a paraphrase of a comment by Montherlant taken from one of de Man's wartime articles. Derrida quotes the line in full early in his own piece.

When I open the newspapers and journals of today, I hear the indifference of the future rolling over them, just as one hears the sound of the sea when one holds certain seashells up to the ear. ('Like the Sound' 591)

The rôle of the press in "Paul de Man's war" is constitutive of the form that war will take according to Derrida. The war is "*declared* in newspapers, *and nowhere else*, on the subject of

friend, is my friend") and reminded his audience that he did not agree with de Man on a number of points. However, "I didn't say that in 1987 because it would have been terrible. People would have exploited it." This is arguable, though Derrida would not agree given his experiences at the time. In any case their differences in analysis and emphasis had already been documented.

<sup>43</sup> As far as the most basic care is concerned, one would be a little wary of such a brief piece when it cannot even maintain simple internal consistency, as de Man's title slides about the place. However,

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arguments made in newspapers, and nowhere else" ('Like the Sound' 591; original emphasis). If the war is declared in the newspapers and nowhere else, Derrida's contribution in the form of the two articles in *Critical Inquiry* cannot be a direct response. He is not taking part in the war on the newspapers' terms because rather than arguing with them he is discussing them as a medium. He is stopping the war in order to talk about it. In this he is being strategic, not guileless. It is Derrida who is declaring the war when he describes what is going on in the newspapers as a declaration of war. Where Derrida positions himself for the duration of this war is as self-conscious and mindful as de Man's position during his own war was naïve and opportunistic. Responding in a sustained manner in the pages of the public press might become a form of collaboration; to adapt one's argument to pre-set constraints might risk repeating the mistakes of another's history. Derrida understands that much of what was written in the press at the time contained a subtext – the ongoing problems with deconstruction. This controversy already had a history in the academy. This is why he is careful to separate out these individual instances from the press at large.

Yet, whatever one may think of the ignorance, the simplism, the sensationalist flurry full of hatred which certain American newspapers displayed in this case, we will not engage in any negative evaluation of the press *in general*. Such an evaluation belongs to a code that one must always mistrust. It is not far removed

from what we are going to talk about. ('Like the Sound' 591; original emphasis)

Derrida might not wish to criticise the press in general but his references to the press are overwhelmingly negative, especially with regard to the American press. In France, he has written for the newspapers and he has written to the newspapers but when it comes to the American press he has little to say to or in them. While acknowledging its necessity he reaches a certain aporia when faced with this institution in which he has such difficulty speaking. When Montherlant\de Man\Derrida speak of the indifference of the future rolling over newspapers and journals, each becomes prey to the irony of the future, of the way things

paranoia with regard to de Man's demotion can be put at rest as in the following two sentences he climbs once more from Mr. to Dr. to Prof.

turned out, of the way things turned out because such things are said and in such a medium – yet de Man quoted this in a newspaper while Derrida quoted it in an academic journal. David Lehman parenthetically remarked in his *Los Angeles Times* piece that "Both sides of the de Man controversy await with interest the publication next month in *Critical Inquiry* of a reported 90-page essay by Derrida, the Algerian-born Jew who founded deconstruction."<sup>44</sup> The rumours were already out: Derrida has written and written at length on the controversy but in a fashion which could never make it into the newspapers.

In Signs of the Times, Lehman recounts that early in October 1988, that is, about a year after the de Man controversy first broke out, Derrida gave his paper on the theme of friendship at Cornell. According to Lehman the large audience in attendance anticipated that there would be some mention of de Man. "What Derrida had in mind, however, was something altogether more abstract" (Signs of the Times 247) and after the lecture Lehman reports that the people around him in the audience were not favourable towards Derrida's ideas on the impossibility of friendship as it has been traditionally understood. The second half of the lecture was delivered two evenings later and, according to Lehman, only about half as many people turned up as before. Lehman notes Derrida's tone of mourning for a past coupled with a "visionary plea" towards the future of the "democracy to come" which has since emerged as one of Derrida's major concerns. If Derrida did not give his audience what they were looking for at the lectures, the more intimate seminar which took place later in the same week proved no more revealing. Lehman notes that what had been scheduled as a seminar "turned out to be an extended question and answer session" during which Derrida was directly asked about de Man.

Nervously, tentatively [a philosophy student] broached "the name of the friend who can't be named, the person of whom you do not want to speak." "Who would that be?" Derrida asked. "Paul de Man" the student said. There erupted

<sup>44</sup> David Lehman, 'The (de) Man Who Put the Con in Deconstruction,' Los Angeles Times Book Review 13 Mar. 1988: Endpapers. the sort of crowd ripple you get when propriety gives way to curiosity and somebody summons up the nerve to ask the question on everyone's mind. Derrida would have none of it . . . he cautioned the group from passing judgement on de Man. (*Signs of the Times* 251)

Lehman goes on to give more details of the exchange which concluded with general laughter in the room while Derrida remained straight-faced. It was an issue that was not going to go away for him. Less than two months later he was writing his responses to the seven critics ranged against him in *Critical Inquiry* which became 'Biodegradables: Seven Diary Fragments' in which Derrida not only takes his critics severely to task for not reading, or reading blindly, 'Like the Sound of the Sea' but meditates on the concept of obsolescence and survival, on what remains when everything is used up.<sup>45</sup> It was clear that his critics and questioners wanted to get as much use or mileage as possible out of the de Man "flap" as Lehman terms it (*Signs of the Times 252*). Lehman himself got a book and articles in the press out of it. It was on "everyone's" mind, but what form "it" took was a question Lehman does not explore. Lehman's crowd scenes in the lecture theatre and in the seminar room make Derrida look faintly ridiculous but also implies that because he was not giving the expected response (and what would that be?) by naming de Man in a lecture on friendship, by acceding to others' curiosity (what were they curious about?) he was giving no response at all. What *should* he have said? What would have sent them away 'satisfied'?<sup>46</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> Derrida begins each section of 'Biodegradables' with the date and time of writing. The first entry is "Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1988, 5 a.m." (812). His personal circumstances at the time are also recorded in 'Circumfession' where he marks that day as the one when his mother passed another milestone on her way to her death, "if I remember that December 24, 1988, when already she was hardly saying anything articulate anymore." Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 37.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>46</sup> In the book which emerged from the seminars of 1988-89, *The Politics of Friendship*, there is a chapter entitled, 'The Phantom Friend Returning (in the Name of 'Democracy').' It does not mention de Man but occupies itself with the anti-Semitic writer, Carl Schmitt. In a footnote Derrida remarks that Schmitt's prejudices should not preclude a careful reading of his work. Derrida questions why leftwing movements have an interest in Schmitt and believes that a question like this is of more value than "indolent denunciations [which] often use this disquiet and the empirically established fact of 'evil

In Lehman's opinion it was the abstract nature of Derrida's contribution on friendship that disappointed his audience. Yet he is equally dissatisfied with Derrida's later response in 'Biodegradables' which he calls an "amazing response."

Derrida came out swinging... It was a sustained rant, proceeding not by argumentation but by invective... On the one hand Derrida can badger a reader into submission. He overwhelms with the sheer rhetorical force of his writing ... To read Derrida at length, which is how he asks to be read, is to expose oneself to a mesmerist's power ... One the other hand, one cannot ignore Derrida's reliance on insult and assertion to do the work of reasoned argument. (Signs of the Times 257)

'Biodegradables' certainly pulls no punches; Derrida is quite scathing about his critics' inability to read. His criticism should be read in the context of the prefacing note from the editors which announces that this group of responses "brings to a close our presentation of this debate on Paul de Man<sup>347</sup> There is no response to Derrida's response and this is probably because Derrida was invited and urged to write 'Like the Sound' whereas his critics' responses were "unsolicited." To these he was again invited to respond. It is a point he brings up in 'Biodegradables.' It is *because* of the quality of de Man's later work that his early articles have now been republished. Many people wrote far worse things at the time (one only has to look at the other opinion pieces, caricatures and falsely attributed quotations which surround de Man's most explicitly anti-Semitic article to confirm this) but, according to Derrida, they have not been "exhumed" because "their authors did nothing else or nothing better" ('Biodegradables' 818). Other names have been forgotten but de Man's survives because of "the richness, the rigor and the fertility" of his later work ('Biodegradables' 818).

influences' as a pretext, without having anything else to say on the matter, for shirking and for deterring others from the task of reading, from the work and from the question." (*The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997) 107). I stated above that Derrida is not fastidious and his reading of those who are no doubt distasteful to him is confirmation of this together with his scorn for those who turn away.

<sup>47</sup> W. T. J. Mitchell, 'In Re: Paul de Man's War' Critical Inquiry 15 (1989) 764.

This raises the issue for Derrida of how to respond to those unsolicited critiques "dipped in venom" which are not "responses,' critical texts or discussions, but rather the documents of blinded compulsion" ('Biodegradables' 820). They would like to finish deconstruction off once and for all but only succeed in sustaining it by talking about it. "Things' don't 'biodegrade' as one might wish or believe" ('Biodegradables' 819). Derrida detracts from his critics by questioning their motivation in writing their unsolicited responses. It was not simply because Derrida was a good friend of de Man's or because they 'shared' a similar interpretative approach that he was invited to respond in *Critical Inquiry*. It was also because his is a name to be reckoned with, and it is because his writing is deemed worthy of comment that he invites this unsolicited criticism. Those who criticise him then get to make their names. He uses the term "exhuming" with regard to de Man's texts and this word is again used as he comes to consider the texts of his critics. He wonders if he should allow them to go unanswered, if by responding to them he is not ensuring their longevity as they ensure that of the discourse around deconstruction.

When someone writes a bad text or a nasty text... is he or she asking to be saved or lost? And which response, in this case, is the most generous, the most friendly, the most salutary, the most just? The response or the nonresponse? It happens that people write bad things, libels or lampoons in which they know they are wrong or do wrong, but they do so, precisely, with the sole aim of provoking a response that will make them stand out and put them on stage, even if it is to their detriment and provided that a certain visibility is thus assured. And with public visibility comes the chance to endure. (Biodegradables 821-22)

This "chance to endure" is an instinctive drive, the chance of publicity, of being remembered, of having one's name spoken when one is not there. Derrida is somewhat unworthily attributing what seems to be a trivial motivation at the root of his critics' efforts to respond to him. As if they had written their responses solely in order to have their names published alongside his, to take part in a debate which involves the big names of Derrida and de Man. They would not get "on stage" unless such names were already there. The stage only comes into existence *because* those names are there. This is an acknowledgement of his own name in

the course of a piece which is precisely about the degradation of the name, the possibility of the erosion of the name and the work, to such an extent that it is completely assimilated and, as itself, disappears. Not without a trace, however. For Derrida, the trace always remains and has a rôle in iteration and recognition. In 'Biodegradables' Derrida looks to his own future and realises that what might survive of him and his work might be nothing like what he has written. This process of reconfiguration had already begun to take place in the newspapers and criticisms of the time. His task then becomes one, not of shoring up his own name or a 'school' of deconstruction, but of attempting to ensure that what does survive is not the monstrous form of deconstruction which is depicted in the archives of the public press.

Refusing to sacrifice unavoidable complexity or a counterintuitive prescription for a nonprogrammed form of ethics, Derrida has turned his attention to more 'public' concerns. Hospitality, death, friendship, religion, justice, forgiveness, migration, lying, perjury and witnessing are some of the subjects he has written about in the course of the past fifteen years. It is a measure of the task he took on, the deconstruction of the metaphysical foundations of Western philosophy, that he is faced with questions and criticisms about the potential of deconstruction for nihilism and anarchy. He has tried to keep deconstruction 'empty,' that is, he has attempted in all his writing to avoid making it into a system that replaces that which it queries. Derrida has variously connected deconstruction with poverty, weakness, and powerlessness and believes that it is in these 'forms' that it will survive.<sup>48</sup> Such a survival,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> I noted Derrida's description of deconstruction as "a poor thing" at the end of Chapter 3 ('Unreconstructed Deconstructionist,' Interview with Jacques Derrida, *Sunday Tribune* [Dublin]16 Feb. 1997: 7) and he has employed figures of weakness and powerlessness in other places also.

<sup>&</sup>quot;I'd like to go back to what you [Maurizio Ferraris] said earlier about deconstruction as thought even weaker than so-called 'weak thought.' I think it's true, in a certain sense. If 'weak' implies liberal relativism, then no, certainly not; but if it implies a certain disarming quality in one's relation to the other, then yes, in that sense yes: in a great number of my texts you will find a discourse on weakness. A weakness that can transform itself into the greatest strength" (Secret 63).

however, might not ensure the endurance of the term 'deconstruction' or even Derrida's own name. If anything the legacy will be secured by the elision of the name or the word which is why Derrida spends much time considering the ghost, the remainder and the difference between the biodegradable and what resists assimilation.

In certain circumstances, however, the name of deconstruction cannot be effaced. Obviously it is still spoken about, criticised by name and asked about, and I will spend the rest of this chapter examining Derrida's reaction to these situations. In other circumstances, however, Derrida *introduces* the word into his pronouncements. This invariably occurs when he is discussing the university.

## iii. This monster I acknowledge

In the course of the career of deconstruction, Derrida has seen it become systematised and institutionalised as others absorbed his work, made deductions about what deconstruction might 'be,' and used that as the basis for their own interpretations. This tended to 'fill' deconstruction up and made an identifiable structure of it. On the one hand, much of Derrida's work has been occupied with offsetting or offloading what others have put into deconstruction. In trying to keep it empty his own career has become full, occupied, a response and responsible. The de Man 'affair' was an extreme case of deconstruction being filled with harmful suppositions which Derrida strove to undo. It was the culmination and

"I have the same feeling as [Richard] Rorty in the sense that deconstruction, in the manner in which it is utilized and put to work, is always a highly unstable and almost *empty* motif" ('Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism' 85). Emphasis added.

"There is a point at which we are all powerless. Deconstruction . . . is not a tool or technical device for mastering texts or mastering a situation or mastering anything; it's, on the contrary, the memory of some powerlessness." 'A Discussion with Jacques Derrida,' *The Writing Instructor* (Fall 1989/Winter 1990) 18.

"What is deconstruction? nothing of course!" 'Letter to a Japanese Friend,' A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 275.

some would say the final straw for deconstruction. On the other hand, as Derrida pointed out in 'Biodegradables,' the critics of deconstruction have sustained it by continuing to attack it and he regards these attacks as a symptom of their unacknowledged consciousness that there is something in his work that cannot be ignored. What Derrida sees as persistent misreading of his work has allowed him the space to respond and has assured the survival and continuation of that work.

Although it would be wrong to argue that Derrida's more recent work is solely a response to the de Man controversy, it would be equally wrong to believe that when the editors of Critical Inquiry closed the book on it that it could be cauterised or sutured without leaving the trace of a scar. When, in 'Like the Sound of the Sea,' Derrida asks, "What is happening?" (593) it is an acknowledgement of the seismic shifts taking place within a loose community of those who had read and written about deconstruction. For some it was confirmation of their suspicions of what deconstruction might mean and what its political affiliations might be. The de Man controversy seemed tailor-made, almost created, to confirm something they always knew but could not say. The opportunity given to people such as Walter Kendrick and David Lehman to write pieces in the public press allowed them the irresponsibility to opine in so many words (but also in so few words) that there had always been something lurking in the deconstructive undergrowth, a history, a bad secret which, once revealed would cause deconstruction to crumble. For others it was an opportunity to take seriously the accusations of immorality or amorality attributed to deconstruction. It is evident from his references that at the time of the de Man controversy Derrida was aware of what was said in the public press about deconstruction and his rôle as "the movement's originator," as David Lehman named him.<sup>49</sup> By "movement" Lehman meant 'school of thought' and Derrida would not accept this position as head of a school. However, it is an inadvertently apt way of describing one aspect

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>49</sup> David Lehman, 'The (de) Man Who Put the Con in Deconstruction' Los Angeles Times Book Review 13 Mar. 1988: Endpapers.

of Derrida's work, which is his interest in the idea of movement as opposed to origin or source and how these two concepts work on each other. Once one begins to take this process into account one can no longer refer to an unchanged and unchanging "originator." At the same time one cannot just speak of movement without reference to some idea of an originator. One *could* therefore say that there is such a thing as a deconstructive movement but only if one takes all senses of the word into consideration.

In a paper given in California in 1987 wherein he delineates the activity of two types of jetty, Derrida draws an analogy to describe the forms that deconstruction has assumed.<sup>50</sup> One form, the "destabilizing" or "devastating" jetty, has echoes of the kind of movement which occurs in Derrida's own work: "the force of a movement which throws something or throws itself (*jette* or *se jette*) forwards and backwards at the same time." The other form is that of the "*stating*" jetty which "proceeds by predicative clauses, reassures with assertory statements . . . such as 'this is that': for example, deconstruction is this or that" ('Truisms' 84). Although Derrida exercises caution when approaching the steady jetty he does not reject it outright because he would subscribe to certain statements made from its shelter, for instance, that deconstruction "is neither a school nor a method" ('Truisms' 85). This jetty becomes perversely dangerous when it is most calm, that is, when statements such as these are made from the harbour of a school. Hence the necessity for the destabilising jetty which never rests which is consistent with his assertion that "[deconstruction] is what happens" ('Truisms' 85).

In the course of the de Man controversy Derrida became, or assumed the rôle of, spokesman for the cause of deconstruction. This, despite his own earlier misgivings about the crystallisation or petrifaction associated with any word which takes on emblematic status. 'Deconstruction' has been knocked about so much it has become tough, ugly and difficult to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> 'Some Statements and Truisms About Neologisms, Newisms, Postisms, Parasitisms, and Other Small Seismisms,' *The States of "Theory,"* ed, David Carroll. Referred to as 'Truisms.'

pronounce.<sup>51</sup> Yet pronounce it he does in the course of his responses to the revelations about de Man's work and to the critical reactions of others. In doing that, Derrida is renewing his commitment to a word which has not only acted as a *pharmakon* in his own career, but led him to choose the course that career would take.

There was a moment for Derrida when he publicly professed his commitment to deconstruction while simultaneously almost apologising for it. This occurred, significantly and ironically, at the mid-point of his career, in the heart of the French university establishment and at a moment when he showed a certain amount of fastidious distaste for the fortunes of the word 'deconstruction.' This instance of fastidiousness on Derrida's part arose out of the specific circumstances.<sup>52</sup> During his thesis defence at the Sorbonne in 1980 Derrida traced his career from a point when he took the decision to follow a certain path (that of the thesis) twenty-five years previously, and his subsequent decision to move away from that "course that was taken to be more or less natural."<sup>53</sup> While protesting that his description of the intervening twenty-five years as "peculiar" has less to do with his own "personal history" than with "the history of philosophy and of French philosophical institutions" his auditors and readers cannot of course help but be reminded of the peculiarity of the events that have surrounded his career. When Derrida refers to "divergences and... marginalization"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Derrida referred to deconstruction as "an ugly and difficult word" in the course of a public interview at Oxford in 1992. "Talking Liberties": Jacques Derrida's interview with Alan Montefiore, 'Derrida & Education, eds. Gert J. J. Biesta and Denise Egéa Kuehne (London: Routledge, 2001) 177. In his 'Letter to a Japanese Friend' he uses similar terms. "I do not think... that it is a good word [un bon mot]. It is certainly not elegant [beau]. It has definitely been of service in a highly determined situation." A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 275.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> For an account of Derrida's difficult relationship with the Sorbonne, see Geoffrey Bennington, 'Curriculum Vitae' in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 331-32.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations,' *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 35. Referred to as 'Punctuations.'

('Punctuations' 35) with regard to his own career he means by this his decision not to follow the classical path of scholarship as outlined by the French institution. In other words his research led him to a point where he could not continue with a thesis which "was one of the essential parts of the system that was under deconstructive questioning" ('Punctuations' 42). Derrida seems to have taken a unilateral decision on this. It is possible that his knowledge of the French system led him to believe that he would be rejected by an institution which he was putting into question. But added to this was his belief in the importance of his work, the seriousness with which he took it and an implicit self-confidence which allowed him to do without institutional legitimation. This was a period of "retreat [and] solitude" for him ('Punctuations' 41). Although Derrida mentions the political events of 1968 and the death of Jean Hyppolite (his supervisor) as significant, it is to deconstruction that he attributes "the end of a certain type of membership of the university" ('Punctuations' 44) in the same year.

Certainly, from the first day of my arrival in France this membership had not been simple, but it was during these years [1958-68] no doubt that I came to understand better to what extent the necessity of deconstruction (I use this word for the sake of rapid convenience, though it is a word I have never liked and one whose fortune has disagreeably surprised me) was not primarily a matter of philosophical contents, themes or theses, philosophemes, poems, theologemes or ideologemes, but especially and inseparably meaningful frames, institutional structures, pedagogical or rhetorical norms, the possibilities of law, of authority, of evaluation, and of representation in terms of its very market. ('Punctuations' 44-5)

This is an extraordinary and revealing statement in terms of the push and pull movement enacted between Derrida and deconstruction and is critical in his relationship with his 'monster.' Here, at the moment he acknowledges the necessary and crucial effect his word was having on his career, he simultaneously pushes it away. He does not like the word and what has happened to it has been a "disagreeable" surprise. Yet he names that word as the fundamental and foundational element of his work and his career. In one sentence Derrida has summarised and summarily dismissed his uneasy relationship with a word which led him into a troubled relationship with the institution. This word which he has "never liked" is one which he cannot erase and, more than twenty years later, it is the word which is most associated with his name. He tries to be rid of it in an apologetic parenthesis which diminishes it to the status of a convenience, something which has to suffice for want of time but which is somehow lacking. Yet he surrounds this aside with an article of faith which affirms the "necessity" of deconstruction. The brackets seem to insert a division between the word and the 'thing,' sign and referent. Derrida acknowledges the necessity of deconstruction to his work – it *is* his work – yet he dislikes the word. He accepts what it stands for but not the word. But what does deconstruction stand for? What is its referent? Although one could argue that deconstruction and box for a lot, having been associated with a number of 'events,' Derrida sees it as being "for essential reasons... meaningless and without reference" ('Remarks on Deconstruction? Especially given Derrida's refusal to attach anything like a method, programme or school to it? One can't, of course, as is clear in Derrida's conscious and consistently contradictory attitude to it. Like it or not, it is something which he acknowledges as his with the responsibility of paternity – or at least affiliation – which that entails.

There are other responsibilities emanating from his commitment to the deconstructive form of questioning or analysis. Derrida asserts the importance to him (and it is a responsibility he bestows on "an intellectual" in general) of his relations not only with the university – which might have been his sole concern if he had adhered to the "more or less natural" course of an academic career – but with other institutions and their representations.

By saying that these first twenty-five years have been peculiar, I am not first thinking, then, of this personal history or even of the paths my own work has taken... but also and especially, more and more indeed, through a play of divergences and of marginalization, in an increasing and at times sheer isolation, whether as regards contents, positions, let us just say 'theses,' or whether more especially as regards ways of proceeding, socio-institutional practices, a certain style of writing as well as – regardless of the cost, and today this amounts to a great deal – of relations with the university milieu, with cultural, political, editorial, journalistic representations, there where, today, it seems to me are

located some of the most serious, the most pressing, and the most obscure responsibilities facing an intellectual. ('Punctuations' 35-6)

Is it representations of the university or of the work carried out (or at least represented as being carried out) within the university (such as deconstruction) by these others which Derrida feels need attention? Such considerations are not only "some of the most serious, the most pressing" but, one could argue, are what lead Derrida to assign 'intellectual' as opposed to 'academic' to the person who would take on such a responsibility. The increasingly public nature of Derrida's work was one of the factors which ensured that his relationship with the university could never be an easy one.

Deconstruction in every meaning of the word happened to Derrida, and he had to decide whether to take it or leave it. To a certain extent, like the choice about his thesis, the decision was already in the dilemma. If Derrida had decided to continue along the normal route for a thesis, it would not have been his thesis. Similarly, if Derrida had turned away from deconstruction he would have turned from the nature of his relationship with the institution, with all the institutions with which he concerns himself. If, as he half-jokingly puts it, he deconstructs "all the time" he could not do otherwise and he could not be otherwise.<sup>54</sup> He would not be Derrida. This is not the quasi-mystical identification of the thinker with his thought which it is one of deconstruction's tasks to undo, yet it is impossible to think Derrida is attacked he defends himself in deconstructive terms. When has Derrida's work not been deconstructive? It is this which Derrida acknowledges in his 1980 thesis defence and in other discussions. Speaking in Glasgow in 1986, he associates deconstruction with the thinking of

the dream beyond Necessity [that] is the plenitude which wouldn't be death. This combination of dream and necessity explains the indefatigable drive for deconstruction... That's the way I live, that's my environment, and for some

<sup>54</sup> Derrida said this in the course of his interview with Dinitia Smith. 'Philosopher Gamely In Defense Of His Ideas,' *New York Times* 30 May 1998: B7-9.

years I obeyed that drive... I think this is valid for everybody, and at the same time a very idiomatic and limited answer.<sup>55</sup>

Others' "indefatigable drives" may take names other than deconstruction and there is a hint in his use of the past tense that for Derrida too this drive might take another name. The drive itself remains because it is the force of desire and to fulfil it would be death.<sup>56</sup> Having named deconstruction as his "indefatigable drive" Derrida rebuffs it in the next breath, on the next page. In a parenthetical aside to "an answer to a question which hasn't been cited," that is, the answer which begins, "Deconstruction is not a method . . ." he downgrades it again to a convenience, saying, "we should say deconstructions (I don't like this word, as I have often said, but it saves time)" ('Some Questions and Responses' 262).

Derrida frequently uses the opportunity of addressing a group to restate this negative definition of what deconstruction might be. Even when, as in this case, he acknowledges that he has not been asked 'what is deconstruction?' he believes that he should repeat his message insisting yet again on talking about it while simultaneously declaring his dislike for the word. The term is a convenience used when short of time; this is one reason why Derrida so frequently resorts to it in the context of discussions with an audience but uses it differently and more sparingly in prepared texts. Why can it be used to save time? What is it a substitute for, or a condensed form of? Each time Derrida refers to 'deconstruction' as a convenience he is referring to everything that it stands for, that is, apparently, to all his own work, even though deconstruction has no referent as such. It is only convenient because 'we' know that it is assuming a metonymical rôle. This is something Derrida is assured of and yet he cannot resist reminding his audience, "You know the programme; it cannot be applied because

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>55</sup> 'Some Questions and Responses,' *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between language and literature* eds. Nigel Fabb, Derek Attridge, Alan Durant and Colin MacCabe (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987) 261. Referred to as 'Some Questions and Responses.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>56</sup> In the same year, speaking at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, Derrida says, "Deconstruction is life to me, so it is survival in itself." 'On Colleges and Philosophy,' *ICA Documents 4 & 5: Postmodernism* (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1986) 69.

deconstruction is not a doctrine; it is not a method, nor is it a set of tools" ('As *if* I were Dead' 217). The programme is that deconstruction is not a programme; 'we' all know this but need to be reminded of it, as do the readers of the publication which will emanate from this discussion at a roundtable, the future readers who haunt all such proceedings. Here, during this question and answer session, Derrida is looking beyond his immediate audience, answering questions which have not actually been asked in a gesture which acknowledges this ongoing necessity to address an absent audience, his future and past readers. Every time he asserts that deconstruction "is not a set of rules or tools" ('As *if* I were Dead' 217), Derrida is responding to those who say that this is what deconstruction *is*, that it can be learned and applied to an infinite number of texts and because it can be learned and applied it will always be recognisable as deconstruction. The only thing recognisable about deconstruction, says Derrida, is that it cannot be recognised as such.

So, if you want to 'do deconstruction' – 'you know, the kind of thing Derrida does' – then you have to perform something new, in your own language, in your own singular situation. ('*As if* I were Dead' 217-18)

Perhaps, then, these new performances will not announce themselves as deconstructive and will only be recognised as such to the extent that they incorporate a concern with the few 'themes' which Derrida associates with deconstruction: the concept of a 'perhaps,' justice, and what he calls 'democracy to come.' Years previously, in what was billed as Derrida's first interview in English, he said, "I think that deconstruction, to the extent that it's of some interest, must first insinuate itself everywhere, but not become a method or a school."<sup>57</sup> To "insinuate" itself denotes a stealthy rôle for deconstruction, an unmarked and unremarked entry for the purposes of carrying out its work. As soon as its cover is blown, as soon as

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>57</sup> Imre Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 14. (Derrida's first English interview is also claimed by James Kearns and Ken Newton who interviewed him in Edinburgh in 1980. *Literary Review* 14 (Apr.\May 1980): 21-2.) In his interview with Richard Kearney, Derrida speaks of the "*surreptitious* deconstruction of the Greek *logos* [which] is at work from the very origin of our Western tradition." (Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with contemporary Continental Thinkers* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 117. Emphasis added.

someone points it out as a 'deconstructive' text, the work becomes swamped with all the assumptions which now – even more than in 1986 when Derrida made that remark – bedevil it. $^{58}$ 

It started out fairly lightly, used sparingly but portentously to describe a "'rationality' [which] no longer issues from a logos, [which] inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos."59 Used early on in Of Grammatology, it is a gesture of destruction and emptying out, of movement directed at that which has been left stagnant for too long. Derrida uses 'deconstruction' throughout Of Grammatology but less so in the second, more illustrative part of the book, where one could say he is doing deconstruction rather than talking about it, although these two operations are not necessarily mutually exclusive. (Derrida could later write texts without mentioning the word 'deconstruction' while 'doing' it because his readers would of course recognise the form his work takes. He no longer needs to point out that what he is doing is deconstruction. In texts where he is talking about it, in interviews, for instance, he is also 'doing' it.) In this early text, one of the foundation stones of a body of work which questions notions of foundation, terms such as 'trace' and 'supplement' are granted far more attention. Nevertheless, there are hints at the potential for a large scale project as Derrida talks about "the work of deconstruction" (OG 14), "an epoch whose meaning we must deconstruct" (OG 19), "the movements of deconstruction ... the enterprise of deconstruction" (OG 24), "deconstructing this tradition [of writing]" (OG 37). Once Derrida explains what he means by 'writing,' and speaks about "the de-construction of the greatest totality" (OG 46), he is positing a potentially infinite project.

<sup>58</sup> Gayatri Spivak uses 'insinuate' with regard the supplement in her translation of *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). "[The supplement] adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void" (145).

<sup>59</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) 10. Referred to as *OG*.

'Deconstruction' was adopted and adapted because, as a term it was 'new' (although Derrida did explain that it was influenced by Heidegger's destruktion and abbau and that it has an entry in the Littre<sup>60</sup>) and seemed to contain the other non-conceptual concepts which he outlined in his early works, 'trace,' supplément, and différance. These words, although widely interpreted, analysed and used, never 'caught on' in the way deconstruction as a 'school' or 'movement' did. If deconstruction had a hook it was its association with structuralism highlighted in the 1966 paper 'Structure, Sign, and Play,' which in its reading of its forebears announces the work to be done.<sup>61</sup> Having asserted that Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger "are trapped in a kind of circle" ('Structure, Sign, and Play' 280), Derrida goes on to brief his audience on what lies ahead. "It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. A problem of economy and strategy" ('Structure, Sign, and Play' 282). Opening his paper by trailing an "event" whose implications, as embodied in the work of Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, were not pushed far enough, Derrida closes with a birth, the birth of a monster whose species is unknown. Others were intrigued by this monster; they embraced it for its novelty and potential, they welcomed it and attempted to assimilate it but above all they named it.<sup>62</sup> Derrida himself played his own part in shaping the identity of the monster in the 1971 'Positions' interview where he spoke about deconstruction in terms of the "overturning" and "displacement" of texts. He does this twice in the course of the interview.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>60</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend,' *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 270-71.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>61</sup> Jacques Derrida 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 278-293. Referred to as 'Structure, Sign, and Play.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>62</sup> It is probably not fortuitous that in his work on hospitality Derrida makes a case for the stranger who should *not* be assimilated. It is possible that he is thinking not only of the difficulties of contemporary migration or of his own early migration, but of the reception accorded to his work.

On the one hand, we must traverse a phase of *overturning*... the word *phase* is perhaps not the most rigorous one. It is not a question of a chronological phase... and on the other hand – to remain in this phase is still to operate on the terrain of and from within the deconstructed system. By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new "concept," a concept that can no longer be, and could never be, included in the previous regime.

The concept of matter must be marked twice (the others too): in the deconstructed field – this is the phase of overturning – and in the deconstructing text, outside the oppositions in which it has been caught... By means of the play of this interval between the two marks, one can operate both an overturning deconstruction and a positively displacing, transgressive, deconstruction.<sup>63</sup>

While Derrida saw this double reading as necessary but merely preliminary, it was precisely what was adopted and identified with what came to be called deconstruction. In 1985, he later distances himself from this limited form of criticism.

There's the double gesture which has become – and this I regret – a kind of procedural or methodological schema which consists in saying basically what I once ventured very hastily in *Positions*... It's a kind of formula ... I believe that what was indicated in this double gesture is necessary ... [But it is] already insufficient. ('Deconstruction in America' 7)

With the use and dissemination of the term 'deconstruction' and its adaptation as a reading method (that is, deconstruction in the form of the double gesture of overturning and displacing), Derrida's name was carried beyond the limited audience who would customarily have formed the readership for a writer of his ilk who came from the European philosophical tradition. Derrida's work in the 1960s and early 70s seemed to accord with both close critical reading (inherited from the practices of New Criticism) *and* with those in the academy who were exploring the possibility of subverting traditional hierarchy, such as those with a

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Derrida, Positions (London: Athlone Press, 1987) 41-2, 65-66.

feminist or Marxist outlook. It seemed to offer a 'method' that combined two impulses which might otherwise have appeared to be at odds with each other. Readers took the method and the name and made off with it. As his popularity grew, Derrida had to fend for his own work which also went under the name but was drawn from a different tradition to that of his contemporaries in literature or philosophy departments in the United States. Derrida's work was not necessarily taken up by 'English' departments as such. Quite often his influence was to be found in Departments of Comparative Literature whose members would be familiar with both Anglophone and Francophone literature, in other words in 'centres' peopled by those who had already begun to redraw departmental and canonical barriers and therefore had manifested an interest in institutional change.

Derrida admits that he does not understand much of what goes on under the name 'deconstruction' in such departments, yet as its 'father' he cannot disinherit it and is "fascinated" by it.<sup>64</sup> He is also uncomfortable with some texts which assume the name. He is thus caught between two conflicting movements which become (at least) doubled when we begin to think of his reaction to those movements. Deconstruction is 'his,' yet in the hands of others it becomes something that might not be recognised as deconstruction except for the attached label. In April 1989 Peggy Kamuf asked Derrida about his use of the word as a possible means towards "the process of its exhaustion" and while Derrida goes some way

<sup>64</sup> Derrida has spoken about his "incomprehension with regard to what happens in the United States, [concerning] what takes place within American deconstructionism" 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism,' *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London: Routledge, 1996) 77. In his interview with Imre Salusinszky he sketches out the problem with his reception in the United States. "Sometimes, in the appropriation or the domestication or the adaptation of what I'm saying to other corpora, which I don't know very well – for instance, the main tradition of English literature . . . it's difficult for me to understand what is going on . . . Of course, it's a fascinating experience, but it's a dangerous experience, because it distracts me from my 'own' (so to speak) 'path'" *Criticism in Society* 3-4. towards affirming the possibility for exhaustion, he also declares his loyalty. The date of the exchange should indicate the reasons for the strength of his words.

I have no particular attachment to the word, it's a strange word, which I used a long time ago without being conscious that it could, or it would, have some privilege in the chain of other words... in the text I was *then* publishing... It gets stranger and stranger for me all the time... Finally, *now*, I love it. I didn't at the beginning; *now* I think *because* of the aggressivity it sometimes provokes, it's not a bad theoretical fetish. But I know – and I hope – it will be, and it has already been replaced. Too, perhaps, it will be totally erased [sic].<sup>65</sup>

In the course of this improvised answer Derrida runs the gamut of his affiliation to the word. By emphasising his juxtaposition of "then" and "now" I wish to highlight his strategic embrace of the word 'deconstruction' in light of the aggression it provokes. It is *because* of the negative reaction to it that Derrida holds on to it and continues using it. He looks to a future when it will be replaced and possibly "totally erased" yet it is difficult to envisage how that could be. If it was to be erased it would not be at a time of controversy; the least likely time for the erasure of deconstruction would be when that demise is announced by its opponents.

In times of trouble, such as in 1988 and 1989, Derrida speaks for and about deconstruction and it might appear that in doing this he is taking time out from his 'real' work. That this is hardly the case is borne out by the kind of work Derrida produced on foot of such upheavals. One of his most important texts which marked the beginning of a more overt concern with broader socio-political questions played out in institutions which are not the university (such as the courts, the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation, globalisation – what Derrida calls 'mondialisation' – the media, Europe and so on) was written as a direct result of the Paul de Man and Heidegger 'affairs.' In 1989 he delivered a seminal paper at a conference called

<sup>65</sup> 'A Discussion with Jacques Derrida,' *The Writing Instructor* (Fall 1989\Winter 1990) 7-8; emphasis added.

'Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice.'<sup>66</sup> The date is, as always, relevant and the paper seems to commit Derrida once more to the term 'deconstruction' which he uses throughout in a sense which is almost defiant in the face of his critics. Ten years after giving that paper Derrida marks the specific connection between it and the ongoing trials of deconstruction.

When a number of ethical and judicial questions impacted on deconstruction, I felt summoned to respond to such questions as I did at the "Possibility of Justice" conference, which for me was a very memorable, precious occasion.<sup>67</sup>

It was at this conference that Derrida performed the task he had set de Man's critics, which was to "have the courage to answer injustice with justice" ('Like the Sound' 623). He brazens it out and pushes this even further announcing that "[d]econstruction is justice" ('Force of Law' 15). As ever, the few startling words take on a significance which overshadows much of what Derrida has to say in the rest of the paper and even the second part given six months later at a conference called 'Nazism and the 'Final Solution': Probing the Limits of Representation' where Derrida presents an intricate, finely nuanced reading of Walter Benjamin's Critique of Violence which, as he acknowledges, verges on the borders of a dangerous anachronism. Paul de Man is not named in either part of the paper. This would have distracted any reading of what Derrida is doing here from the very issues that the de Man controversy brought up. In other words, naming de Man would have distracted from what Derrida regarded as the real issues that emerged from the de Man debate. What Derrida is doing here, especially in his reading of Benjamin as he threads his way through a text which has elements of a "Judeo-German' psyche" ('Force of Law' 65) is reminding his audience yet again that things are more complex, that just because Benjamin was Jewish or just because we now read him in light of his personal history does not mean that what he wrote bore nothing of "a certain German patriotism, often a German nationalism, and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>66</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation of Authority," *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, eds. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, David Gray Carlson (New York: Routledge, 1991) 15. Referred to as 'Force of Law.'

<sup>67 &#</sup>x27;An Interview with Jacques Derrida' www.cardozo.net\life\fall1998\derrida\ p.1.

sometimes even a German militarism" ('Force of Law' 66). In risking - and being quite conscious of - his own anachronism (because Benjamin's work was published in 1921), Derrida warns others of their anachronistic reading. What he is doing here is reading by example and although it could be argued that the second part of the paper at least might be directed more at his critics in the 'Heidegger affair,' it cannot be read - coupled as it is with the Cardozo part - by putting to one side one's knowledge of what was said about deconstruction during the throes of both the de Man and Heidegger controversies of the previous year. At the end of the paper Derrida is careful to mark the distinction between "Benjaminian 'destruction' or Heideggarian 'Destruktion'" and the "deconstructive affirmation that has guided me tonight in this reading" ('Force of Law' 63). Aware of the impact of the closing line, anxious about what people will take away with them, Derrida's final words are a reproach not only to the kind of closing lines written by critics such as David Lehman (recall his account that the "traditional humanists hope that ['new historicism' which holds more than a trace of deconstruction] will self-deconstruct in the wake of the de Man disgrace" at the end of his Newsweek piece), but to de Man himself who, in 1941, rounded off his most explicitly anti-Semitic article by asserting that the creation of a Jewish colony isolated from Europe would not result in deplorable consequences for Western literary life.68 Beware the conclusions you draw is Derrida's warning, not only the assumptions born of hastiness but the literal conclusions with which one closes one's text.

Whatever about the fragility of the de Manian shadow which haunts the second part of 'Force of Law' there is little doubt that it has a more material existence in the first part of the piece

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>68</sup> "En plus, on voit donc qu'une solution du problème juif qui viserait à la création d'une colonie juive isolée de l'Europe, n'entraînerait pas, pour la vie littéraire de l'Occident, de conséquences déplorables." 'Les Juifs dans la Littérature actuelle,' *Le Soir* 4 Mar. 1941, *Paul de Man, Wartime Journalism, 1939-43*, eds. Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz and Thomas Keenan (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989) 45.

where Derrida stoutly defends deconstruction against the charge that it neglects to consider the theme of justice. Thus he sets his argument.

Do the so-called deconstructionists have anything to say about justice . . . Why, basically, do they speak of it so little? . . . Isn't it because, as certain people suspect, deconstruction doesn't in itself permit any just action, any just discourse on justice but instead constitutes a threat to *droit*, to law or right, and ruins the condition of the very possibility of justice? ('Force of Law' 4)

Having listened to the end, the audience will realise that Derrida has created the conditions for his argument in the form of these opening questions which appear to be a generalised synthesis of all the criticisms so recently aimed at deconstruction. These questions seem to come from elsewhere, relayed by Derrida to his listeners with a gesture towards the hospitality he is receiving from them. These are the questions you want answered, I will answer them. What he goes on to show is that deconstruction is, of course, a threat to droit, to law or right, but only on condition that one does not make justice conditional on droit, law or right. Justice is always implicated in institutions, it cannot appear without those institutions, whatever shape they may assume, and is therefore dependent upon them for its work, but it is not conditional on them; they cannot determine it, they can only provide the environment in which justice can be 'seen.' The law is deconstructible, justice is not. And, according to Derrida, it is justice which allows deconstruction to come about and indeed is "inseparable" from it ('Force of Law'15). Because there is no a place as such which justice can occupy, a pre-existing location into which justice can fit, "there is" deconstruction and justice to the extent that they are impossible. Derrida has associated deconstruction with the 'impossible' before. It is difficult, almost impossible, to go along with Derrida here, and in exploring this area he recognises that he will alienate even those who think they know what deconstruction

is.

If I were to say that I know nothing more just than what I today call deconstruction . . . I know that I wouldn't fail to surprise or shock not only the determined adversaries of said deconstruction or of what they imagine under this name but also the very people who pass for or take themselves to be its partisans or its practitioners. ('Force of Law' 21)

In saying this Derrida is marking out his own personal experience of what he calls deconstruction separate from both "adversaries" and "practitioners." At the same time he is also renewing his oblique, mediated and troubled link with both groups (clustered together under those two broad headings), taking charge once more of the word 'deconstruction' and signing his name to it. In 'Force of Law' Derrida analyses that question which the fracas over Paul de Man brought so much to the fore. How does one, in all justice, deal with the individual case within institutions which are built on the notion of groups, of inclusion and exclusion, of dividing lines which seal such groups off from each other? It is a question which, of course, plagues all realms of discourse and conflict and is not unique to arguments about deconstruction. However, because deconstruction finds its 'place' on the borders between pre-existing divisions and spends all its time talking about such divisions, it is not merely one example among many.

It would be somewhat remiss to imply that, having taken on all-comers in the course of the controversies over deconstruction, Derrida will simply accept the term without demur once the immediate ruckus has died down. In 1993 he asserts, "I have never claimed to identify myself with what may be designated by this name [deconstruction]. It has always seemed strange to me, it has always left me cold. Moreover, I have never stopped having doubts about the very identity of what is referred to by such a nickname."<sup>69</sup> Derrida's uneasiness with regard to the word deconstruction has never allowed him to embrace or reject it fully. He speaks about it frequently in terms which veer from the coldness seen here to the heated defence of it and he always marks his distance from it. He is affiliated to it but the connecting lines are not necessarily filial or paternal. When convenience is required it is convenient to describe Derrida as deconstruction's 'father' and it would be possible to draw elaborate analogies of the relationship between Derrida and his problem offspring which he has never

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>69</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Time is Out of Joint,' *Deconstruction is\in America*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: New York University Press, 1995) 15.

quite disowned. Such figurations can be, and are, used but it would be untrue to any reading of deconstruction not to insert a warning about them, not only on the grounds of their metaphoric nature but also because it is illegitimate to situate deconstruction within the legal system of paternity when its task has ever been to question such institutions. The idea of a bloodline would be foreign to deconstruction which distances itself from purity and always allows for contamination. In measuring this distance from his own work to that of Heidegger or Benjamin, Derrida says,

I am not sure that such a thing as "Deconstruction," in the singular, exists or is possible... I think that deconstructive discourses as they present themselves in their irreducible plurality participate in an impure, contaminating, negotiated, bastard and violent way in all those filiations – let's call them Judaeo-Greek to save time – of decision and the undecidable... And finally for what remains to come in deconstruction, I think that something else runs through its veins, perhaps without filiation, an entirely different blood or rather something entirely different from blood. ('Force of Law' 56)

This opens out the possibility that deconstruction has no direct or uncontaminated relationship with its so-called originator or father. When either name is under scrutiny the other will appear; would one be doing justice either to Derrida or to deconstruction if one did not mention them in each other's company? Yet if Derrida has insisted that deconstruction has always happened and was 'there' before it was named, is it not possible that it will remain after that name has been exhausted? As Derrida might say, yes and no. Perhaps the name is not yet quite exhausted, overused as it has been, because even today, according to Derrida, there is much to do under its auspices.

If anything, the work of deconstruction is all in the future. In a recent paper, Derrida takes a very firm grip on the word 'deconstruction.' No longer is he apologising for using it or glossing it as a 'convenience.' Here, in 'The future of the profession or the university without condition (thanks to the "Humanities," what *could* take place tomorrow),' Derrida can claim,

even demand, a place for deconstruction, in part because it is no longer his.<sup>70</sup> Earlier I pointed out that the more deconstruction was attacked the more Derrida took it upon himself to defend it. He did not defend the deconstruction that was attacked, that was, indeed, a stranger to him but he defended his work because, going by the same name, it became contaminated by misreading. Derrida also takes up the word in other circumstances, that is, when he feels freed enough from it to champion it without being perceived as championing himself. This was the case with 'Force of Law' which might have seemed hubristic to those who were not listening to what Derrida was saying. It seems that in this more recent paper too he is sufficiently at ease with the word to use it as a continuing source of unease.

This university without condition... should remain an ultimate place of critical resistance – and more than critical – to all the powers of dogmatic and unjust appropriation. When I say "more than critical," I have in mind "deconstructive" (so *why not* just say it directly and without wasting time?). I am referring to the right to deconstruction as an unconditional right to ask critical questions not only to the history of the concept of man, but to the history even of the notion of critique, to the form and the authority of the question. ('Future of the Profession' 25-26; emphasis added)

"So why not just say it directly" asks Derrida mimicking those who have asked direct questions about deconstruction for many years. And here, saying it directly saves time but this is not a cause for regret as it was in all those many places where Derrida sighed over having to use the word deconstruction as a literal stopgap, filling the silence on the "recording tape" which in his interviews leaves "no time to look for the right words."<sup>71</sup> In this paper deconstruction *is* the right word and takes its rightful place in the unconditional university which, as Derrida points out, "does not, in fact, exist" ('Future of the Profession' 25). It takes

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>70</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The future of the profession or the university without condition (thanks to the "Humanities" what *could take place* tomorrow),' trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 24-57. Referred to as 'Future of the Profession.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>71</sup> Jacques Derrida, '*Ja*, or the *Faux Bond* II,' trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Points* . . . *Interviews*, 1974-1994, ed. Elisabeth Weber (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 1995) 30.

place in the "law faculties or in the new Humanities capable of working on these questions of right and of law – in other words, and again *why not* say it without detour – the Humanities capable of taking on the tasks of deconstruction, beginning with the deconstruction of their own history and their own axioms" ('Future of the Profession' 26; emphasis added). In this paper he is concerned with the professions of professors, professions which exceed technoscientific knowledge.

*Philosophiam profiter* is to profess philosophy: not simply to be a philosopher, to practice or teach philosophy... but to pledge oneself, with a public promise, to devote oneself publicly, to give oneself over to philosophy, to bear witness, or even to fight for it. ('Future of the Profession' 36)

This is, of course, what Derrida is performing here. He declares himself and argues for – even fights for – the necessity for deconstruction. Weighed down as it is with all that has gone before Derrida refuses to divest himself of this word. Not only that but his pledge must be public and without delay, detour or even embarrassment.

[D]econstruction (and I am not at all embarrassed to say so and even to claim) has its privileged place in the university and in the Humanities as the place of irredentist resistance. ('Future of the Profession' 29)

One manifestation of Derrida's comfort with the discomfort that deconstruction causes is his recent acknowledgement that there *is* an element of destruction in deconstruction after all. Having for years asserted that deconstruction is affirmative (though never positive), having repeatedly stated that it is not destructive and having measured his distance from Benjamin's and Heidegger's forms of destruction Derrida persists in destabilising his word.

I use the word deconstruction 'as if' there were such a thing. Initially, this word encountered so many objections and such hostility, reproaching it with being nihilistic, destructive, negative, that I had to insist again and again that deconstruction does not mean destruction and is not negative. But perhaps this strategy was somewhat dangerous, because it is not true, there *is* destruction. In Heidegger what one might translate as 'deconstruction' is *Destruktion...* there is something destructive, not a negative destruction but in the sense that we cannot

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not destroy. So I am a little uneasy about my own insistence on the nondestructive character of deconstruction.<sup>72</sup>

Derrida is not necessarily going back on his word. On the evidence of what he saw in others' reaction to his work he believed that any mention of 'destruction' would bring down the shutters on all reading.<sup>73</sup> In other words, the time was not right to start introducing notions of destruction into deconstruction. In the years when Derrida was publishing his book on Heidegger, *Of Spirit* (published in 1987, the English translation in 1989) and '*Geschlecht* II: Heidegger's Hand' (1987) and was subsequently interviewed on Heidegger for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, the Paul de Man and Heidegger 'affairs' erupted. It was not the time to talk about the destructive element of deconstruction. In the ensuing period there has been time for these controversies to at least settle if not be settled. It is possible that a place has been made for deconstruction, that it has been assimilated and thus overcome. Derrida will have none of this and is careful to sow some seeds of destruction in an academy that may have become too comfortable with deconstruction.

Derrida's problems with the word 'deconstruction' span his career and act as a barometer for the 'state' of deconstruction at any particular time. It is when it is most under siege, as in the Paul de Man affair, that Derrida is most willing to stand up for it, to publicly declare or profess it. On the other hand, when people are at ease with it, thinking that they know about 'it,' Derrida intervenes to insist that it is something else again and reiterates his dislike for the

<sup>72</sup> Jacques Derrida 'Perhaps or Maybe,' *Responsibilities of Deconstruction, PLI Warwick Journal of Philosophy* 6 (Summer 1997): 16. Derrida also introduced the 'perhaps' into the affirmation of deconstruction in *Specters of Marx.* "Once again, here as elsewhere, wherever deconstruction is at stake, it would be a matter of linking an *affirmation* (in particular a political one), *if there is any*, to the experience of the impossible, which can only be a radical experience of the *perhaps.*" *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 35.

<sup>73</sup> Gayatri Spivak notes in her introduction to *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974) that "in the first published version of *De la grammatologie*, Derrida uses the word 'destruction' in place of 'deconstruction'" (xlix).

term – there are times, as we have seen, when he does both simultaneously. Prior to the de Man controversy, deconstruction, for all the upheavals of the cultural wars, was establishing itself in the departments and the canons of the university, albeit faced with the resistance of those who would subsequently use the controversy to give vent to their "accumulation of resentment."<sup>74</sup> Derrida had been considering at least reducing the rôle of the term in his work which led him to point out that other terms would henceforth gain more prominence. Thus in 1985 Derrida states,

I believe in spite of everything that the strategy for the last ten, fifteen years – my small strategy – has in fact shifted. That's not to say that now I'm going to put deconstruction in the drawer and take up something else. It means that there are gestures, movements, procedures, words which become less urgent, less useful – or less overwhelmingly useful – than others, and then at that moment there is a pass off in the relay.<sup>75</sup>

Putting "deconstruction in the drawer" might entail shutting the book on its implications but this was not something Derrida envisaged. His putative move would have been to leave the word behind, passing it on to those who were using it in diverse and singular ways. The de Man controversy, especially its public dimension and its damaging implications was pivotal to Derrida's relationship with the word and the work of deconstruction. When the *New York Times* could make assertions such as "deconstructionism [is] a nihilistic philosophy that makes moral or political beliefs impossible" ('Yale Scholar' B6), Derrida could not let this go unchallenged, not only because it was patently untrue as far as he was concerned, but because of the kind of fundamental flaw it revealed in an institution – the public press – whose importance Derrida has emphasised. The corresponding errors and bad faith portrayals of deconstruction within the university compelled Derrida to devote his energy to defending and developing deconstruction as a possible critique of institutions where such misreading could take place. Derrida remains a prolific writer and speaker, he produces work on many issues

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>74</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Canons and Metonymies: An Interview with Jacques Derrida,' *Logomachia: The Conflict of Faculties*, ed. Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) 213.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>75</sup>Jacques Derrida, 'Deconstruction in America,' interview, Critical Exchange 17 (Winter 1985): 21.

and texts. However, when the issue is the university he explicitly links the academy to come with deconstruction. In my conclusion I will return to the complex connections between the declaration of American academic freedom of nearly a century ago and Derrida's profession of faith in a deconstructed university.

In a May 1988 interview, given as an addendum to the conference in Alabama some months before, Derrida refers both to the subject of the scheduled part of the conference, 'Our Academic Contract: The Conflict of Faculties in America,' and to the supplementary meeting after the conference was officially over. It was at this meeting that de Man's wartime journalism was first discussed 'publicly' - publicly, in that it was decided that the books, Responses and the collection of de Man's articles, would be published. 'Publicly' also in that Derrida subsequently published his contribution to the meeting as part of 'Like the Sound of the Sea.' The meeting was a footnote to the main event but its subject was set to overshadow the conference itself. When one takes into account that the theme of the conference was the Kantian text that had influenced German ideas about academic freedom and, in its turn, the formation of the American university and Derrida's deconstructive interpretation of that text, the conference begins to look like an illustration of the concerns described in the first two chapters here. On the one hand, there is the 'large scale' question of the institution, its history and its rationale; on the other, is the apparently more localised but controversial issue of deconstruction, whether it goes under the name of de Man or Derrida. The footnote becomes all that is read of the text and what seems like the more important issue becomes eclipsed. If a conference centred on the identity of the university was effaced by an apparently singular event, that event could go on to become part of any analysis of such an identity. The de Man affair highlighted questions about the responsibilities of those who appear to break down the borders between the university and the public press by writing in the public press. It is a stark example of how professors can assimilate the less desirable elements of 'journalistic' writing in order to articulate their opinions of deconstruction. There are times, such as in 'Biodegradables,' when Derrida too veers dangerously close to these standards of discourse.

Overall though, the experience has served to support Derrida's argument for a better awareness of the responsibilities of the university and its professors which he associates with the necessity for deconstruction. The de Man controversy has become part of what has happened to deconstruction, an element in the many interpretations of the word and a constituent of Derrida's relationship with that word.

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## CONCLUSION

In 'The Future of the Profession' (where, we recall, he cast off his embarrassment at using the word deconstruction), Derrida argues for the university to come that he believes deconstruction makes possible. This paper echoes the AAUP's '1915 Declaration'; Derrida uses practically the same terms with regard to the university, and both texts act as announcements oriented towards the future. The '1915 Declaration' was a foundational, performative document which aspired effectively to cut the university off from its outside while acknowledging its dependence on external institutions for its existence. A case was made for the university to be an "inviolable refuge [from the tyranny of public opinion]" allowing it the freedom to be an "intellectual experiment station."<sup>1</sup> Consciously or not (he never cites the declaration), Derrida uses this vocabulary in his profession of faith in a university founded on tradition but open to the future as the "unconditional university." I have italicised the terms which are common to both, but Derrida's "as if" is the point of contrast and it is that which orients the reading of this paragraph.

The long title proposed for this chapter signifies first that the modern university *should* be without condition... Here then is what I will call the unconditional university or the university without condition: the principle right to say everything, whether it be under the heading of fiction and the *experimentation of knowledge*, and the right to say it publicly, to publish it ... I believe ... that the idea of this space of the academic type, which has to be protected by a kind of absolute immunity, *as if* its interior were *inviolable*, is an idea we must reaffirm, declare, and profess endlessly – even if the protection of this academic immunity ... is never pure.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 'The 1915 Declaration of Principles,' *Academic Freedom and Tenure: A Handbook of The American Association of University Professors*, Louis Joughin ed. (Madison, Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969 edition) 167. Referred to as '1915 Declaration.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The future of the profession or the university without condition (thanks to the "Humanities" what *could take place* tomorrow),' trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Jacques Derrida and the* 

The '1915 Declaration' asserts the autonomy of the university from its outside while acknowledging its concurrent duty towards that outside. However, the thrust of the document is to identify the academy as the source of original knowledge, expertise and ideas. The public addressed was to be on the receiving end. In other words, the AAUP in defining the university also defined its readers, the public who could either take or leave what was offered but were themselves excluded from having any significant effect on the work carried out in the university. There was no 'as if' with regard to the inviolability of the refuge in the AAUP's declaration. They put these barriers in place mindful that the public might find the work carried out in the university "distasteful" ('1915 Declaration' 167). The aspiration on the part of the AAUP was that the public would somehow 'catch up' with what was going on in the university. This is why Richard Hofstader and Walter P. Metzger, in their study of academic freedom, refer to the public to which the professors are responsible as "an abstraction called 'posterity'", that is, an idealised public of the future rather than the existing public. In this sense the university represents itself as being one step ahead of the world outside it. This move on the part of the university is, according to the AAUP, necessary for it to maintain its disjuncture from what they call "the community as a whole" ('1915 Declaration' 167).

One problem with this is that the work which the public might find distasteful – such as deconstruction – is the very work which draws attention to the university. It is when the university is most at odds with the public that it is most visible, the refuge is at its least inviolable and there is most 'communication' between them. In other words, what makes it necessary to call the university an inviolable refuge – 'distasteful' work – is what causes the

Humanities ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 24, 26, 40-1. All but first emphasis added. Referred to as 'Future of the Profession.'

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Richard Hofstader and Walter P. Metzger, *The Development of Academic Freedom in the United States* (London: Columbia University Press, 1955) 410.

violation of that refuge. Deconstruction is an example of the kind of work represented *to* and *by* the press as having the potential for causing distaste.

There is an element of 'the public' in all conflict because conflict needs an audience. In chapter two, the 'culture wars' were brought in as an example of how conflict in the university continues, almost without missing a beat, in the public press. If anything the experience of deconstruction has demonstrated the extent of the alliance between certain forms of academic discourse and the public press. There has to be a willingness and a desire on the part of the 'professor-journalists' to adapt themselves to their surroundings. This is not simply to associate like with like. The alliance can occur between both sides in an academic conflict and the arena in which it is enacted. They speak each other's language whereas Derrida has always defended the difference which is the imperative for translation. This has put his work outside the commonly recognised limits of conflict even when it is the subject of that conflict. In taking part in the controversies Derrida strives to maintain his position at an oblique angle. In fact, it could be argued that Derrida transforms the usual trend of the 'professor-journalist' in that he resists the "temptation of the media" - not the temptation to speak in the public press, Derrida has done that – but to succumb to what is expected of him in those circumstances, to play the 'get real' game, part of which is the tacit agreement that one does not pass remarks about where one is because to do so would be the sign of an impolite guest as he pointed out in his paper, 'The Principle of Reason' examined in chapter two.<sup>4</sup> Derrida persists in remarking the performative aspects of his discursive surroundings and this makes 'people' (his readers, his hosts) uncomfortable. The performative elements in all constative 'reports' bears examination as does the context of such reports. The press is not simply constrained by limits of space but by discursive traditions as embedded as those of the academy. These traditions include a form of unwritten law in the literal sense. Reference to its

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Honoris Causa: "This Too Is Extremely Funny," trans. Marian Hobson and Christopher Johnson, Points, 401.

own discursive practices remains unwritten in the press, as it does in the academy. At the very least, what Derrida has achieved is a demonstration of this absence.

This is one way in which the repetition between Derrida's declaration and that of the AAUP both is and is not the closure of a circle. The two declarations echo back and forth to each other, one written by a group representing university professors and founding the concept of academic freedom in America, the other written by an individual as part of a conference paper. The first was produced as a document which could be referred to in times of conflict. This circumstance dictated that the possibilities for misinterpretation had to be minimised in order to found the freedom which the second declaration – Derrida's paper – could exploit. It is only because the AAUP declaration did not refer to the 'as if' element of the borders of the university that Derrida (and writers like him) can.

The other reason why Derrida is enabled and obliged to refer to the 'as if' nature of the inviolability of his "university without condition" is the apparently mundane one of his own experiences. These experiences permit him to make the somewhat grand demand for a university without condition – Derrida's career, for better or worse, has been 'large' and 'public' as he continues to travel in order to address audiences as a professor-at-large and continues to add to his extensive list of publications on a variety of subjects. Yet he is also *obliged* to recall the 'as if' nature of this university, not only to be true to the responsibility of his own work which has always drawn attention to the difficulties inherent in exclusion and forgetfulness, but also because of the reception of that work, a reception which drives him to react, reiterate, expand and clarify – all of which he enacts most revealingly in his interviews. Chapter three goes some way towards exploring the debt Derrida owes his bad readers. Their negative reaction has not only led to new work, it has confirmed for him the anxiety deconstruction causes.

It is this anxiety I now want to address as we observe Derrida's ultimate 'perilous movement.'

In chapter four Derrida's paper, 'Force of Law,' was examined in the light of what was happening to deconstruction at that time. There is no doubt that deconstruction had its most 'public' moment during the controversy over Paul de Man's wartime journalism. Derrida risks alienating his supporters as well as further confirming his enemies' opinion of him and his work with the apparently bombastic statement that "deconstruction is justice." Further, he also risks the integrity of his own oeuvre when he calls for a turning away of deconstruction from the very issues it should be concerning itself with. There are echoes of the appeal for the possibility for an inviolable refuge in this. To be sure, Derrida forewarns his audience of the risk he is about to take. This is a dangerous stunt, he says, as he puts everything on the line and starts across it.

Derrida is talking to a law school about responsibility. There is a responsibility to justice but part of that responsibility, in fact the driving force of that responsibility, is a suspension of justice in the usual meaning of the word. For Derrida, the justice that is seen to be done is not necessarily or inevitably just. This is not merely a reference to miscarriages of justice. Derrida is concerned to lever justice away from the legal system in which it exists without denying its relevance to that system. And Derrida is not merely speaking about justice and the legal system. He is referring to the institutionality of all systems as is made clear in his description of the injustice that "supposes that the other, the victim of the language's injustice [the other who does not understand the French phrase, 'justice est faite' ('justice is done or made')] is capable of a language in general, is man as a speaking animal."<sup>5</sup> According to Derrida, justice as a concept is not confined solely to its meaning in the juridical sense. In coupling deconstruction with justice Derrida moves away from his immediate surroundings. Launching himself into his argument he calls for the suspension of the axioms that support any system.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundations of Authority" Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice eds. Drucilla Cornell et al., 18. Referred to as 'Force of Law.'

which deconstruction has long been accused of. Just when one thinks that Derrida would be at his most law-abiding, emerging as he is from two years of controversy, he courts irresponsibility when the one value deconstruction, as it has been defined in his work, has always laid claim to is the responsibility of answering to the other.

[The] concept of responsibility is inseparable from a whole network of connected concepts (property, intentionality, will, freedom, conscience, consciousness, self-consciousness, subject, self, person, community, decision, and so forth) and any deconstruction of this network of concepts in their given or dominant state may seem like a move toward irresponsibility at the very moment that, on the contrary, deconstruction calls for an increase in responsibility. But in the moment that an axiom's credibility (*crédit*) is suspended by deconstruction, in this structurally necessary moment, one can always believe that there is no more room for justice . . . This moment of suspense, this period of *épochè*, without which, in fact, deconstruction is not possible, is always full of anxiety, but who will claim to be just by economizing on anxiety? ('Force of Law' 20)

Interrupting Derrida here in order to ask if he will be allowed to continue what he is saying, to *justify* the momentary suspension of justice, one can begin to see the outline of the impasse between the academy and its outside. It is not simply a question of allowing him an audience, of letting him say his piece, but of the conditions in which such work can be conducted. It is with this in mind that Derrida uses the terminology of experimentation. He speaks about deconstruction in terms of an intervention, an interruption or suspension which demands a different rhythm, improvisation, and the possibility there might not be 'progress' as such. For now, for Derrida, it is necessary to maintain a firm foothold within the university (because it is one of the few places which, as he reminds his readers, allows that other seemingly irresponsible concept, 'play'<sup>6</sup>) but in the course of his engagement with other institutions he works away at the presuppositions which, by virtue of the fact that they *are* presuppositions, deny justice. An example would be the belief that the limits of what gets said and how it gets

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> [In the university], you may search, just for the sake of searching . . . So there is a possibility of what I would call playing. *It's perhaps the only place within society where play is possible to such an extent.* Jacques Derrida in Imre Salusinszky, *Criticism in Society* (New York: Methuen, 1987) 19-20.

said in the press are immutable. They still appear to be as this account of what happened to deconstruction has shown. However, these experiences have at least had the effect of calling attention to this condition of the institutions of the press and the university and the thinking of the possibility of their mutability.

The suspension of axioms in order to deconstruct presuppositions takes place as if the borders between the university and its outside were inviolable. In this the university seems to divorce itself from its 'outside' (which can include certain elements of the university too) where injustice continues to be perpetrated. The 'as if' has the effect of the suspense Derrida described in 'Force of Law,' which is necessary for deconstruction to occur. Derrida seems to be retreating or retiring all the while protesting that he is doing so in the name of justice, to bring about an increase in justice. Retreating to safety, in the moment of suspense, Derrida risks unbalancing himself in a perilous movement which turns away, albeit momentarily, from the heritage and apparatus of justice. The apparatus of justice no doubt includes the public press, which, in its freedom, has potential as "democracy's most precious good." But it too is an apparatus from which Derrida turns in order to begin to answer the demand for responsibility which the axiomatic nature of such institutions calls for. If deconstruction is initiated, or initiates itself, when confronted by the impossible, the impasse, the aporia, does this mean that deconstruction becomes more, or less, possible when the impossibility confronted is that between the university and the press over the issue of deconstruction? In light of the preceding chapters, it appears that deconstruction in the context of its engagement with the public press is less possible than ever given the way in which it has been represented. At the same time, deconstruction becomes more possible in surroundings that are inimical to it because as Derrida sees it, conditions of impossibility instigate its movement. Such has been the case so far, as we have seen. The impasse between the university and the public press demonstrated in these chapters has both initiated and delimited deconstruction. The evidence of this aporia has caused Derrida to respond and his work emerges from the difficulties of its reception. The demand remains; the public press must still be attended to

## with "yet another effort." Whether that effort will go under the name of deconstruction remains to be seen.

WORKS BY JACOUES DERRIDA

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