

tion is one of specificity, of attending to—rather than collapsing or neutralizing—important differences (see, e.g., 1276). Quite simply put, my point is that Derrida's work is not the same as de Man's or Culler's—and “[m]aybe it's about time we came to terms with *this* fact.”

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The Accessibility of Derrida

To the Editor:

Since I teach English composition and since you saw fit not just to publish but to seek out an article that begins with the following three sentences (Jacques Derrida, “The Other Heading: Memories, Responses, and Responsibilities,” 108 [1993]: 89–93), I would like to know how you (or anybody who understands and approves) would answer the succeeding questions about the second sentence—as asked, say, by students who open *PMLA* knowing that it is the leading journal in a profession they have committed their English education to.

To begin, I will confide in you a feeling. Already on the subject of headings [*caps*]—and of the shores on which I intend to remain. It is the somewhat weary feeling of an old European.

Questions: (1) At what point is a reader to see what “Already” modifies and directs attention to? (2) What does “the subject of headings” denote or refer to? (3) What is a reader to make of “[*caps*]”—before getting the clue, twenty-three lines further on, that it is a translator's insertion and not an idiosyncrasy among the others? (4) What connection is a reader to make between this sentence and the ones that come before it and after it?

If you can give no answers to these questions that are consistent with what we teach in composition class (taking care of readers, making modification clear to them, making reference only to publicly accessible things, maintaining sentence coherence), then I would like to know the theory that justifies your not doing so.

I ask this with all respect, as one concerned for the profession and its reputation.

H. R. SWARDSON
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Reply:

While H. R. Swardson's queries may have been better addressed by Jacques Derrida than by us, we feel a responsibility as translators to justify our reading and translation of Derrida's text. We have not consulted Derrida about this, and so all speculations concerning his style and argumentation are our own.

As the editors of *PMLA* noted, the excerpt from *The Other Heading* begins five paragraphs into the text. A reading of the entire text would surely help recast, if not answer, some of Swardson's questions, since it would show, for example, how Derrida uses fragments throughout the text to develop or emphasize certain key words and phrases. Yet the excerpt can, we believe, be read on its own and our choices of translation justified on internal grounds.

Here are the three lines as they appear in the French: “Je vous confierai pour commencer un sentiment. Déjà au sujet des caps—et des bords sur lesquels j'ai l'intention de me tenir. C'est le sentiment un peu accablé d'un vieil Européen.” The first thing to note is that we tried to respect both Derrida's choice of words and his syntax. We took this approach not out of some unalterable principle of translation but because we felt it important for conveying Derrida's argument—an argument that ultimately revolves around the question of “publicly accessible things.” We might, for example, have made “what ‘Already’ modifies” a bit clearer by combining the second line with the first, translating them as “To begin, I will confide in you a feeling that already concerns headings . . . ,” but the words “feeling” and “already” would have lost important emphasis, and Swardson would still have been able to ask why “already” is used at all, why any reader would be surprised that Derrida is already referring to headings or would think that he should not already be referring to them. It all comes down to the question of public accessibility.

Those familiar with Derrida's style—a style that has been publicly accessible in English translation for well over twenty years—would suspect that the uncharacteristically abrupt and straightforward first line is part of something more than an informal avowal of a personal feeling. Those acquainted with Derrida's attention to beginnings and with his careful use of terms would suspect that the word “feeling” is not quite—or not only—his. This suspicion would be reinforced a couple of lines later when Derrida speaks of “moving surreptitiously from the feeling to the axiom,” and it would later be confirmed (though this passage is not included in the excerpt) by the discovery