
Forum

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The Discipline of Deconstruction

To the Editor:

Jeffrey T. Nealon's "The Discipline of Deconstruction" (107 [1992]: 1266–79) is a useful antidote to the widespread idea that deconstruction asserts the meaninglessness of all texts, but to make his argument more dramatic Nealon misrepresents my book *On Deconstruction*. He has told me that he will revise his discussion for publication in book form, but I want to set the record straight in *PMLA*.

A section of his article called "The Commodification of Deconstruction in America" claims that deconstruction was

simplified and watered down for use in how-to books that gave (and continue to give) a generation of literature students an overview of what was supposedly Derrida's work without paying corresponding attention to his texts. For example, the following quotations are taken from two of the leading handbooks used to represent deconstruction in theory seminars—the first is from Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* . . . : "In undoing the oppositions on which it relies and between which it urges the reader to choose, the text places the [deconstructive] reader in an impossible situation that cannot end in triumph but only in an outcome already deemed inappropriate: an unwarranted choice or a failure to choose" (81). . . . In Culler's characterization, deconstruction is essentially a formalist reading method that emphasizes a predetermined fall into meaninglessness resulting from the self-cancellation of oppositions in any text. (1269; Nealon's interpolation)

Now, this quotation from my book comes not from any "characterization" of deconstruction, not even from my 140-page chapter entitled "Deconstruction," but from the first chapter, "Stories of Reading." I am discussing one sort of "story of reading," which refuses happy endings, and take as example Paul de Man's account of Rousseau's *Profession de foi*. The sentence Nealon quotes is not a "characterization" of deconstruction but a description of what de Man says this work does to every reader. Nealon inserts "deconstructive" before "reader" to make the passage look like a description of deconstructive method.

The main claim in this section of "The Discipline of Deconstruction" is that commentators (specifically Christopher Norris and I) have distorted Derrida by failing to acknowledge the importance he gives to the displacement and reinscription of binary oppositions. But what do I say when I *do*

set out to define and describe deconstruction? My chapter “Deconstruction” begins by quoting Derrida on “une stratégie générale de la déconstruction”:

“To deconstruct an opposition is above all, at a certain moment, to reverse the hierarchy.”

This is an essential step, but only a step. Deconstruction must, Derrida continues, “through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing, put into practice a reversal of the classical opposition and a general displacement of the system. It is on that condition alone that deconstruction will provide the means of *intervening* in the field of oppositions it criticizes and which is also a field of non-discursive forces.” (85–86)

To identify the aspect of Derrida’s work that commentators like me are supposed to have neglected, Nealon uses this same quotation (1269), which *On Deconstruction* emphasizes. This corroboration would be gratifying did he not immediately proceed to criticize me and Norris for failing “to acknowledge the importance of this displacement in Derrida’s thought” (1270). I should say, rather, that if my chapter on deconstruction does oversimplify Derrida’s work, it is because its first ninety-five pages follow in Derrida’s writings (pace Nealon, who says we commentators do not pay attention to Derrida’s texts) his engagement with one opposition after another—speech versus writing, serious versus nonserious, philosophy versus literature, inside versus outside, literal versus figurative—attempting to show how his deconstruction of these oppositions leads not just to a reversal but to a displacement of the terms and thus to an intervention in the discursive field.

There are potential points of disagreement between me and Nealon, which might emerge if he were to attempt to show in detail or in particular cases how reversal and displacement work. He might, for instance, find my description inadequate to what Derrida actually succeeds in doing with such oppositions as speech versus writing, or we might disagree about whether the operations of reversal and displacement are always separable, as Nealon seems to believe, or whether, in some cases, an effective inversion is not already a displacement and reinscription. These are, I think, matters of some interest, on which Nealon might have a significant contribution to make, but for this sort of discussion he would have to abandon a discourse claiming that earlier commentators have simply ignored the operation of displacement.

Finally, to support his general claim that I conflate Derrida with de Man, Nealon quotes my observation that deconstruction “emerges from the writings of Derrida and de Man” (1277n5). That it does seems to

me indisputable, but this point does not imply that Derrida and de Man are the same. In fact, my sentence is about the diversity of deconstruction: deconstruction, I write, “emerges from the writings of Derrida and de Man only by dint of iteration: imitation, citation, distortion, parody. It persists not as a univocal set of instructions but as a series of differences that can be charted on various axes.” Furthermore, I bring together Derrida and de Man far less than the manifest connections between their works would warrant. Derrida’s works are the subject of my central chapter, “Deconstruction,” where de Man is cited only a few times. De Man’s distinctive contribution is discussed in a separate chapter, “Deconstructive Criticism.”

These corrections are tangential to Nealon’s general argument about what Derrida says, with which I fundamentally agree. That they should be tangential and that Nealon’s hasty caricature of *On Deconstruction* serves only to make his argument more simplistic and dramatic raises questions about the purposes such distortions fulfill in the practice of criticism. Some books, including *On Deconstruction*, have wagered that the institution of professional critical discourse does not in fact make denigration of precursors a condition of success. Is that position correct, or does the institutional demand for controversy and novelty, even in *PMLA*, require young critics to distort their precursors to gain a hearing? According to John Kronik, the members of *PMLA*’s Editorial Board chose to publish Nealon’s essay because they thought it “would stimulate a healthy dialogue.” I hope the board was right.

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To the Editor:

Jeffrey T. Nealon’s essay “The Discipline of Deconstruction” should initiate a welcome trend: the abandonment of programmatic literary “deconstructions” and a return to the thought and writings of Derrida. The reading of Derrida in this essay is sound, and Nealon is certainly right to insist that no reading can be a deconstruction without a reinscription of the hierarchical terms “within a larger field—a ‘textual’ field that can account for nonpresence as other than lack of presence” (1269).

I must take issue, however, with Nealon’s choice of Jonathan Culler as the scapegoat for “the commodification of deconstruction in America” (1268). Theory handbooks have indeed become a ubiquitous