

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.

JONATHAN CULLER
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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

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

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

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

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

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

Could Nealon possibly have missed this?

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

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

JAMES M. LANG
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To the Editor:

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

EDWARD R. HEIDT
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To the Editor:

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