

Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor, and the authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

Dialectics

To the Editor:

The hidden agenda, as I understand it, of Marshall Brown's intriguing essay "'Errours Endlesse Traine': On Turning Points and the Dialectical Imagination" (99 [1984]: 9–25) is to turn dialectic back against Derrida's rejection of it and thereby restore to (the writing of) history a kind of teleology that displaces deconstruction's infinite play of signs. There are two dialectical moments in Brown's discussion: (1) the dialectics of human history experienced from the inside, the "turning point in the turbulence of its occurrence" (9), and (2) the historical moment as a point where the thrust of thought or action in one direction reverses toward the opposite direction. Though Brown treats the second moment as the concretization of the first, they are really related dialectically. This is because articulation of history from within is "always already" to have taken a perspective on history from without and to embark on claims to perceiving various dialectical patterns within history.

Another way of articulating Brown's notion of dialectical turn (I have developed this idea extensively elsewhere) is as follows. (1) A resolution of antinomies is opposition-under-the-sign-of-unity. (2) A conflict of antinomies is unity-under-the-sign-of-opposition. (3) Both resolution and conflict, since they contain the elements of both in a reciprocal dialectical relationship, are themselves related as mutually cause and effect. These three propositions taken together account for the moment of the dialectical turn, because the conflicts of history are generated by the drive toward resolution of conflict. But since resolution of conflict is always partial and incomplete (Kenneth Burke's *Grammar of Motives* explores this aspect of dialectic), such resolution always contains the seeds of further conflict.

But there is more. What makes the dialectical turn possible is the refusal of dialectic. By this I mean that human history—all the ideological, philosophic, or (merely) military strategies that aim at the resolution of conflict—comes to be controlled by a dialectical pattern despite itself. If, as I think Brown and I agree, the dialectical turn seems radically to constitute human history, this is not because human agents direct their energies and strategies toward such a turn with consciousness and deliberation but rather for just the opposite reason. Such dialectical transformations of direction occur despite these strategies: they catch us all

unawares, turning us always in directions in which we had never planned to go but toward which the dialectical potentiality buried within our actions turns us willy-nilly. And so the dialectical turn, governed by the three propositions given above, becomes possible to the exact degree that human agents refuse that turn. Which is the same as saying to the degree that human agents refuse the logic of dialectic.

Consequently, the dialectical patterns that human history exhibits come to regulate that history "from above," as it were, precisely because the complexly interacting thrusts of human agents—experienced "from within"—refuse these patterns, seek to turn neither to the right nor to the left but proceed straight on toward a (nondialectical) goal of resolution of conflict.

I would provisionally agree with Brown's conclusion that the "turbulent movement comes neither from determinations of truth nor from deconstructive denials of truth but from a different, more provisional and more humane kind of insight." Truth is "truth in movement, a constant interplay of intentions and originations, and not mere results" (22). I would, however, want to point out and develop a little the dialectic implicit in that statement. It should be understood by this time of the day that Derrida's deconstruction of Western thought's cult of origins and presences is not merely placed in dialectical opposition to "determinations of truth." It is not, as J. Hillis Miller has argued (*Deconstruction and Criticism*, 1979), another form of traditional skepticism. For lack of space I would merely advance the following points as starting places for meditation.

1. Derrida's attack on dialectic is an attack on a certain brand of Hegelian dialectic that features the drive toward closure and the end of dialectic, that is, that features only the first proposition I list above. Derrida's play with Hegelian dialectic is, as far as I can tell, the drawing out of it just those unsettling dialectical entailments that my three propositions state collectively.

2. Consequently, Derridean deconstruction transcends the neither-nor alternatives Brown states in the quotation above. If there is a dialectical component in Derrida's work—and I believe there is, particularly exhibited in his play with Plato's *pharmakon* in *Dissemination*—it operates to call into question all traditional Western antinomies in the name of just those

ironies that I and Brown (coming from different directions) call “dialectic.”

3. And so, finally, deconstruction from the viewpoint I argue here is another form of dialectical analysis. The question is how one feels about the dialectics that Western thought involves itself in in the process of fleeing them. Hegel (or Hegelianism of a certain variety) likes dialectic because it inscribes a process of escape from it. One can also “like” dialectic in the way that Derrida, Brown, and I appear in common to like it: as a set of strategies for debunking not only history’s flight from dialectic but, more basically, history’s commitment to the nondialectical antinomies of thought and action that make dialectic possible.

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Reply:

I didn’t think that my agenda was hidden, but my essay was more performance than prescription, and I can hardly imagine a finer elucidation of its aims. I welcome the opportunity to outline some further implications in my turn.

Derrida, as McCanles rightly says, has no truck with “deconstructive denials of truth”; he wants, rather, in precise ways, to decenter truth. In his own book McCanles adopts the term *dianoia* for the tripartite drive toward resolution of conflict (*Dialectical Criticism and Renaissance Literature* [Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1975], 218–23). I might prefer to call it ideology, but I think we would both concur with the words of one of our greatest theorists of error: “No ‘truth’ without passion, without error. I mean: truth is only obtained passionately” (Valéry, *Œuvres*, ed. Jean Hytier [Paris: Gallimard, 1957–60], 2: 641). McCanles’ chapter on Bacon is as clear a demonstration as one could wish.

In my view, this amounts to an unreserved Hegelianism, that is, a Hegelianism without an absolute. Derrida himself attacks history as a negative or limiting factor that he would like to escape in favor of a writing machine that works “without being regulated by an order of reappropriation” (“Le Puits et la pyramide,” *Marges de la philosophie* [Paris: Minuit, 1972], 126). Such a denial of history may be merely an idealist illusion, as de Man argued early on. But even if Derrida wins the contest with Hegel, he acknowledges that history is an inescapable factor with every repeated rejection of it. Deconstruction inevitably exists in an indissoluble dialectical relationship with dialectic itself, that is, with history, as passion or error does with truth. So far I agree wholeheartedly with McCanles.

In practice, however, we go different routes. My play with truth and error corresponds to a double view of

writing, as composition and as (for want of my own word) dissemination. As compositions, works are necessarily dialectical and historical. That was the agenda of my text. Internal divisions and contradictions are not flaws but markers to be read according to a historical dialectic of before and after, problem and solution, or “intentions and originations.” This is a correction of the received notion of organic form as self-containment. The true organism is self-differentiating as well as self-limiting, and an organic composition lives by differing from itself according to a model of growth and development. Even a writing machine—or, let us say, language in itself—can be seen not as a drift (*dérive*), à la Derrida or Lyotard, but as a dialectical, driving, and deriving historical force: “*To write being, by rights, to construct, as solidly and as exactly as one can, that language machine in which the release of the activated spirit [la détente de l’esprit excité] is expended in conquering real resistances, it demands that the writer become divided against himself*” (Valéry 1: 1205, his emphasis). Dialectical criticism need not debunk history but can instead require the writer’s expenditure in the struggle against the inertia of the past.

But as error precedes truth, so dissemination precedes composition. That was a second item in my essay’s agenda, inscribed not in the text but, perhaps too prominently to be readily seen, in my subtitle. For there is an imagination that circumscribes or undergirds dialectic. McCanles’ studies begin by formulating a conceptual, debunking, or ironizing dialectic and proceed to evaluate an author’s eventual mastery of or accommodation to it (e.g., “the yearning for retreat from dialectic has so led [Marvell] to recognizing his complete immersion in it that now he is provisionally free of it” [117]). Mine begin with the irrational force of the imagination, as manifested in the evasions of words and the drift of imagery; they move toward dialectic as that which enables a great author to master his or her imagination. Dialectic is, in Hegel’s sense, the truth or, in Derrida’s, the reappropriation of the imagination. Another term for the starting point is style, another for the terminus is form—style as the vagrancy or free flight of fancy, form as that through which authors subdue themselves to the world of history. “Thus each great man is stained with an error. Each spirit that is found to be powerful, begins with the fault that makes him known. In exchange for the public’s gratuity, he gives the time that it takes in order to make himself perceptible, in order for the energy that has been dissipated to be transmitted and to prepare satisfaction for others [la satisfaction étrangère ‘alien satisfaction’]” (Valéry 2: 16).

The terms are not easy to define—especially not the colloquial ones like style and form—and the itinerary is not easy to describe; my essay tries to show but is shy of telling. I am grateful to the Forum and to McCanles’ incisive letter for this opportunity to consolidate,