
Forum

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Saving Deconstruction

To the Editor:

Jeffrey T. Nealon's "The Discipline of Deconstruction" (107 [1992]: 1266–79) gets Derrida precisely wrong in one crucial way: it proceeds to recuperate deconstruction by projecting Derrida as origin, as founder, as ur-text to which all others must refer. Thus, the problems of all previous readers are due to their having missed this origin, which of course Nealon handily lays claim to. One doesn't have to read very far in Derrida to suspect this invocation of an originary figure and this premise of priority. The move is a standard one in literary history, assigning a name to a field of forces and events, akin to what M. H. Abrams does in "Construing and Deconstructing," where he roots deconstruction in the skeptical tradition of Hume. The tactic is a way of domesticating potentially dissident features into a pasteurized and comforting genealogical narrative beginning with "Father says . . .," which in turn draws authority from the exemplary statements of the Founding Father.

Nealon sets up this move by his initial postulation of the death of deconstruction, an obvious figural space-clearing so that he can rebuild his phoenix. This preparatory claim is troubling as well. While it's undoubtedly true that deconstruction has *changed*—it is not the dominant theoretical construction or rubric of the 1990s, as it was of the late 1970s and early 1980s, when it in fact spoke for or became synonymous with theory—it is also undoubtedly true that deconstruction is not dead but is still operative in the theories that currently hold the field (see Edward R. Heidt's letter on Nealon [Forum, 108 (1993): 535]). Just think about *margin*, a term that before 1970 didn't have much significance beyond inch measurements given in the *MLA Handbook*. I would put it even more strongly: deconstruction, as an institutional practice, has enabled the very field of theory, or, rather, what goes under the name *deconstruction* has legitimated the site of theory, the institutional field we find ourselves situated within—Nealon; Jonathan Culler, Robert A. Hall, Jr., and Nealon's other respondents in the May Forum; and me. So let's dispense with this death business or at least interrogate it for the trope that it is.

Further, I find this move to project Derrida as origin not only suspect but pernicious: the effort to purify deconstruction by "going back" to the founding texts of the father, Derrida, is patently coded as an elision of de

Man. To put it nicely, Nealon casts a kind of good-cop-bad-cop deconstruction. Derrida is the good cop (don't worry, you can trust him), and de Man is the bad cop, on suspension from the deconstruction force pending the results of an Internal Affairs investigation (him you can't trust, he's brutal, so you had better start talking to Derrida before de Man gets back). To put it less nicely, I find that this rhetorical move is dishonest and scapegoats de Man's texts, neutralizing their powerful but disturbing significance. In short, the move works to whitewash theory by expelling de Man. If one wants to play origin games, I would argue that *de Man*, not Derrida, is the site or figural locus of deconstruction in America (for confirmation of this, one need look no further than Derrida—in *Mémoires for Paul de Man* or an interview called "Deconstruction in America"). Maybe it's about time we came to terms with this fact.

What Nealon's essay really does, as its title suggests, is discipline those outside his newly founded church of Derrida. I don't mean anti-Derrideans like Hall; rather, as with any church, the real action is internal, in the making of internecine differentiations, to claim rule inside the church. Like the true messiah, Nealon is claiming the true Derrida. And hence his dispute with Culler. (More exactly, the rhetoric of Nealon's argument mandates his misreading Culler. So Culler is right to say that Nealon suppresses his precursors, but Culler shouldn't take offense since the omission only reveals the marshaling of Nealon's rhetorical strategy.)

I'm not panning Nealon's essay two thumbs down, however. Taking the lesson of de Man's *Blindness and Insight*, I'd give it one thumb up and one thumb down. Nealon's polemic, his slant for Derrida and for reinstating a discourse on Derrida, precisely leads him to his invocation of and blindness to these tropes of death, origin, and so on—in other words, to the rife contradiction of his rhetorical terms. To paraphrase de Man loosely, rhetoric's a son of a bitch.

JEFFREY WILLIAMS
East Carolina University

Reply:

I suppose that it's tempting to read me as the leader of the Branch Derrideans, holed up in my heavily fortified (but untenured) rural Pennsylvania compound (Rancho "No Apocalypse, Not Now"), hysterically claiming that my ravings perfectly represent the Master's Word.

There is, however, at least one huge problem with this picture: to use Jeffrey Williams's phrase, "[o]ne doesn't have to read very far in Derrida" to see that Derrida does not agree with my reading of rhetorical deconstructive criticism. He has nothing but praise for Culler's and de Man's work, and he is most certainly not keen on polemicizing against deconstructive criticism. In fact, he has repeatedly "disciplined" Gasché for doing so. See, for example, "Some Statements and Truisms" (in Carroll's *The States of "Theory,"* esp. 89–90) and *Acts of Literature*, where "the Founding Father" assures us that his disciplining of Gasché has taken hold: "I talked to him about it" (71). It's tough to play the "true messiah" when your god has (always?) already forsaken you.

In addition, "one doesn't have to read very far" in my essay (past the first line?) to see that I'm not merely or simply declaring deconstruction to be dead. I am anything but blind to the supposed "contradiction of [my] rhetorical terms" (see, e.g., 1268). Certainly the article—and its placement in *PMLA*—highlights the complexity of the opening sentence and the impossible performative that announces deconstruction's death. To borrow Derrida's words from another context, this death "is not the opposite of living, just as it is not identical with living. The relationship is different, different from being identical, from the difference of distinctions—undecided" ("Living On—Border Lines" 135).

If I attempt to save or "recuperate" something, I do so perhaps in the name of any deconstruction that would complicate efforts to domesticate its "potentially dissident features into a pasteurized and comforting genealogical narrative." I argue that Culler and de Man produce such an innocuous narrative when they base deconstruction on an originary lack that is revealed in and by a rhetorical criticism of literature. Such a narrative allows—de Man even calls for—deconstruction to become a wide-ranging disciplinary project that neutralizes oppositions wherever it finds them; "one thumb up and one thumb down," Williams's insightful characterization of this reductiveness, becomes the upshot of any text—mine, Derrida's, Yeats's, Archie Bunker's.

I wholeheartedly agree with Williams's view of de Man as the father of American deconstruction; it is precisely my point that "de Man, not Derrida, is the . . . figural locus of deconstruction in America" (emphasis changed). In my opinion, however, such a realization or argument concerning the rhetorical nature of deconstruction in America has nothing to do with quibbles about orthodoxy; instead, the ques-