

# Jacques Derrida on Rhetoric and Composition: A Conversation

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Jacques Derrida's work has forever altered how we perceive the relationships among writers, readers, and texts and has transformed our very notions of "rhetoric" and "writing." Not only have composition theorists drawn on his work, but recently some have attempted to apply it to the classroom. The publication of Gregory's Ulmer's *Applied Grammatology*, G. Douglas Atkins and Michael Johnson's *Writing and Reading Differently*, Jasper Neel's *Plato, Derrida, and Writing*, and Sharon Crowley's *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction* indicates just how influential his ideas have become in our field.

While Derrida has, of course, had much to say about writing and rhetoric, this interview is his first extended discussion of rhetoric and composition *per se*. He describes his own growth as a writer, proposes a model of composition instruction, discusses problems compositionists should avoid, and comments on a range of other related topics, including liberatory learning, social constructionism, logocentrism, and feminism.

The theme that perhaps will most surprise at least some readers is that Derrida vigorously asserts the importance of the "canon," the "tradition," and rigorous academic discipline. He concludes that many critics have seriously misrepresented his ideas. Pointing to his own rigorous academic training, Derrida maintains that even as he seeks to deconstruct pedagogies and ways of thinking, he is "at some level true" to the "classical" training he received in the French educational system. He stresses that deconstruction "doesn't mean simply destroying the norms or pushing these norms to utter chaos." In fact, if what passes as deconstruction produces "neglect of the classical authors, the canonical texts, and so on, we should fight it."

This theme recurred throughout the session, indicating how strongly he feels that deconstruction has been misrepresented and maligned. He is convinced that "if deconstruction is only a pretense to ignore minimal requirements or knowledge of the tradition, it could be a bad thing." Apparently, it is often supporters of deconstruction themselves who feed this misunderstanding: "Sometimes the most ferocious critics who react vehemently and passionately and sometimes with hatred understand more than supporters do." Those who "play at deconstruction, try to behave deconstructively" before reading "the great texts in our tradition" give decon-

struction a bad name. Certainly, we need to open the canon, to broaden it, to question it, but we can't do so before acquiring at least a "minimal knowledge of the basic foundations of the canon." Only then can we develop "a deconstructive practice." As if to warn supporters as well as to answer critics, Derrida insists, "If you're not trained in the tradition, then deconstruction means nothing. It's simply nothing."

Derrida also has firm convictions about how composition should be taught. Although there is no formal composition instruction in the French system, he believes there should be. He speaks of "much anxiety" in France over the level of students' writing competency. While he hesitates to call this situation a "literacy crisis," he says that many of his generation feel that the young no longer "respect the same norms," the same values—that they "don't read and write the way they should." Derrida perceives this problem as a "restructuring of the norms." He suggests that it is not that students are less intelligent but that "their intelligence is applied differently." However, he contends that instruction in composition would be beneficial, that there should be "parallel teaching of composition everywhere: in the teaching of French literature, of history, and so on."

It's no mistake that this sounds like a writing-across-the-disciplines model of writing instruction; Derrida fully endorses such a model. While he is not sure how such a model would work, he is certain that writing instruction centralized in a single academic department will lead to the "hegemony of some kind of norm in writing." Aside from "minimal requirements in grammar, clarity of exposition, and so on," writing competence is inextricably linked to the discourse conventions of specific disciplines. He questions whether it is possible to teach writing without being "competent in the content of a discipline." After all, he argues, "you can't teach writing simply as a formal technique." Of course, he is quick to point out that he does not advocate establishing "boundaries"; yet, he is concerned that writing instruction detached from specific discourse communities will be artificial and, therefore, ineffective—a mere matter of mechanical, formal "technique."

On the other hand, he does not propose that compositionists be "scattered" helter-skelter throughout the university. While he does think it important that writing instruction take place within particular disciplines and therefore that writing specialists be associated with and competent in those disciplines, he feels just as strongly that compositionists must have "something in common"; that is, they must have shared training and expertise in the teaching of composition—in effect, a common discipline of their own. Thus, fully aware of the complexity of the subject and the contradictory nature of his response, Derrida says, "I would not rely on a model in which composition instructors are confined simply within one discipline; nor would I rely on a model in which they are simply dispersed, scattered among a variety of disciplines."

Nor does he recommend that compositionists form their own academic departments apart from English departments. While he acknowledges that “it’s important that a large number of composition teachers belong to the English department,” he reiterates that it would be counterproductive to “confine” compositionists to any single department.

Clearly, Derrida has a keen grasp of the complexity of the very issues we ourselves are struggling with, and his reluctance to seek security in a “unilateral solution” may well be an example we should follow in shaping the future of writing instruction and our own professional relationships within the structure of the university.

Moreover, we would do well, Derrida advises, to “deconstruct” not only written texts but the institution of composition and the very notion of “composition” itself. He cautions against imposing rigid schemes of writing on students and suggests that we continually question and destabilize the authority of models of composition and that we seek to “invent each time new forms according to the situation.” Echoing the recent concerns of many composition theorists, Derrida reminds us that writing is always contingent upon context—the “situation, the audience, your own purpose”—not on pre-established, formulaic models. So we should “analyze these models” and determine “where their authority comes from” and “what interests they serve.”

Compositionists should be especially wary of what Derrida calls “rhetoricism”: “thinking that everything depends on rhetoric.” Certainly, rhetoric is central to almost every facet of life, but we must not attribute to rhetoric more power than it has—an “inherent danger” in the teaching of rhetoric and composition. This is not to say that “rhetoric is simply subordinate,” but that “rhetoric is not the last word.” Derrida believes that “a self-conscious and trained teacher, attentive to the complexity, should at the same time underline the importance of rhetoric and the limits of rhetoric.” We need to help students understand the full complexity of language use—its power *and* its limitations.

It is evident from the conversation recorded here that Derrida takes writing instruction quite seriously and shares with compositionists many of the same concerns, both theoretical and pedagogical. He supports our attempts to improve composition pedagogy and applauds our efforts to deconstruct ourselves—our self-reflexive examination of the notion of “composition,” the field, and our institutional relationships. Such continual analysis and self-examination will lead to productive change and growth. Not only is his support somewhat comforting, but his insights, I believe, contribute productively to the ongoing dialogue in rhetoric and composition about who we are and who we should be.

Q. Do you think of yourself as a writer?

A. It’s difficult to answer this question without some preliminary precautions.

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I don't think of myself as a writer if by "writer" you mean merely a literary writer, an author of poems and fiction in the traditional sense. From that point of view, I'm not a writer. But neither am I a philosopher who writes or a theoretician who writes without being attentive to writing—to the form, techniques, and so on. So, I think of myself neither as a writer (in the sense of working within literary genres) nor as a scientist or philosopher who wouldn't be interested in questions of writing. I'm interested in the way I write, in the form, the language, the idiom, the composition. When I write a text—and I write different kinds of texts—I'm as attentive to, let's say, the content as to the formal style and also to the performative shape, the genre, all the aspects that belong to a given genre. All those problems which are traditionally called "formal" are what interest me most. To that extent, I think of myself as a sort of writer. But I'm unhappy with the boundaries between, let's say, literary writing and philosophical writing. I'm not a writer, but writing to me is the essential performance or act. I am unable to dissociate thinking, teaching, and writing. That's why I had to try to transform and to extend the concept of writing, which is not simply "writing down" something. So, "yes and no" would be the answer to the first question.

Q. Who were key "writing teachers" for you? By that I mean not necessarily people who held official faculty positions, but people who advised you well about your writing or whose writing inspired your own composition processes.

A. There are a number of possible answers to this. Paradoxically, I learned a lot from my teachers both in high school and in what we call the *khâgne*—a grade between high school and the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*—the university. We had to prepare a composition we call the *concours d'entrée*. This instruction was very hard and heavy, very demanding according to classical norms. I was trained in those very classical norms. And probably people who read me and think I'm playing with or transgressing norms—which I do, of course—usually don't know what I know: that all of this has not only been made possible by but is constantly in contact with very classical, rigorous, demanding discipline in writing, in "demonstrating," in rhetoric. Even if I feel, or some of my readers think, that I am free or provocative toward those norms, the fact that I've been trained in and that I am at some level true to this classical teaching is essential. I think that perhaps my American readers—when they read me in English, for example—don't or can't pay attention to the fact that this classical superego is very strong in terms of rhetoric, whether it's a question of rhetoric in the sense of the art of persuasion or in the sense of logical demonstration. When I take liberties, it's always by measuring the distance from the standards I know or that I've been rigorously trained in. So, my classical training in France has been a great influence—all those competitions that I suffered from. The French system was and still is

terrible from that point of view; you have to go through a number of selective competitions which make you suffer to make you better. I'm politically against this system and I fight it; nevertheless, I had to go through it. Yet, however negative it may be from some point of view, it's good discipline and I learned a lot from it. The way I write is probably marked by this experience. So, first, there are those teachers at school. But then, you learn from everything you read; every writer or philosopher you admire is a kind of writing teacher. So I learned from many, many writers.

Q. Anyone in particular?

A. No, because it depends on the type of text I write. I write different types of texts. I won't say I imitate—that's certainly not true—but I try to match in my own idiom the style or the way of writing of the writers I write on. When I write on Mallarmé, I don't write the same as when I write on Blanchot or Ponge. It's not a mimetic behavior, but I try to produce my own signature in relation to the signature of the other, so I don't learn a model way of writing. It's not learning; it's listening to the other and trying to produce your own style in proportion to the other. It's not a lesson you learn; it's something else.

Q. Would you describe this as being "influenced" by these authors?

A. It's not an "influence." Even though I write differently when I write on Mallarmé or Blanchot or Ponge, this difference doesn't mean that I'm under their influence. But I adjust. I don't write like Blanchot, but my tone changes; everything is differently staged, but I wouldn't speak of "influence."

Q. So it's a matter of "responding."

A. Yes, responding; that's it. Responding is responding to the other. Blanchot remains other, and I don't write the way he writes so my writing is other, too. But this otherness is responding or co-responding, so to speak.

Q. Most European universities do not offer courses in writing. Is composition taught in French universities? If not, do you think that formal courses in writing should be taught there?

A. No, there is no such instruction in France. We don't teach composition, as such. Of course, through the teaching of French and literature, there has been, or there should be, the concurrent teaching of composition. The teacher of French literature, for example, requires students to write correctly, elegantly, and so forth. There are grammatical and stylistic norms. But this is a very mobile situation. Now we are seeing problems which look or sound like yours. I wouldn't call it "illiteracy," but there has been a massive change during the last two decades. The level of what is required seems to have dropped, and this is something that everyone in my generation complains about. But it's not that simple, and I don't share these complaints. It is true that our norms are not respected, and we cannot recognize in children and young people now the same respect we had for spelling, and so on. In France the pedagogy which was built through the

ideology of the Third Republic was very rigorous, and the social authority of the teacher was enormous. This meant that there was an ethics of spelling, of *orthographe*, and every transgression, every misspelling, was a crime. This was the case in my generation and before me. Now, of course, this is no longer the case, and respect for these values has disappeared, for the students and for the young teachers, too. But this doesn't mean that these people have given up any respect for anything; it's that the norms have changed. They're not less intelligent but their intelligence is applied differently, and it's very difficult for people from my generation to understand this shifting, this restructuring of the norms. So there is no teaching of composition, as such. There should be parallel teaching of composition everywhere: in the teaching of French literature, of history, and so on. Now, everyone believes that French young people, however intelligent they may be, don't read and write the way they should. This is the cause of much current anxiety in France.

Q. What university department do you think should teach writing? Would it be the French department? Would it be a separate department?

A. I wouldn't think that one single department should be in charge, because if you concentrate the teaching of composition in a single department—for instance, the literature department—then you'll have the hegemony of some kind of norm in writing. The people in mathematics and history and law don't have to write the same way. Of course, the minimal requirements in grammar, clarity of exposition, and so on can be addressed everywhere. But then you have to adjust the transformations of the way you write according to each discipline, the discourse of the discipline. There is writing competence for a lawyer, for a historian, and there are also changes in those competencies. So if you concentrate composition teaching in one single place, you won't be able, first, to differentiate between the different requirements, and then to take into account the necessary transformations in style. And, of course, I'm in favor of transformations in rhetoric and in the mode of argument. Such changes have to be specific to each discipline. And, if possible, crossing the boundaries would be good, too. I have no model for this, but I would not rely on a model in which composition instructors are confined simply within one discipline; nor would I rely on a model in which they are simply dispersed, scattered among a variety of disciplines. There should be a specificity and also a crossing of the boundaries. So, it's a very difficult question.

Q. In fact, there's a model here that we call "writing across the disciplines" in which all or many of the academic departments are involved in the teaching of writing.

A. I don't know what your feeling is, but is it possible to teach writing without being competent in the content of a discipline? You can't teach writing simply as a formal technique. Each technique is determined by the specific

content of the field. So the one who teaches writing in law school should, I think, be informed about the laws and not simply a rhetorician.

Q. You say that the ideal situation would be to teach within the discourse of each particular discipline and not isolate rhetoric in a particular department. However, the political situation in American universities is such that rhetoric and composition specialists typically hold faculty positions in English departments, along with specialists in traditional literary areas and critical theory. Composition programs (and their faculty) are beginning to emerge as powerful components of many English departments because of the increasing political, economic, and curricular importance of writing instruction. Understandably, the co-existence in many institutions of traditional literature professors and these newer composition professors has created a certain amount of tension and professional rivalry. Given this political situation, do you believe that writing/rhetoric programs should be housed in English—that is, *literature*—departments? Or should they, as in a few American institutions, exist as independent departments devoted exclusively to the study of and instruction in language, writing, and rhetoric?

A. Both, I would say. I'm not attempting to avoid your question, but I would say that any unilateral solution would be bad. First, there's the question of English in this country. And this is a political question: why should composition and the teaching of rhetoric be linked not to English as English literature but to English as the English language, the American language? There are linguistic minorities in this country, so, to some extent, you have to teach English, including composition. Of course, English is and will remain the predominant language in this country, but if it's not the only spoken and written language in this country, if there are also the languages of minorities and also people who know other foreign languages—French or Spanish or Chinese or Japanese—then you have to respect this diversity. How to do so I don't know, but if English remains the only vehicle for the teaching of rhetoric and composition that would be limiting, especially in this country. That's one level of this question. Another level is exactly the one you mentioned: whether it's a good thing that writing teachers be in English departments because the English departments are the most powerful and the largest, even though differences among colleagues may occur. Many of my best students in this country are in English departments; their fields are more differentiated, and there are more struggles. So, I think it's important that a large number of composition teachers belong to the English department. But it would be a bad thing that they be confined in them because there are other perspectives and, of course, other disciplines which are not literary disciplines. So, it's important, too, that to some extent, in some ways, teachers of rhetoric and composition not remain confined in the English depart-

ment. My answer is apparently contradictory, but that's politics. You have to be contradictory in a sense; you have to do both.

Q. You wouldn't, then, put them in their own department by themselves—a department of rhetoric and composition?

A. No, but there must be some specificity, something in the training of teachers in rhetoric, something in common. They should have something in common, as well as a specialization in a field or discipline. So my answer is what we call in French *une réponse de Normand*, which is “yes and no; on the one hand and on the other hand.” Any unilateral solution would be bad.

Q. A few other questions about the teaching of writing. One connection between deconstruction and composition may be a recognition of the incredibly complex nature of communication processes and a recognition of the “fleeting uncertainty” of knowledge. Do you see any specific implications for composition studies in the recognition that we are trapped in a logocentric world? If so, what are they?

A. Of course there is a connection between deconstruction and composition. Of course composition should recognize the complexity of communication processes and the uncertainty of knowledge. But before reaching the level of these concerns—the university level, where we should really face these questions—I think deconstruction should go through a reflection on the institution of composition. As you know, deconstruction is not simply a critical questioning about, let's say, language or what is called “communication processing.” It's not only a way of reading texts in the trivial sense; it's also a way of dealing with institutions. Not only with content and concepts, but with the authority of institutions, with the models of institutions, with the hard structures of institutions. And we know that “the complex nature of communication processes, and so on” depends on many institutions, and, to begin with, on schools. So, the connection between deconstruction and composition should be problematized—first, I would say, in political and institutional terms. The word *composition*, as you know, is an old word, implying that you can distinguish between the meaning, the contents of the meaning, and the way you put these together. As you know, *deconstruction* means, among other things, the questioning of what synthesis is, what thesis is, what a position is, what composition is, not only in terms of rhetoric, but what *position* is, what *positing* means. Deconstruction questions the *thesis*, the theme, the positionality of everything, including, among other things, *composition*. Writing is not simply a “composition.” So once you realize that writing is not simply a way of positing or posing things together, a number of consequences follow.

Without remaining at this level, which is radical—but we have to mention this radicality—I would say that in the university, or in high school, or in any academic field, deconstruction should provoke not only a questioning of the authority of some models in composition, but also a



new way of writing, of composing—composing oral speeches and composing written papers. Now, this new way is not simply a new model; deconstruction doesn't provide a new model. But once you have analyzed and questioned and destabilized the authority of the old models, you have to invent each time new forms according to the situation, the pragmatic conditions of the situation, the audience, your own purpose, your own motivation to invent new forms. And these depend on what I was just calling the “pragmatic” in the sense of speech act theory. In each situation you have to write and speak differently. Teachers should not impose a rigid scheme in any situation. A moment ago, I was speaking of my training in France; the rigidity of those forms, those norms for rhetoric and composition, was terrible. It had some good aspects too, but it was terrible. You had to write what we called a *dissertation* according to a certain pattern: in the introduction you should ask a question after having played naive; that is, you should act as if you do not know what the question is, then you *invent* the question, you justify the question, and at the end of the introduction you ask the question. Then in three parts you. . . . Well, there's no need to describe the formula, but it was terribly rigid. So I think through deconstruction you should study and analyze these models and where they come from, where their authority comes from, what the finality of these models is, what interests they serve—personal, political, ideological, and so on. So we have to study the models and the history of the models and then try not to subvert them for the sake of destroying them but to change the models and invent new ways of writing—not as a formal challenge, but for ethical, political reasons.

- Q. As a matter of fact, there have been at least three new books published in the 1980s in America that attempt to apply your work in the classroom: Gregory Ulmer's *Applied Grammarology*, G. Douglas Atkins and Michael Johnson's *Writing and Reading Differently*, and Sharon Crowley's *A Teacher's Introduction to Deconstruction*. Are you familiar with any of these texts and, if so, what is your response to them? Generally, are you satisfied with how your work has been applied pedagogically?
- A. I must confess that the only one you mentioned that I know is Greg Ulmer's *Applied Grammarology*. I greatly admire Gregory Ulmer's book—not only this book but everything he writes. It's very important for me and very rigorous. I think what he did in *Applied Grammarology* is, first, very original, which means that it's not simply an “application.” It moves very far from, let's say, the premises, what he would call “the premises”; it's not simply an applied grammarology. It goes much further. This means to me that he opens a new field; he's not only applying something relating to the field, but he has discovered a field of new possibilities. I agree with him that in *Of Grammarology* pedagogical problematics were not applied but *implied*. This doesn't mean I would apply these implications the way he does. I don't know; I haven't done such work. But I'm sure he's right

in trying to propose a new pedagogy that takes into account new technologies, the new space opened by those questions, and that is not frightened by the modernity of telecommunications, video, etc. I'm not sure I would agree or disagree with his approach; I don't have anything very specific to say about the methodology he would practice. But I'm sure that an awareness of the problematics is absolutely necessary, and it's what is expected from all of us. [Note: A week after this interview, Derrida wrote in a personal correspondence, "I'm currently reading another book, as new and as important, by Greg Ulmer: *Teleteory: Grammatology in the Age of Video* (Routledge, 1989). I find it illuminating for the questions we were discussing in New York."']

Q. So you're encouraged by such attempts.

A. Of course, absolutely.

Q. For close to two decades, Roland Barthes has been refining a classroom practice of deconstruction aimed at throwing literary texts into disorder and deconstructing academic, professional discourse. He lets classroom discourse "float," "fragment," and "digress." Do you believe these techniques would be appropriate not only in the literature classroom but in the *writing* classroom? If so, in what way?

A. I wouldn't approve of simply throwing literary texts into disorder. First, deconstructing academic, professional discourse doesn't mean simply destroying the norms or pushing these norms to utter chaos. I'm not in favor simply of disorder. In fact, there are many ways of practicing order and disorder. I'm sure that there are very conservative ways of throwing texts into disorder, or very conservative ways of disorganizing the classroom. On the contrary, there are very disturbing ways of teaching quietly and, apparently, according to the most traditional forms. I'm not presenting myself as a model for pedagogy, far from it, but people who have a certain image of deconstruction and associate it with me would be very surprised by the way I teach, the way I read papers, the way I give advice to students; it's apparently a very traditional way. The scenario is very classical. In my case, in order to convey what I want to say or to provoke what I want to provoke, I need a very quiet and classical staging of the teaching. But this is not a model; my situation is very specific. When I started teaching, I arrived in the classroom (as everyone does) with a few notes, spoke according to these notes, asked questions, and so on. Now, I just lecture. I arrive with a written paper. I don't change a word for two hours. Everybody is quiet (which is usually the case in France). In some ways it's a liberal way of teaching, in that everyone can cooperate and interrupt me—though, in fact, no one does except when I stop and say, "Well, now we'll start the discussion." Nevertheless, I think that through these very academic, very quiet and conservative ways of teaching, something non-conservative and disturbing arises. But it depends on the situation. At CUNY, for instance, I don't teach the same way. I've only a few notes, and

I improvise. So, I don't think there is a model for teaching and an alternative between, let's say, a conservative and a progressive teaching. What we have to do, perhaps, once the minimal requirements are fulfilled in terms of language, grammar, comprehension, and so on, is to let each teacher have maximum freedom for his or her idiom in teaching, according, again, to the situation. And the situation depends on the audience and the teacher, and the situation is different in New York and Florida, even in some sections in New York and other sections. You have to adjust your teaching according to the situation. I call my students in France back to the most traditional ways of reading before trying to deconstruct texts; you have to understand according to the most traditional norms what an author meant to say, and so on. So I don't start with disorder; I start with the tradition. If you're not trained in the tradition, then deconstruction means nothing. It's simply nothing.

Q. What about those teachers who are afraid of what deconstruction might bring to the classroom, afraid, perhaps, of confusing students, afraid that it may just undermine some of the goals they thought they had? Is there anything we can tell them?

A. First, I would say, when they say this in good faith, I understand them and I approve. I think that if what is called "deconstruction" produces neglect of the classical authors, the canonical texts, and so on, we should fight it. I wouldn't be in favor of such a deconstruction. I'm in favor of the canon, but I won't stop there. I think that students should *read* what are considered the great texts in our tradition—even if that's not enough, even if we have to change the canon, even if we have to open the field and to bring into the canonical tradition other texts from other cultures. If deconstruction is only a pretense to ignore minimal requirements or knowledge of the tradition, it could be a bad thing. So when those colleagues complain about the fact that some students, without knowing the tradition, play at deconstruction, try to behave deconstructively, I agree that that's a mistake, a bad thing, and we shouldn't encourage it. However, sometimes some colleagues refer to these situations simply in order to *oppose* deconstruction: "Well, the effect of deconstruction is this, so we must exclude deconstruction." That's what I would call bad faith in the service of conservative politics. So, I would say that we should require, according to the situation—which may be very different from one country to the other, one city to the other—a minimal (the definition of *minimal* is problematic, I know) culture and minimal knowledge of the basic foundations of the canon. On this ground, of course, students could develop, let's say, a deconstructive practice—but only to the extent that they "know" what they are "deconstructing": an enormous network of other questions.

Q. Vincent Leitch says that deconstructive pedagogy moves "beyond" traditional liberalism in that it could serve conservative or liberal agendas. Such "heterogeneity," says Leitch, is the "hallmark of deconstructive

productions.” Peter Shaw, on the other hand, says that deconstruction is the child of French radical, leftist politics; it is by nature already political and “leftist.” Which perspective is more in line with your own?

- A. I understand why Vincent Leitch says what he says. In fact, according to the privilege you give to one or another aspect, deconstruction may look conservative. I’m in favor of tradition. I’m respectful of and a lover of the tradition. There’s no deconstruction without the memory of the tradition. I couldn’t imagine what the university could be without reference to the tradition, but a tradition that is as rich as possible and that is open to other traditions, and so on. That’s conservative; tradition is conservative to that extent. But at the same time deconstruction is not conservative. Out of respect for the tradition, deconstruction asks questions; it puts into question the tradition and even the concept of “question” (which I did in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* [Chicago UP, 1989])—and this, clearly, is a nonconservative stand. So this oscillation is not pertinent here. Deconstruction is, at the same time, conservative and nonconservative. This political translation is not pertinent here either. If you use these political criteria, these old criteria, to describe the effects of deconstruction in the academy, you say, “Well, sometimes, of course, some professors are comforted by deconstruction because it helps them to reinforce the tradition and to exclude other politically subversive questions.” That may happen, of course; or it may happen the other way around. That’s why there is not one deconstruction, and deconstruction is not a single theory or a single method. I often repeat this: deconstruction is not a method or a theory; it’s something that happens—it happens. And it happens not only in the academy; it happens everywhere in the world. It happens in society, in history, in the army, in the economy, and so on. What is called deconstruction in the academy is only a small part of a more general and, I would say, older process. There are a number of deconstructions occurring everywhere.

Now, if we refer to deconstruction as an organized discourse which appeared under that name some twenty-five years ago, of course, this phenomenon, as such, appeared in France. Nevertheless, it was not originally French; it appeared in France as already the heritage of a number of old things—German things, for instance. It was a new hybrid or graft, the French graft, of something older which implies Marxism, Heideggerianism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, and so on. So if it’s a child, it’s a bastard, I would say. As a child of French leftist politics, it was already a bastard, a hybrid. Now, I should say, since deconstruction is always associated with me, that I consider myself a leftist. I won’t say it’s visceral, but I never thought of myself as anything other than a leftist. But this doesn’t mean that deconstruction, as such, is leftist. Depending on the situation, it can be a weapon to resist, let’s say, liberal capitalism; in other situations, a way of resisting leftist totalitarianism. So it’s not intrinsically

one or the other. This doesn't mean that I have a relativistic view of deconstruction. I would say it's not a theory that can be abstracted from a given field of forces—political, economical, etc. You see, even in France it's not always considered radical and leftist. It's considered such by some and the other way around by others. If it were really only the child of French radicalism, how could you account for its success in the United States, which is more widespread than in France? For me, deconstruction is rather an American child. The fact that apparently it came from France and landed in the States but received in the States a welcome and extension which is out of proportion with what it has been in Europe, and the fact that now it is beginning to come back to Europe through the United States means that the real birthplace, if we follow this metaphor—which I would not want to follow very far—the richer, most fecund birthplace is the United States, and probably for very serious reasons. I apologize for quoting myself, but in *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, the three lectures I gave at Irvine a few years ago about deconstruction in America, I ventured to say at some point that “deconstruction is America.” It's for essential reasons that deconstruction has had such a development in this country. And we have to understand why—for what historical, political, and theological reasons in the tradition of the United States—deconstruction is such a phenomenon. So if it's a child, it's as well a child of the United States.

Q. Many compositionists draw on the work of Paulo Freire and his notions of “critical literacy” and “liberatory learning.” Are you familiar with Freire's work? If so, do you believe that deconstruction and liberatory learning share similar goals?

A. This is the first time I've seen his name.

Q. He's a Marxist educator in Brazil, and he's got quite a following in America and internationally. He is interested in subverting the traditional kinds of teaching which help to reinforce and reproduce the ideology of the ruling class and that keep people illiterate in the name of literacy. Freire wants to subvert such hierarchies.

A. Well, I'm not familiar with his work, but, referring to your description, I would say that in some situations—and we have to take such situations into account—deconstruction would help liberatory learning. I think that you couldn't compare, for instance, the situation in industrial, rich societies and the situation in oppressed, Third World countries. But in the situation of a repressive teaching institution, in the situation in which learning and culture are used in order to confirm the given hegemony, I think that deconstruction could help, could have some emancipatory effect. However, I can imagine some perverse use of deconstruction in the hands of the authorities, who might, for instance, maintain the given order by using apparently deconstructive arguments. So you have to suspect the strategy of self-appointed deconstructionists. To act in a liberatory or emancipa-

tory way, it's not enough to *claim* to be a deconstructionist or to apply deconstruction. In each situation you have to watch, and I can imagine (of course, I try not to do so) someone using deconstruction with reactionary and repressive effects or goals. That's why you can't stop watching and analyzing. You can't simply rely on names, titles, or claims.

- Q. Hélène Cixous and other French feminists advocate that women create a "women's language"—a language that inscribes femininity, a "new insurgent" language that liberates, ruptures, and transforms "phallogocentric" discourse. Such a language aims "to break up, to destroy," to "wreck partitions, classes, rhetorics, regulations and codes." Do you see these strategies as identical to those of deconstruction? Can deconstruction serve to help bring about the goals and aspirations of feminism? Or do you believe that such attempts are merely replacing one hierarchy with another?
- A. Sometimes it does; it depends on the way women and sometimes men practice this writing, teaching, speaking, and so on. Sometimes feminism replaces phallogocentrism with another kind of hegemony. I wouldn't say that all women do that, but it's a structural temptation. It's perhaps inevitable at some point that they try to reverse the given hierarchy, but if they do only that—reverse the hierarchy—they would reinscribe the same scheme. Sometimes feminism, as such, does that, and I know that some women are not happy about that. You are quoting Hélène Cixous, a very old friend of mine whom I admire deeply, and she is, I would say, one of the greatest writers in France today. She, at some point, of course, spoke of "feminine writing," but I don't think she would still do that, if by "feminine writing" you refer to a specific essentially feminine way of writing. At some points in history, women have had to claim that there is some irreducible feminine way of writing—themes, style, position in the field of literature—not in order to essentialize this, but as a phase in the ongoing war or process or struggle. But if some of them—and I don't think this is the case with Hélène Cixous—would try to say it's the eternal essential feminine which is manifested in this feminine writing, then they would repeat the scheme they claim they are fighting.
- Q. Several composition theorists are especially interested in social constructionism because if you posit that all "facts" and knowledge, even *reality* itself, are community created and maintained, then rhetoric becomes the central, paradigmatic epistemic activity. That is, if all of our knowledge and facts and reality are created by social groups, by discourse communities, then rhetoric is the key to it all. What are your thoughts about social constructionism?
- A. I must confess, I'm not familiar with the term "social constructionism."
- Q. It's a movement drawing in part from the work of Thomas Kuhn and others that posits that all knowledge, all facts, even the ways we think are not "essential" but rather depend on the social group. So, for example, if the

community of, let's say, philosophers believes such and such, then that becomes the current "knowledge" until the community of philosophers decides to change this knowledge.

- A. I wouldn't be inclined to think that the beliefs, the values, the norms in the community depend on, let's say, thinkers or philosophers, as such. This doesn't mean that philosophy or thinking is simply a symptom, but it's not a *cause* of the shared values. The social structure doesn't obey this kind of causality. I would say that philosophy is neither just an epiphenomenon, nor the cause of or the place where everything is decided on or constructed. Although I'm unfamiliar with social constructionism, I'd like to make a point about rhetoric becoming the central paradigmatic, epistemic activity. On the one hand, I would think that we should not neglect the importance of rhetoric, as if it were simply a formal superstructure or technique exterior to the essential activity. Rhetoric is something decisive in society. On the other hand, I would be very suspicious of what I would call "rhetoricism"—a way of giving rhetoric all the power, thinking that everything depends on rhetoric as simply a technique of speech. Certainly, there are no politics, there is no society without rhetoric, without the force of rhetoric. Not only in economics but also in literary strategy, rhetoric is essential. Even among diplomats, rhetoric is very important; in the nuclear age much depends on some kind of rhetoric. (I tried to show this in an article called "No Apocalypse, Not Now" in *Diacritics*.) Now, this doesn't mean that everything depends on verbal statements or formal technique of speech acts. There are speech acts everywhere, but the possibility of speech acts, or performative speech acts, depends on conditions and conventions which are not simply verbal. What I call "writing" or "text" is not simply verbal. That's why I'm very interested in rhetoric but very suspicious of rhetoricism.
- Q. How might composition teachers and theorists avoid falling into this rhetoricism? How can they be cautious; what steps can they take?
- A. There is an inherent danger of rhetoricism in the teaching of rhetoric. You can't avoid that. It's intrinsic. When you teach rhetoric you are inclined to imply that so much depends on rhetoric. But I think that a self-conscious and trained teacher, attentive to the complexity, should at the same time underline the importance of rhetoric and the limits of rhetoric—the limits of verbliness, formality, figures of speech. Rhetoric doesn't consist only in the technique of tropes, for instance. First, rhetoric is not confined to what is traditionally called figures and tropes. Secondly, rhetoric, as such, depends on conditions that are not rhetorical. In rhetoric and speaking, the same sentence may have enormous effects or have no effects at all, depending on conditions that are not verbal or rhetorical. I think a self-conscious, trained teacher of rhetoric should teach precisely what are called "pragmatics"; that is, the effects of rhetoric don't depend only on the way you utter words, the way you use tropes, the way you compose.

They depend on certain situations: political situations, economical situations—the libidinal situation, also.

- Q. Ever since Plato's opposition to rhetoric as a discipline, philosophy and rhetoric seem to have existed in a state of continual tension. Why does there seem to be tension between these disciplines? Aren't these disciplines—rhetoric and philosophy—necessarily bound together? Aren't they necessarily intricately and complexly tied?
- A. Well, from that point of view I would be on the side of philosophy. The tension comes first from the fact that rhetoric as a separate discipline, as a technique or as an autonomous field, may become a sort of empty instrument whose usefulness or effectiveness would be independent of logic, or even reference or truth—an instrument in the hands of the sophists in the sense that Plato wanted to define them. So contrary to what some people think I think—for instance, Habermas—I would be on the side of philosophy, logic, truth, reference, etc. When I question philosophy and the philosophical project as such, it's not in the name of sophistic, of rhetoric as just a playful technique. I'm interested in the rhetoric hidden in philosophy itself because within, let's say, the typical Platonic discourse there is a rhetoric—a rhetoric against rhetoric, against sophists. I've been interested in the way concepts or arguments depend intrinsically on metaphors, tropes, and are in themselves to some extent metaphors or tropes. I'm not saying that all concepts are essentially metaphors and therefore everything is rhetoric. No, I try to deconstruct the opposition between concept and metaphor and to rebuild, to restructure this field. I'm not at ease with metaphor either. I'm not saying, "Well, we should just substitute metaphor for concept or simply be content with metaphors." What I say, for example, in *White Mythology* is that the concept of metaphor, first, is a metaphor; it's loaded with philosophy—a very old philosophy—and so we shouldn't keep the concept of metaphor the way it is commonly received. So I would distrust, suspect, the couple concept and metaphor. And I would, for the same reasons, be suspicious of the opposition between philosophy and rhetoric. To the extent that I am caught up within this couple, I'm a philosopher, but I try not to remain within this opposition. I try to understand what has happened since Plato and in a recurrent way until now in this opposition between philosophy and rhetoric.
- Q. Let me ask you more about the sophists. Recently, several historians of rhetoric have sought to revive the legacy of certain "good" sophists—Gorgias, Protagoras, and Prodicus, for example—finding them lost exemplars of an anti-Platonism attuned to the ways that the contexts for rhetorical acts can shift. In your deconstruction of the *Phaedrus* in "Plato's Pharmacy," you seem to offer support for a sophistic stance toward rhetoric and philosophy. Yet, at times you seem to retreat from a full-fledged endorsement of the sophists. Would you elaborate on your attitude toward the sophists for



these historians? Do you think that we know enough about them to conceptualize their legacy?

- A. Your question implies the answer, and, in a way, I've already suggested an answer. I've resisted the way Plato attacked or imprisoned the sophists, captured the sophists, in the figure of the sophists. To that extent, it's as if I were simply counterattacking Plato from the position of the sophists. But as you've said, it's not that simple: if the sophists are what Plato thinks they are, I'm not in favor of the sophists; however, I think it's much more complicated. We don't have enough knowledge; the question of what the sophists really were is an enormous question. I wouldn't venture to simplify this. Considering how little we know of what the sophists were, I think today we must be interested in the challenge philosophy was to the sophists, as well as the challenge the sophists were, and still are in their modern form, to philosophy. This has had, again, a recurrent form in many epochs, including Nietzsche's and ours. So today, first, we should remember what happened between Plato, Socrates and the sophists—remember all the subsequent figures of this opposition. But also we must try not to reduce modern conflicts to this opposition. There are people who say, "Well, today we have to restore philosophy against the modern sophists." And usually deconstructionists are considered the modern sophists. Such people are reducing the complexity and the singularity of the situation. We're not in the same situation. We have, of course, to refer to these Greek situations because they are part of our heritage, but some essential things have changed, and we have to take these changes into account. There are no more sophists today and I would say no more philosophers in the given sense. So I'm not in favor of sophistic. But neither am I against the sophists, against Protagoras and the others. I would try to give an accurate analysis if possible of what is inherited, but also of what is new in our culture. And I think the battle between Plato and the sophists is not pertinent enough.
- Q. Rhetoric is defined in many disciplines as Aristotle's "discovery of the available means of persuasion." Yet, in many English departments, the notion of "rhetoric" that has become increasingly familiar is the view promulgated by Nietzsche, Paul de Man, J. Hillis Miller, Barbara Johnson, and others. They seem to equate rhetoric with the cognitively disruptive interplay of tropes—the status of text as an allegory of its ultimate unreadability. Some rhetoricians tend to regard this notion as an undue truncation of what appears to be a Western rhetorical tradition. Would you agree with this judgment? By giving such importance to their own particular sense of "rhetoric," can these deconstructionists be accused of "rhetoricism"? Or does this set of questions unfairly characterize them?
- A. This is a very delicate question since names are dropped. It's very difficult. As you know, I'm very close to the people you mention here, but at the same time I'm not doing exactly what they're doing with regard to

rhetoric. All of them are attentive, and I think rightly so, to rhetoric. First, I wouldn't agree with this opposition. Paul de Man, for example, is interested in rhetoric also as a means of persuasion. And his theories precisely of grammar, rhetoric, tropes, and persuasion are very complex ones.

Q. So you don't think that this work necessarily subverts the ancient rhetorical tradition?

A. I would not simply reduce these people, these works, to a single, homogeneous set; however new these works are, they aren't simply inventing a new rhetoric or breaking with the tradition. Their relation to the tradition is more complex: it disrupts and it inherits at the same time. For instance, when Paul de Man speaks of "unreadability," he's not simply a rhetorician (although in comparison what I'm doing is less rhetorician than his work). There are so many differences here between de Man and myself that this is difficult to answer, but let me try an answer that would do justice to the complexity without really being able to engage in the full complexity of this subject. I would say, for instance, that de Man and Hillis Miller, differently, are very much, and I would say rightly so, interested in rhetoric in literature and in the problem of rhetoric. Sometimes it's as if rhetoric could have the last word for both of them, especially for Paul de Man. Then, perhaps, someone could speak of rhetoricism. Sometimes I'm tempted to say, "There is a danger of rhetoricism here—that is, of claiming to exhaust the text, the reading of the text, through the means of rhetorical questions." But at some point, what de Man and Miller do goes further than rhetoric. For instance, when de Man speaks of the aporia between performative and constative, when he speaks of unreadability and so on, he exceeds the classical field of rhetoric, although through a new problematic of rhetoric. Another example is when Hillis Miller asks questions, when he not only reads Victorian novels in a new way, in a deconstructive way, being attentive to all the rhetorical figures, but when he asks ethical questions, when he speaks of the ethics of reading, and so on; the ethics of reading cannot be reduced to rhetoric.

This doesn't mean that rhetoric is simply subordinate, not simply, but rhetoric is not the last word. Rhetoric is subordinate to something which is not simply rhetorical. When sometimes I've used the word *rhetoricism*, it was not simply in reference to rhetoric. I remember having used this word as an accusation. I was not referring to what we call "rhetoric" or to the attention given to rhetoric. On the contrary, I am in favor of the most rigorous and most generous attention given to rhetoric. What I'm suspicious of under the name "rhetoricism" is the authority of language. *Rhetoric* comes from, as you know, a Greek word meaning *speaking*. So, the charge of logocentrism or phonocentrism is, by itself, a charge against rhetoricism not the narrow field of what we call rhetoric, but simply the authority of speech, the authority of speaking. If you give absolute

privilege to rhetoric you fall into what I call logocentrism or phonocentrism; that's what I meant when I spoke of rhetoricism. I was not charging anyone with being too attentive to rhetoric. I think we should be attentive to rhetoric and to language as much as possible, but the hegemony of speaking over anything else—writing, acting, and so on—is a kind of rhetoricism. So for me, rhetoricism in that context is synonymous with logocentrism or phonocentrism.

Q. Some of your remarks on Chinese characters in *Of Grammatology* suggest that logocentrism may be less prevalent in non-Western cultures. If so, can we turn to these other cultures as a model of a post-logocentric culture, or are we doomed to remain within logocentrism and struggle against it?

A. Well, for these very, very difficult questions there are many possible answers. Let me attempt an immediate answer, not a learned or scholarly answer. I wouldn't say that logocentrism, as such, is less prevalent in non-Western cultures. I would speak of "phonocentrism"; I would say that the phonocentrism of a culture linked to a technique of writing, which submits, for instance, writing to speech, is less prevalent in cultures in which non-phonetic writing prevails—the Chinese language, for instance. But I would dissociate here phonocentrism from logocentrism, because even in a culture which is non-phonocentric with respect to its technique of writing, the logocentric scheme may prevail with all its essential features, even all the oppositions, the hierarchies which are linked to logocentrism in Western cultures. So I would say that phonocentrism has prevailed in Western cultures. Logocentrism, however, is a universal structure.

That's the unlearned answer, using the word *logos* in the wide sense. Now, if you refer to *logos* in its Greek, determined sense, then, of course, logocentrism is only a Western phenomenon. Then we'll have to understand what *logos* is. Last week I gave a lecture on Heidegger and precisely on the tradition of *logos*, what he wrote about *logos*. I tried to show how Heidegger was logocentric, not because *logos* was considered the center, but because, for Heidegger, *logos* is a gatherer; it's something which assembles, unifies, gathers everything. Logocentrism wouldn't mean in that case that *logos* is at the center of everything, but that *logos* is the centering structure; it is the structure or the experience of re-gathering—that is, re-assembling around the circle, re-forming the circle, not being at the center of the circle but gathering instead of dissociating the authority of the one as opposed to the multiple, to the other. So from that point of view, if you interpret the tradition of *logos*—which, of course, you can't do improvising in front of these little tape recorders—then I would say logocentrism is essentially Western. Logocentrism literally, as such, is nothing else but Greek. Everywhere that the Greek culture is the dominant heritage there is logocentrism.

I wouldn't draw as a conclusion, as a consequence of this, that we should simply leave it behind. Perhaps modern China is Greek and as

logocentric as any other culture. I wouldn't say that we have to "leave" logocentrism. It's something that we can't simply turn our back on and say, "enough." There's another way of, let's say, living with this memory and transforming it and thinking it, and to think of it is not simply living within it. You can travel all your life and go very far from Europe without stopping being logocentric, and you can live in Athens or in New York or in Rome and already have left logocentrism to some degree. I think that the deconstruction of logocentrism is not a matter of decision, it's not a matter of deliberate politics; it happens—it just happens.

Q. Have the non-Western cultures been an influence on your thought?

A. Unfortunately not. The *existence* of such cultures, the *fact* that they limit or delimit or make a pressure on our own, of course, has an influence. I can't simply sleep and ignore this. But if by "influence" you mean: do I really know from the inside a non-Western culture, then no, unfortunately; of course, I should but I don't. I would like to, but that's a limitation on my part. What is interesting to me—and unfortunately I'm not able to follow this work—is that there have been a number of publications on the relationship between deconstruction and some non-Western cultures—Buddhism and Zen, etc. So I read to some extent these books, but I can't really say they've influenced me.

Q. Final question: your work has been cited extensively by countless scholars from numerous disciplines. Such frequent citation necessarily increases the opportunity for misunderstanding or misrepresenting your views. Are you aware of any specific misunderstanding that you would like to take issue with at this time? Any analyses or critiques of your work that have been misinformed?

A. First, there are no simple misunderstandings. Each time you read a text—and this is my situation and the situation of every reader—there is some misunderstanding, but I know of no way to avoid this. Misunderstanding is always significant; it's not simply a mistake, or just an absurdity. It's something that is motivated by some interest and some understanding. Sometimes the most ferocious critics who react vehemently and passionately and sometimes with hatred understand more than supporters do, and it's *because* they understand more that they react this way. Sometimes they understand unconsciously, or they know what is at stake. Sometimes I think that this enemy, because he's so ferocious, so nervous, is more aware of what is at stake than a friendly ally is. So, sometimes misunderstanding is understanding, and the other way around.

After these preliminary cautions, I would say, very briefly, that the misunderstandings that I deplore most would be, in the broad sense, political and institutional. I think that the people who try to represent what I'm doing or what so called "deconstruction" is doing, as, on the one hand, trying to destroy culture or, on the other hand, to reduce it to a kind of negativity, to a kind of death, are misrepresenting deconstruction. Decon-

struction is essentially affirmative. It's in favor of reaffirmation of memory, but this reaffirmation of memory asks the most adventurous and the most risky questions about our tradition, about our institutions, about our way of teaching, and so on. When people try to confine deconstruction in negative models as something nonpolitical, noninstitutional or as something confined to books, to speculative speeches, to what is in the library, when they interpret text as something which is written down and not in the generalized concept that I've tried to elaborate, I think it's a very serious misrepresentation. But it's the symptom of a resistance; it's not simply a mistake. It's precisely a resistance to what is happening through deconstruction. So I try to understand what this resistance is, where it comes from; and sometimes this resistance is at work within myself, within the people who are supposed to be in favor of deconstruction. These prejudices about the notion of text, the notion of writing, are as old as what I call "deconstruction," which is about twenty-five years old. From the beginning, I tried again and again to say, "Well, a text is not simply an alphabetic note or a book." And from this statement a number of consequences should follow. But from the beginning and from the most authorized voices in France and over here came not simply the misunderstanding but the deliberate effect of misunderstanding. They didn't want to understand. Foucault tried not to understand, and many people, distinguished individuals who really understood what was going on, tried to reduce the text to "the book," the writing to the "pen"—and with all the consequences of this reduction. If this mistake, this prejudice, could be left behind or deconstructed, then a number of consequences would follow.

## **Gender, Culture, Ideology**

*JAC* invites submissions for a special issue, "Gender, Culture, Ideology," to be published in the summer of 1990. The editor is particularly interested in essays exploring the role of gender in writing and in the composition classroom; ideology in the classroom, composition scholarship, and the discipline of English; and, generally, any discussion of social/political concerns relevant to composition theory and the teaching of writing, especially on the advanced level.