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Derrida's Deconstruction: Wholeness and *Différance*

Is deconstruction a movement in philosophy or in literary theory (or neither, as a deconstructionist would likely insist)? In this paper I assume that it is both. However, I shall concentrate on the philosophical claims of deconstruction, hoping that an assessment of those claims will shed some light on its role in literary theory. I shall begin by examining the philosophical pedigree of deconstruction. It is clear enough that a line can be drawn linking deconstruction with Nietzsche, connecting along the way Heidegger and Husserl. Some commentators have extended the line back to Hegel where I begin my investigation, ignoring the question of how far back the line goes. I believe that it is illuminating to compare the central claims of deconstruction with Hegel's concept of wholeness, or unity, embodied in his "Absolute Idea." This task has been undertaken by William Desmond in his recent paper, "Hegel, Dialectic, and Deconstruction."¹ In Section I, I discuss Desmond's comparison of Hegel's dialectic and deconstruction. This discussion reveals a common complaint against deconstruction. In order to show that this complaint represents a misconstrual of deconstruction, I examine in some detail the philosophical stance of deconstruction in Sections II and III, and return to the complaint in Section IV. In the final Section I show that, in turn, the deconstructionist critique of "Western metaphysics" and *a fortiori* of modern analytical philosophy is misplaced. For simplicity, I shall refer exclusively to the writings of Jacques Derrida. The reader is entitled to substitute "Derrida's deconstruction" for every occurrence of "deconstruction" in this paper.

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I

According to Desmond, in the paper cited above, "many of the themes implicit in the strategy of deconstruction are articulated in Hegel's view of dialectic" (pp. 252–253). I think he is right about this. Despite the fact that both Nietzsche and Heidegger regard Hegel as a representative of the "traditional metaphysics" they wish to attack, many of the Hegelian themes come very close to the Nietzsche–Heidegger metaphysics and transitively to deconstruction. One such theme is the process of *becoming* in which dialectic situates us. Dialectic emphasizes the conflict, or opposition, between thesis and antithesis in a way not unlike the way deconstruction emphasizes the conflict between possible meanings or between certain predicates or concepts. With regard to language and literary theory, this similarity becomes more striking when we note with Desmond that for Hegel, "language at its richest is dialectical" (p. 254). The second theme in Hegelian dialectic, which is closely related to the first, is the process of differentiation. Indeed, becoming depends on differentiation: to become is to differ from oneself. As Desmond has remarked, "a similarity with Derrida's *différance* strikes one on this point" (*ibid.*). Putting together the two themes or processes, we derive many Hegelian claims that deconstructionists will be happy to endorse. In Desmond's words, "Everything we try to affirm with absolute fixity falls in time. Its fixity dissolves and comes to nothing" (p. 255). Further,

Hegel warns us that we must stare the negative in the face. And in the *Phenomenology* we discover consciousness trying to assert itself with complete certainty in a plurality of different forms, each of which it tries to fix as absolute. None proves absolute, each form breaks up out of its own inherent tension or strain. Each configuration (*Gestalt*) of consciousness disfigures itself, each form deforms itself, every construction deconstructs itself under the relentless power of "negative" (pp. 255–256).

Despite the above similarities, Desmond insists that the path of Hegel's dialectic soon diverges from that of deconstruction. He claims that the dialectical path enables us in the end to preserve the character of wholeness of an art work. By contrast, there is a suspicion that "this essential wholeness dissolves at the hands of deconstructionists" (p. 245). Desmond argues, quite correctly I think, that Hegel's *Aufhebung* is a process of articulation which "does not just form and deform, construct and de-

construct. It reforms and reconstructs" (p. 257). As such, the dialectical approach is one way of making "intelligible the experience of (the) rich wholeness" that "a great art work communicate(s) to the reader" (p. 258). Deconstruction goes along with dialectic in drawing our attention to the complexity and richness of an art work by pointing out the contraries and oppositions, but fails to take us back to the original synthesis and thus "has difficulty in making intelligible the possibility of this original synthesis" (p. 259), giving rise to the suspicion that "the art work in its integrity has disintegrated or even vanished in the process" (*ibid.*).

Desmond's complaint against deconstruction is a common one which, indeed, the word "deconstruction" itself invites. However, while I take Desmond's account of Hegel to be largely correct, I believe he has, as many others have, misconstrued the philosophical stance of deconstruction. Before showing this, let us take a closer look at this common complaint. Desmond claims that having "analyzed the original unity into its inherent oppositions, the deconstructionist then goes on in practice to deny the possibility of bringing together these oppositions" (*ibid.*). Since deconstruction destroys wholeness, so goes the complaint, and since "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, . . . , deconstruction alone cannot tell us what this 'more' is, though (it) can illumine the complexity of the parts for us" (p. 260). Desmond goes on to say: "Inevitably the feeling surfaces that something essential has been missed, that deconstruction itself represses our experience of this 'more', our experience of concrete present wholeness" (*ibid.*). Finally: "The deconstructionist plays with this infinite chaos in Nietzschean fashion with a clarity of consciousness almost Cartesian. Not surprisingly we sometimes find the deconstructionist speaking about oscillating between nihilism and logocentrism" (p. 261). The most common words in the vocabulary of critics of deconstruction seem to be "chaos" and "nihilism." To avoid falling into chaos and nihilism, Desmond and other critics claim that we must "deconstruct deconstruction," we must "negate the negation."

To put the matter bluntly, critics complain that the deconstructionist breaks up the whole and leaves it at that, or leaves it to others to pick up the pieces. This makes deconstruction essentially a destructive process. However, this is a serious misconstrual of deconstruction. It is arguable that the deconstructionist tries to do precisely the opposite. In showing that breaking up the whole into parts will lead to conflict, opposition, or even contradiction among the parts, the deconstructionist tries to show that the breaking up the whole into parts in the first place is a mistake. The

deconstructionist aims to show that the “analytical” approach—consisting of dissecting the whole into component parts, classifying, distinguishing, categorizing, etc.—leads soon enough to an untenable position. There will also be a risk of a much more serious error committed when one adheres to one of the parts or either of the pair of oppositions. This is a serious error because, as the deconstructionist sees it, none of the parts can stand on its own, and to lean on any one of them risks pulling down the whole structure, or dissolving the whole. Thus, the deconstructionist is likely to argue that it is not deconstruction that breaks up the parts, leaving it to others to pick up the pieces, and that the truth is the other way around: it is those in “traditional” philosophy who destroy wholeness by imagining that it has well-defined parts and then abandoning the whole for one of the imagined parts.

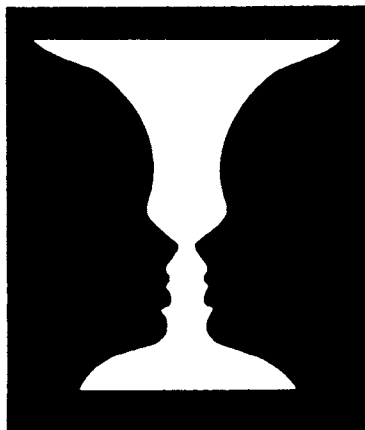
I shall try to illustrate my point in two stages. I shall argue first that for at least one deconstructionist, Derrida, wholeness is in some sense inviolable, and that the parts are what they are only by virtue of the dynamic processes of differing and deferring, or by *différance*, inherent in the whole itself. I shall next illustrate the point with reference to some specific cases of Derrida's deconstruction.

II

In *Speech and Phenomena*,² Derrida refers to the totality of being as the “text.” This is the unity, or wholeness, out of which particularity emerges, though *not at all* in the same way as particulars emerging from Platonic forms. For Derrida, the particulars arise from what he calls the “play of differences.” The text itself contains a system of differentiation which can divide and cut up the same whole into different parts. Thus, each part owes its existence to *other parts which it is not*. It is what it is by virtue of being different from what it is not, by virtue of the “play of differences.” The idea of differentiation is borrowed from Ferdinand de Saussure, who claims that there are distinctions and differences within language that can generate linguistic concepts not corresponding to any extra-linguistic entities.³ For Saussure, a thing, anything, can be defined *within* language by being contrasted with other terms within the system. However, Derrida goes much further than Saussure (who restricts his claims to linguistic entities), and claims that the play of differences also has a *temporal* dimension. Thus, a thing can also be defined in terms of being different from what it has been and what it is yet to be. It is always a *deferred* something, and there is always a something else which is deferred with respect to it. One might say, to

illustrate Derrida's point, that an acorn is in part a deferred oak tree *and* relates to some other thing in such a way that to that thing it is a deferred acorn. Thus, Derrida supplements Saussure's process of differentiation with the temporal process of *deferral*, and combines the two elements, difference and deferral in his notion of "differance." Derrida goes on to say that *différance* is responsible for everything in our experience. It is a force that operates on the whole, the text, which has an ontological priority over everything. Thus, "differance could be said to designate the productive and primordial constituting causality, the process of scission and division whose differings and differences would be the constituted products or effects" (*Speech and Phenomena*, p. 137). For Derrida, it is differance that "introduces into self-presence from the beginning all the impurity putatively excluded from it," allowing the living present to spring forth "out of its non-identity with itself" (p. 85). One is here reminded of the Hegelian processes of differentiation and becoming mentioned in Section I.

On my interpretation, Derrida's view is that the whole is prior to its parts. Derrida could be said to have inverted the usual intuition that the whole cannot exist without its parts, saying instead that the parts cannot exist without the whole. The whole itself, the text, is just what it is, no matter what parts we see in it, or how we actually experience the parts. It follows that fixation on the parts amounts to an inversion of priority, to a metaphysical neglect of wholeness as the ontological foundation. Furthermore, to restrict oneself in any way whatsoever to any one part to the exclusion of others is to fail to realize that the very existence of the chosen part depends on those that have been excluded. Let me illustrate this point with the following, familiar drawing:



Whether we see (i.e. experience) this drawing as a vase (the white part) or as two faces (the black part) depends very much on what we *do not* see (or more accurately, what we exclude from our seeing). One part cannot exist, hence cannot be experienced, without the other. One may add that if the differences between the white and the black are “played out” differently—and by that I mean both spatially and temporally, or played out *différent*—we will experience different things.

III

It is all too easy to misconstrue deconstruction if we lose sight of the metaphysical stance outlined above. I wish to show now that this stance is the thread that connects Derrida's various deconstructive readings. I begin with his overall critique of what he calls the “metaphysics of presence.” Derrida believes that this metaphysics is implicit in the traditional approach to language according to which the word, or sign, is linked to a “signified,” be it a thought or an idea (a “referent,” generally), in the sense that some specific referent is taken to be *fully present* to a sign. But, in line with the metaphysical stance, it must be said that the present cannot be experienced independently of the absent, i.e., the past and the future. In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida embraces Husserl's account of the consciousness of the present as *structurally* linked to the *retention* of the past and the *protention* of the future.⁴ Thus, the “metaphysics of presence” is nothing more than an improper fixation on one part of a whole, which cannot exist without other parts. If I am right, then, Derrida in his critique of the “metaphysics of presence” urges us to return to the inviolable wholeness of time, which is itself only a part of the wholeness of text.

In *Of Grammatology*,⁵ Derrida provides a deconstructive reading of Rousseau, focusing on Rousseau's opposition of nature to culture. For Rousseau, culture improves on nature and eventually takes over. Culture is said to *supplement* nature by adding to it. But as Derrida sees it, this account displays Rousseau's fixation on nature and culture as separate elements, as well as his bias in favour of culture. The fixation and bias prevent Rousseau from seeing that nature and culture both belong to the wholeness of men and women, that there is no such thing as unsupplemented nature, that there are no unsupplemented men and women. The process of supplementation, argues Derrida, does not divide nature from culture in the way Rousseau envisages. Rousseau's “supplement” is an “undecidable” which disallows any reconstitution or synthesis of the opposing terms.

In a paper entitled “Signature Event Context,”⁵ Derrida argues that the nature of a sign is such that it cannot be pinned down to any single experience such as one might have in writing, reading, uttering, or hearing it, i.e., it cannot be pinned down to any single context. Derrida claims that “a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context, that is, with the collectivity of presences organizing the moment of its inscription . . . No context can entirely enclose it” (p. 182). Any single context of experience is merely a part of, or an episode in, the whole life of the sign. To fixate on any such part, or episode—e.g., on the occasion of my writing these words, or on my authorship of them—is to ignore the fact that it is such an episode—e.g., my writing these words—only by virtue of the infinite possibilities of *other* episodes—e.g., other writings. For Derrida, something is a sign only if it is *iterable*, or repeatable in numerous possible episodes or linguistic experiences. Thus, *iterability* belongs to the structure of the sign. The sign itself is a whole, a unity, having an iterability which functions as a differentiating or rather *différentiating* force, creating infinite possibilities of different employments of a sign, or different experiences. That is why it is improper to tie the sign to any single person’s thought or idea as the meaning or referent of that sign. Given my interpretation here, when Derrida and some other deconstructionists talk about severing the link between the signifier (the sign) and the signified, they can be said to be urging us to respect the inviolable wholeness of the sign.

With this in mind, Derrida goes on to criticize Austin’s account of “performatives” in *How To Do Things With Words*. According to Derrida, the trouble with Austin’s analyses is that they “at all times require a value of *context*, and even of a context exhaustively determined, in theory or teleologically” (p. 187). We are reminded that Austin restricts his discussion of *performatives* to certain contexts described as “serious,” “felicitous,” or “normal” and thus excludes “non-serious” contexts which he calls “infelicities” (such as the context of a theatre or a work of fiction). Furthermore, Austin regards the “non-serious” as “*parasitic* upon its normal use.” By now Derrida’s objection should be obvious. He asks rhetorically: “For ultimately, isn’t it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, ‘non-serious,’ *citation* (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality—or rather, a general iterability—without which there would not even be a ‘successful’ performative?” (p. 191). Once again, we have seen that Derrida draws attention to an improper fixation on a part (the “serious”) of the whole (which in this case is the “graphematic structure”). This whole possesses a *différentiating*

force which produces the different contexts discussed by Austin. All these contexts stand and fall together, and none can be excluded. "*Différance*, the irreducible absence of intention or attendance to the performative utterance, . . . , is what authorizes me, . . . , to posit the general graphematic structure of every 'communication'" (pp. 192–193).

IV

We can now return to the common complaint against deconstruction discussed in Section I, in particular, to Desmond's suspicion that "wholeness dissolves at the hands of the deconstructionists." Given my interpretation above, this clearly represents a misconstrual of deconstruction. In fact, if I am right, the deconstructionist's concern is quite the opposite: he is concerned to preserve wholeness, and argue that while the force of *différance* cuts up and divides the whole, the text enables us to experience different aspects, parts, or episodes of the whole. Bearing in mind that no single part can exist without other parts, or without the whole. As a result, deconstruction, or Derrida's deconstruction, is much closer to Hegel's dialectic than Desmond has suggested. Hegel's description of the Absolute as the "identity of identity and difference" is something that Derrida would certainly endorse. Indeed, we may say that Derrida has taken this "identity" further and given it a force—*différance*—that can generate the differences. Thus, the dynamism of deconstruction is no less than that of dialectic. At lower levels, Desmond acknowledges that there is an agreement between deconstruction and dialectic, but the agreement might be much closer than Desmond believes. For instance, Hegel's advice that "we must stare the negative in the face" could well have come from Derrida. (Consider, for instance, my example of the vase–faces drawing.) Thus, Desmond's claim that we must "deconstruct deconstruction," or "negate the negation" (p. 261), is somewhat misplaced: the negation negates itself, and deconstruction deconstructs itself, as does everything else, in the wholeness of the text.

There are of course differences between dialectic and deconstruction, but they do not lie in their respective attitudes towards wholeness. It is not true, as we have seen, that Hegel's dialectic respects wholeness and deconstruction does not. The differences lie, rather, in the starting point and the direction of analysis. Hegel's dialectic is a struggle *upwards* towards the Absolute Idea. Its starting point is the particularity of a certain thesis, leading to the recognition of an antithesis, and then to a synthesis, in an

endless process of *Aufhebung*. The dialectical process leads to the Absolute as the *destination*. For deconstruction, the starting point is the whole itself, moving *downwards* towards the opposing and contrasting elements by virtue of the force of *différance*. The text, the whole, is the *base* from which *différance* operates—it is not a dialectical destination. For Derrida, the opposing elements cannot be synthesized dialectically (i.e., in an upward fashion), but should rather be seen as coming down from a whole which must always be presupposed. Thus, he writes in “Signature Event Context” (a title which designates a “whole” that cannot be separated even by commas):

(The) spacing which separates (the sign) from other elements of the internal contextual chain . . . is not the simple negativity of a lacuna but rather the emergence of the mark. It does not remain . . . as the labor of the negative in the service of meaning, of the living concept, of the *telos*, supersedable and reducible in the *Aufhebung* of a dialectic (p. 182).

Given the differences between the two approaches as I have outlined, one may argue that deconstruction has a definite advantage over dialectic as an approach in literary theory. Thus, deconstruction enables us to see an art work in many different ways, depending on how the differences are “played out.” There could well be different *kinds* of opposition and contrast. There is no reason why the force of *différance* should determine a unique set of possibilities. Using the text as the home base, we may venture out in different directions and acquire different experiences. In this way, the same work of art can be experienced anew, time and again. This possibility not only does *not* dissolve wholeness, but is presupposed by it. Furthermore, this would not be possible in a dialectical approach which requires that we move *away* from our experiences towards some *fixed* destination. So while the dynamism in deconstruction is at least equal to that in Hegel’s dialectic, the former is certainly much more creative. The deconstructionist’s wholeness is “open” to richness and complexity, whilst there is a sense in which Hegel’s dialectic is “closed.” Desmond seems to have an awareness of this point, which forces him to defend Hegel by claiming that Hegel’s wholeness “need not be closure but may be ‘open’” (p. 261). Whether this defense is successful or not, we have seen that deconstruction does not need one as it already opens out to diverse possibilities, experiences, and *interpretations*.

V

From the philosophical stance above, Derrida has launched an attack on "traditional" philosophy, on the "metaphysics of presence." A brief assessment of this attack is now in order.

For Derrida, there is nothing wrong with descending to the level of the opposing and contrasting elements. His advice, however, is that we should not stay there and become lost or unable to see the wood for the trees. Thus, he writes: "By no means do I draw the conclusion that there is no relative specificity of effects of consciousness, or of effects of speech . . . , that there is no performative effect, . . ." ("Signature Event Context," p. 193). What Derrida objects to is the fixation on some "specificity" at the exclusion of all else, in view of the fact that the "all else" structurally props up that "specificity." However, when an analytical philosopher focuses on some one element, part, episode, or context of the whole, he or she is not necessarily committing the fallacy of "not seeing the woods for the trees." (The fallacy of *decomposition*?) When Austin, for instance, focuses on the "felicitous," or ordinary contexts, he does not necessarily destroy the "graphematic structure" which would be the case only if Austin's account meant that the performative had lost its iterability in other contexts. Derrida seems to have realized this about Austin's position. Thus, in his reply to Searle,⁷ "Limited Inc abc . . .,"⁸ (again, a title with an implication of wholeness), he credits Austin with a recognition of the inter-relatedness of contexts, but insists that Austin is to be criticized for claiming that the "infelicitous" is *parasitic upon* the felicitous. This shows Austin's bias towards one particular element. *Structurally*, all the contrasting contexts are equal, and the bias towards any one could pull down the whole structure.

It has to be admitted that Derrida's complaint against Austin in "Limited Inc abc . . ." is legitimate. Similar complaints of bias have been raised by deconstructionists against philosophers from Plato to Descartes, from Leibnitz to Austin. For instance, Descartes's bias against "madness" in the very first Meditation has not escaped the attention of deconstructionists (Foucault in particular), who ask quite legitimately why Descartes entertains the possibility of dreaming and yet not the possibility of madness. However, the fact remains that, on the whole, when we choose to see things in one way we do not throw away what structurally supports our choice. The word "choice" is important here. It indicates a desire, or a preference, *not a cognition*. The desire for something is perfectly compatible with the cogni-

tion that that thing is what it is by virtue of what it is not (now and other times), by virtue of all the negativity surrounding and thus delineating it (spatially and temporally). It is true that our cognition of something involves the whole structure in which that something is located, thus requiring us to have cognition of other elements in that structure. However, to desire is to isolate and to select, or to show bias. In cognition, all structural elements are equal. In a desire, they are not—they cannot be. Will wholeness dissolve in a desire? I believe quite the opposite is the case. A meaningful desire *requires* that we have a *clear cognition* of what it is that we desire, which in turn requires, on Derrida's own terms, that the structural whole be clearly before the desiring subject. For there to be a choice one has to be conscious of what is *not chosen*. As the contrast fades away, so does the choice. It makes no sense to say, for instance, that people have chosen democracy when they have no idea what the alternatives are. In fact, this link between choice and cognition enables us to say that to refuse to choose, to refuse to show bias, is the same thing as to refuse to "stare the negative in the face."

With the distinction between choice and cognition in mind, one might defend Austin along the following lines. Austin's talk about performatives reflects his *choice* of subject matter. As a choice, Austin is entitled, indeed required, to *exclude* what is not chosen. His exclusion of certain contexts of speech act (the "infelicities") thus reflects his desire to give an analytical account of certain types of speech act. This choice does not destroy the "graphematic structure." On the contrary, the choice requires Austin to be at all times conscious of the contrasting and opposing contexts. Still, it would be difficult to defend Austin's claim that some contexts are *cognitively* parasitic upon others.

The strategy with which I have defended Austin may be employed to defend certain concerns of "traditional" philosophy. I have elsewhere⁹ identified one such concern as being with meaning and truth. We have seen how Derrida's philosophical stance allows him to sever the link between the sign and what it "stands for" which is taken to be its meaning in "traditional" philosophy. Here again, one might say that the fixing meaning reflects a *choice* which in turn presupposes our consciousness of what is not chosen. Thus, to say that a sentence (a novel, a poem) says (means) something is *not* to ignore, downgrade, or otherwise obliterate those other things that it could well be saying. Indeed, it is to presuppose that it could well be saying them. As these other possible meanings become fewer and/or less obvious, the meaning that we have fixed on, or chosen,

becomes less significant and our "taking it to mean" loses its significance. It is arguable that the concern with meaning and truth in "traditional" philosophy reflects the very fact that choices have to be made constantly in life. Indeed, to live is to make choices, show bias, rise from the anonymity of the whole, and define oneself (as existentialists would say). And to make such choices just is to descend into "relative specificity," to determine meanings and intentions, interpret, and rejoin the severed link between the signifier and the signified if indeed it has been severed. Such choices are consistent with, indeed require, the *cognition* of the structural whole.

It might be worth noting that some positions within the analytical tradition could be said to be immune from the deconstructionist attack simply because their metaphysical stance is not unlike that of deconstruction. Kripke's essentialism is a prime example. Thus, for Kripke, the essence of a thing includes what it has been and is yet to become, a view not unlike the temporal aspect of *différance* or the process of becoming in Hegel and Nietzsche. It is no wonder that Christopher Norris has given Kripke quite a favourable deconstructionist reading.¹⁰

We must conclude that the philosophical stance of deconstruction does not warrant a blanket attack on "traditional" philosophy. The deconstructionists should not set up their position in opposition to it (which is itself an un-deconstructionist practice). To the extent that they do, it is in the end not a significant failing. On the positive side, we owe it to the deconstructionists for having alerted us to the danger of being too well-conditioned by our own specific choices, forgetting as a result the fact that they are nothing more than choices and mistaking them for some reality forcing itself upon us. In the case of a work of art, the danger is to mistake a chosen interpretation for the unique and true interpretation. Against deconstruction, it might be said that this approach could result in rampant relativism: any choice or interpretation will do. However, if I am right, this need not be the outcome. Rampant relativism would result only if our choices were at variance with one another and showed no tendency to converge. But we know that in fact life is reasonably well-ordered and stable, that communication is more or less successful. Thus, while we are free to choose, we on the whole tend to choose much the same things. There are biological as well as other reasons for this phenomenon. The "play of differences" can result in various performances, but we on the whole tend to watch the same shows.

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NOTES

1. "Hegel, Dialectic, and Deconstruction," *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol.18(1985), pp. 244–263.
2. Trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
3. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, in collaboration with Albert Reidlinger, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1959).
4. Ironically, Derrida uses Husserl's own account to attack Husserl's view that a sign can *indicate* something specific or particular.
5. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1976).
6. *Glyph*, Vol.1(1977), pages 172–197.
7. "Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida," *Glyph*, Vol.1(1977), pages 198–208.
8. *Glyph*, Vol.2(1978), pages 162–254.
9. "On Deconstructing Philosophy," *Metaphilosophy*, forthcoming.
10. *The Deconstructive Turn* (London: Methuen, 1983).