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Deconstruction, Process, Writing

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Deconstruction, Process, Writing

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While some excitement—of both threat and possibility—posed by the entry of poststructuralism into composition theory may still linger in the hopes and fears of our profession, a variety of efforts at unfolding and surveying the pertinence of deconstruction to the teaching of writing have by now made the specter familiar. Proposals for daily use of deconstruction in the classroom now exist, as do more general considerations of the benefits and unhappinesses held in store by the meeting of deconstruction and writing pedagogy. Indeed, enough of these exist to warrant some assessment of the encounter between Derridean thinking and theories about writing and its teaching. Since deconstruction presents itself as a precipitator of change in metaphysics, epistemology, and reason itself, as well as a radically subversive political force, one might expect to see, with this embracing of deconstruction, a correspondingly profound shaking of the foundations in our teaching of writing. But such a shaking is not on the horizon of what still looks like an eminently reasonable and politically unexceptional composition pedagogy. Since profound differences are not there to trace, the task here will instead be to disentangle the interweavings of deconstruction and composition theory in order to point out some of the effects of this meeting, to trace some ways in which deconstruction has been tucked into familiar writing theories and teaching orthodoxies, and to identify loose

ends, which if pulled, might yet transform (for better or for worse?) our teaching practices, the institutions these practices support, and most especially, our students' writing.

As a beginning, I would like to mention a brief piece by Denis Donoghue titled "Relax, It's Only a Theory," published in the *New York Times Book Review*. In it, Donoghue tells his readers not to fret about deconstruction. It is only a theory, not a belief—that is, he writes, not a basis for action. It is a seminar topic, a philosophy of the theoretical classroom not a philosophy of the streets, and "nobody proposes to act or to speak according to deconstruction once the seminar is over." Donoghue breathes a sigh of relief that deconstruction has not affected what people do—how they act, how they speak, how they write. His essay, of course, comes in the wake of other versions of this point of view—that, for example, poststructuralist theory is an elitist literary discourse that cannot be translated into individual teaching practices or radical political agency—a suitable matter, in short, for abstract and secluded academic meditation, but otherwise useless. I would like to put these conclusions once again as questions, with special reference to that site of *praxis* and its preparation, the writing classroom. Has deconstruction proved useless for practical affairs in the writing classroom? Has it, can it, or should it affect the way we teach writing, or the kind of writing we teach? If so, why? If not, why not?

For a quick gauge of its effects, let us look for a moment at the comments of an exemplary deconstructionist. If we take J. Hillis Miller's two essays on deconstruction and the teaching of writing ("Composition and Deconstruction" and "The Two Rhetorics") as indices, deconstruction has not and will not alter very much what we do in the composition classroom or the kind of writing we teach there. Miller hints in both essays that there could be a practical—and threatening—effect: deconstruction ought to *kill* composition; an awareness of the disruptive powers of language should prevent compositional control. But he shifts his ground from this disturbing contest between deconstruction and composition to that between reading and writing. There he finds a reconciliation; as his familiar remark has it, "reading is itself a kind of writing, or writing is a trope for the act of reading" ("Composition" 41). From this connection between reading and writing as analogous acts or processes of interpretation (a connection we might all acknowledge), Miller slides into the declaration that deconstructive reading—a kind of tropological analysis he calls "good reading as such"—naturally serves an equally ahistorical standard of "good writing." In other words, the murder

of composition by deconstruction is here forestalled as the two are raised up into an ideal of "good" reading and writing, a unity that has always existed and will continue.

Miller, of course, has self-confessed conservative instincts ("Rhetorical Study" 12), and he is the familiar *bête noire* for those who would save deconstruction from a textual aestheticism and use it as a means of change. But I would like to consider whether his discursive maneuvers might not dramatize and heighten more widespread habits of thought about deconstruction and the teaching of writing, habits characteristic even of the well-meant and sympathetic efforts of those who would use deconstruction to transform writing instruction. Specifically, in the existing efforts to bring deconstruction into the writing classroom, do we not persistently present it as a method of *reading* that leaves intact what we must suppose is the usual outcome of this activity: writing as composition, resolution, retying—"good" writing as textbooks imagine it? Or, in a related move, do we not ally deconstruction with a process pedagogy that relegates deconstructive activity to moments of invention, moments that leave few traces, if any, in the product (where Denis Donoghue could see and worry about them)?

Reasoning that the New Criticism made a powerful alliance with a writing pedagogy (of the so-called current-traditional model) that focused on composition as product, composition theorists friendly to poststructuralism have tried to forge a new alliance between deconstruction and "process pedagogy," an alliance that could displace the previous regime (see Winterowd 79–81; Crowley, "Gorgias" 279; White 188). But using process as the hinge to ally deconstruction with composition asks for some scrutiny, especially because this move defines a version of deconstruction that finally seems to have very little effect on student prose. For example, Edward M. White, in a pioneering 1984 essay tracing and advocating alignments between literary theory and composition pedagogy, writes that poststructuralist theory has understandably found its way into our thinking about writing because its version of reading as a meaning-making process suits theories of writing as process (189).

While this assertion should quickly gain assent, White's story of this correspondence and commerce foregrounds the problems I have mentioned. First, like Miller, he identifies poststructuralism as a theory of reading, not of writing; this move rests on the opposition between reading as analysis and writing as composition, and it effectively keeps deconstruction at one remove from the writerly act. Second, he links deconstruction to "writing as process" in a way that

conceives "process" as activities of invention and revision that take place before the writing is unveiled for the reader's eyes, or at least that occur someplace other than the presented page, which only inadvertently might betray symptoms of poststructuralist activity. In the familiar phrase, his attention is not on *what* the student writes, but on *how* the student writes; his concern, he claims, lies especially with "the flux of ideas behind the writing," where invention, revision, and deconstruction meet and mingle (191).

This view retains a notion of a "product" created and supported by that backstage sector of chaotic process and messy meaning that, like a contractor's litter, is cleaned up and hidden before the final, balanced, centered edifice is presented to view. We need not be surprised at this, since process pedagogy in most of its forms chose not to challenge essays well made into hierarchical structures—with theses and clear directions, cues, and prescriptions for reading; it simply asserted that we should teach the activity of this making, not only the result. What a student writer would finally let go of—thanks to plenty of playful and rigorous activity in invention and revision—could be formally and stylistically similar to what was produced under the regime of product-oriented pedagogy.

White has been joined by many others; a review of the existing essays on deconstruction and composition shows that most of them tend to veer away from the implications deconstruction has for concrete student texts, for "products," by invoking "process" and then tucking deconstruction away in backstage activities of reading (rather than writing), invention, and revision. In one of the more compelling essays on deconstruction and the teaching of writing, for example, David Kaufer and Gary Waller immediately echo J. Hillis Miller. Titled "To Write Is to Read Is to Write, Right?" the essay cogently translates deconstruction into a pedagogy that stresses reading and writing as perpetual processes of the reconstruction, rearrangement, exploration, and testing of knowledge. While such teaching would plausibly make some difference in student writing—by encouraging students to conceive of a text as a structure of inclusions and exclusions, to understand that the perspectives one brings to a text will shape what one finds, to write their texts as momentary entries in an ever-changing conversation—here the main difference finally appears to be in reading, in what students write about (the content), or in what they do while they do it, not in the compositions they end up with. For when the authors turn specifically to teaching writing, they distill their poststructuralist pedagogy down to some lessons writing teachers would find familiar: teach the activity of

problem analysis in a way undifferentiated from Linda Flower and Young, Becker, and Pike; help students grasp knowledge as conflicted, in contest—but mainly as conceptual support for the standard exhortation to consider your opponent; promote the understanding of style and grammar as contextual. All of these are worthy lessons to help students compose and persuade, and the authors lucidly show how deconstruction can be enlisted to undergird them. But if deconstruction is presented as a support for composing practices we already teach, and for a familiar model of good prose, where is the difference?

The most common tendency in the current thinking about post-structuralism and the teaching of writing is to equate deconstruction with invention. For example, according to one essay in the collection edited by C. Douglas Atkins and Michael L. Johnson, *Writing and Reading Differently: Deconstruction and the Teaching of Composition and Literature*, deconstruction belongs in an “inspiration” stage of writing, a “rehearsal-for-writing” stage, where its capacity to aid invention will “improve” the final product by enabling fresh insights into the object of study. Deconstruction becomes here a step in a natural process that dispels in the end the uncertainty deconstruction fosters in “prewriting” (Northam 115–28). In joining deconstruction to process, William Covino also links it to invention, arguing that invention is a “process of finding differences [in Derrida’s sense]” (1), and conversely, that *différance* (“a process rather than a product” [3]) is unquestionably a matter of invention. Gregory L. Ulmer makes his *Applied Grammatology* a practice of creativity, frequently reminding us that the “post(e)-pedagogy” he advocates shifts emphasis from the transmission of information to invention. John Harned, though he articulates connections between deconstruction and process pedagogy that bode radical changes, finally steps back and takes deconstruction as a tool for invention that is quite clearly subordinated to a version of “our mission” of “stimulating our students to write better” (15).

Deconstruction in these pieces appears to have little bearing on what “essays” might look like, and leaves the familiar and unexamined aims of “improvement” toward “better” writing intact. It is precisely at this point, however, that deconstruction would and could intervene, for it is concerned with writing processes as they appear on the page and, importantly, writing processes that dismantle the forms of the book and the essay, processes such “unities” cannot “settle.” Derrida attacks the kind of well-composed and unified essay we know, and refuses to grasp his own writing as “‘essays’ whose

itinerary it would be time, after the fact, to recognize; whose continuity and underlying laws could now be pointed out; indeed, whose overall concept or meaning could at last, with all the insistence required on such occasions, be squarely set forth" (*Dissemination* 3). He pursues textual operations and effects that exceed effects of unity, conceptual dominance, and control. Derrida's work is remarkable because of the features of his prose, with its digressions, recursiveness, equivocations, with its juxtaposed parts and multiple points and points of view, which irregularly and surprisingly mesh with, confront, and transform each other.

One of the reasons, surely, that such deconstructive writing has not touched what students finally present as their essays is the progressive process to which our thinking about writing is harnessed. The oppositions we typically use to make sense of (and contain) writing processes—for example, between "exploratory writing" and "formal presentation," or between "writer-based prose" and "reader-based prose"—are uncongenial to lessons of deconstruction inasmuch as they suggest that such "things" "exist" and that there are practices that will bring writing to an end by moving it from unsteady exploration and invention to conceptual mastery, airtight argument, well-made construction, and manipulative practices (presented as "aids" to readers). These oppositions look crude and misleading when they confront the complexities of writing, partly because (as everyone would finally acknowledge) exploration infects all writing, there are no clear divisions between "free writing" and premeditated control of an audience, and play among parts of a text and between texts goes on despite efforts to stop it.

They also look rigid and limiting when confronted from deconstruction, because their ends (fantastic or not) and tools work hard to foreshorten the possibilities of writing. Most of the advice given to students under the authority of the ideal of "reader-based prose" would be called immediately into question by a poststructuralist writing. The basic maxims for saving readers from difficulty, for easing their passage through a text, for avoiding excessive demands on short-term memory—that a writer "orient" readers by providing a telling title and using headings, guide them by quickly presenting an overarching thesis, use topic sentences to subordinate paragraphs to the thesis and to encapsulate units of meaning, provide periodic summaries that divide the argument into graspable stages—all aspire to a hierarchy and control that a poststructuralist perspective would consider delusory (because of the insecurity of pretensions to immobilize meaning) or unfortunate (because of the reductions such

limits try to enforce, the dodges involved in their coherences, the manipulations and prescriptions enacted through their clarity).

This is not to say that a writing influenced by deconstruction would refuse such markers and devices, but rather that they would be treated always as parts of the general textual economy—not outside of it, not transcendent, not as external controls that would arrest “the concatenation of writing” (*Dissemination* 5). If presented as “outside” the text (“hors livre”), they come into circulation as additions of meaning, not reductions, not announcements of the author’s mastery of the textual whole, and not distillations of the writing-to-come presented for the reader’s possession. Within the general economy of the text—a shifting economy of moving parts that continually entail and encipher each other—a thesis would not be secure as an inscription of a restricted economy of meaning. Instead of serving as an arch or frame, it would itself be framed, turned into only a momentary effect: “Suddenly it is a part. And just as suddenly apart. Thrown back into play. And into question” (*Dissemination* 350). Indeed, any “program,” Derrida would tell us—preface, thesis, map, topic sentence—is “already a program, a moment of the text, reclaimed by the text from its own exteriority” (20). Similarly, Derrida would recommend (as he says Mallarmé does) a “suspension of the title . . . both because it raises its voice and drowns out the ensuing text, and because it is found high up on the page, the top of the page becoming the eminent center, the beginning, the command station, the chief, the archon” (177–80). But such suspension, stilling the overweening authority of the title, would not preclude its use as a generative source, a textual part radiating multiple possibilities of meaning, poised to combine with other parts of the text—“yet unreadable, protruding like a tothing-stone, waiting for something to mesh with” (289). Titles and theses become pieces in the play of meaning, not the rules of the game (330–31). A deconstructive pedagogy would promote a writing interested in, aware of, and ready to exploit such “gambols of language.”

Hand-in-hand with the processes that are thought to bring writing to reader-based ideals are processes thought to bring writers to control of their texts—to self-assertion, and ownership, and masterfully autonomous shaping. The “empowerment of students” is an idea attractive enough (to us all) to make even crusading poststructuralists drop their notions that the writing “I” is always in process, always modifying and modified, continuously dislocated, knocked about by the repercussions of language. John Harned writes, with no apology, that in adapting and adopting deconstruction “we will

resist the effort to dislodge the author as the authority who controls the shape of his or her text" (15). While Sharon Crowley's "writing and Writing" begins with an idea of a text as boundaryless, a flow of multiple, uncontrollable discourses into which a writer may enter, this is overborne by a democratic image of authoring as empowerment, and the essay slides past a vocabulary of self-determination into one of mastery that promotes students' faith in the intelligibility of their own writing. Other preservations of the writer's authority are commonplace in deconstruction's American guises. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes, deconstruction in the "narrow sense"—simply a "literary-critical methodology" that "fit only too well into the dreary scene of the mainstream pedagogy and criticism of literature in the United States"—locates the "(dis)figuring effect of a radical heterogeneity" in the "'text's' performance [not in the writer's self] and allows the critic authority to disclose the economy of figure and performance." Deconstruction "in the general sense," on the other hand, "puts into question the grounds of the critic's power" (16). Such throwing into question (as Derrida puts it) of the "consciousness of ideal mastery, this power of consciousness in the act of showing, indicating, perceiving, or predicating" (*Dissemination* 352) lacks practitioners. But perhaps the real point is that, just as we need a general theory that both respects the autonomous and purposive subject and acknowledges its divisions, constitution, and dissemination, so we need to face writing—including student writing—unbridled by the impulse to take sides on simple oppositions between empowerment and disenfranchisement, authority and uncertainty. This would entail, now, being much more ready to take language (I am again quoting *Dissemination*) as "a force whose effects are hard to master, a dynamics that constantly surprises the one who tries to manipulate it as master and as subject" (97).

How might such deconstructive writing practices and perspectives enter our pedagogy? I find uninspiring a hope for "assignments" or "exercises" that will add deconstruction to the classroom. This is not only because the existing suggestions are thin and practiced apart from everyday writing—see, for example, Sharon Crowley's suggestion to have students "write opaque prose once in awhile," play with sentence-combining, and experiment with traditional rhetorical devices ("Gorgias" 284), or Gregory L. Ulmer's student exercises in plagiarism and misreading ("Textshop" 58–59). It is also that, while the authority of the teacher cannot be denied, it perhaps can be loosened, but exercising the foresight of assignments and sequences does not move in that direction. A readiness to engage—in confer-

ence, in class discussion, in written comments—what comes to us in student writing promises something else. This may simply involve acknowledgment of and receptivity to difficulties our students experience, difficulties we may otherwise try to suppress or dismiss—that straddling a stretch of writing with a thesis does indeed pose problems, that the benefits for readability a thesis offers may run up against the impossibility of saying beforehand what a text in all its turnings undertakes, that texts often (always?) exceed anticipations and recapitulations, that writings often harbor many theses, that doctoring writing to suit a thesis requires repressions aplenty, that introductions and conclusions indeed *are* “hard” to compose—because of their suspicious pretensions to reduce a chain of writing to an idea, because they can provide only feignings of totalizations or final revelations. We may also add to our repertoire of questions to ask of writing: If we find a title that does not give us a “good idea” of what an essay is “about,” what *does* it do? What does it do in relation to other parts of the text—this part, that part? If a text does not carefully restrict meanings by titles, theses, topic sentences, conclusions, and so forth, what happens in the writing, and in what ways might we evaluate what happens? Might there be benefits to a text that displays a writer’s process of discovery and invention? In the case of texts that appear carefully composed or strongly gain our consent, where does a careful reading show conflict or lapses in univocity, and can a critical reading always point out in such student texts a “relationship, unperceived by the writer, between what he commands and what he does not command of the patterns of the language that he uses”? (Derrida, *Grammatology* 158).

I do not write the preceding paragraph to invite everyone to teach students to write like Derrida. The features of his styles that Barbara Johnson lists—unspeakable syntax, allusions, cryptic beginnings and endings, unconventional units of coherence (letters, anagrammatical and homonymic plays, puns), and so on (*Dissemination* xvii)—strike me as idiosyncratic moments that are less compelling as classroom matter than are the general implications of deconstruction and dissemination. And the most general implication is the marriage of deconstruction to a different “process pedagogy”—distinct from those with models of writing process that aim always for standard, sturdy prose. For deconstruction is akin only to versions of meaning-making process that see endless readings, reinterpretations, and recontextualizations overrunning every sheet of paper we, or our students, inscribe. Moreover, this understanding would be apparent in the writing. To extend deconstruction into student writing would

mean taking student texts as never finished—in the sense of a smooth surface, a clinched argument, or a rounded discussion—but instead encouraging the rough edge that signals troubles, vexing complications, contradictions, allowing the insecure articulations that hover around an undecidability. The pretense of certainty a thesis has, the security of a conclusion, the assertion of mastery over a text would give way.

Seeing and teaching writing in this way, one might think, could be welcomed as a new purchase on the workings of language that is well suited to our historical moment. But of course it is not welcomed. W. Ross Winterowd, who more than any other writer on composition and deconstruction appears to grasp the implications I have been trying to foreground, attacks meshings of deconstruction and the teaching of writing precisely because they threaten the essayistic practices of our currently dominant tradition. In the composition classroom altered by deconstruction, he writes, an “endless dialogue and dialectic will replace conclusiveness: the clearly stated enthymeme, the clincher sentence of the paragraph, the crisp summary conclusion. For better or for worse, a change not only in attitudes and epistemologies, but also in practices” (86–87). This statement is almost neutral enough to invite endorsement, to rally encouragement for the developments it describes. As Winterowd elaborates his vision of a deconstructionist future, however, the unhappy edge takes over the essay. “Explanatory” writing and, Winterowd seems to think, any writing with claims of certainty or reference, “will be devalued in favor of others that fit the value systems of the post-structuralists” (90), until opacity and obfuscation will be most valued in student writing. In this poststructuralist nightmare, a refusal to communicate rules the day, and “gobbledygook and obscurity are enfranchised” (87).

Unintelligibility does not characterize writing carefully attentive and wise to its scatterings of meaning, nor does it characterize writing that displays a careful estimate of the tenuousness of its positions and of the writer’s limited control over text, language, and signification. But to step back from Winterowd’s particular lament and survey the broader territory: What can account for the general unwillingness to extend deconstruction past invention into forms of writing, the reluctance to treat student texts as objects of deconstruction, the failure to encourage self-awareness in student products of gaps, contradictions, exclusions, undecidabilities, multiple points of view? Some easily apparent forces, of course, work to preclude our teaching a Derridean Writing that refuses to totalize itself, that preserves

multiple strands of coherence and play among them. There is the professor's institutional obligation to teach "serviceable" prose, joined to a strongly felt responsibility to our students to equip them for success. But it unhappily seems that with the renewed concern over general literacy has come, quite often, a resignation to a limited teaching, a diminished literacy of efficiency and know-how that employs language skillfully only on the job. As Sharon Crowley has written, "to confine instruction in composition to the writing of 'readable' prose is to prepare our students for careers as bureaucrats rather than as rhetoricians of whatever field or profession they might choose to enter" ("Post-Structuralism" 190). While we appear to handicap our students by not more fully fleshing out their knowledge about writing that is effective, communicative, clear, redundant, hierarchized, purposeful, and so on, we arguably do them another disservice by failing to point out the pitfalls of such writing (for example, the difficulty they already sense—that ingenuousness at best, and falsehood at worst, are the real securities of theses, arguments, and conclusions).

We may also cheat students by failing to teach other kinds of writing. If, to use Richard Rorty's phrase, philosophy is a kind of writing, and if, to extend the idea, English studies represent a kind (or, rather, overlapping kinds) of writing, then teaching students that there is only one kind of writing worth learning, an efficiently instrumental writing fashioned for the professional transmission of information, a writing increasingly unlike our own writing, is an acquiescence and a condescension. To be sure, critical practice in our profession has not moved decisively to a writing that mimics Derrida, and many may think it naïve—and not merely premature—to seek a freshman writing pedagogy akin to discursive practices embraced only by poststructuralist factions in the academy. However, if we are not emulating Derrida in professional journals, writing in our profession nonetheless includes, or is moving toward (or returning to), a writing of uncertainty, recursiveness, complexity, a writing that is especially and obviously *written*. Do we not have a responsibility to teach students this thinking-writing? If embedded in our best writing is an education about writing itself—its figurative, rhetorical, shifting capacities, its provisional place in the interweavings of other writings—then we are right to share this education with our students. We have, then, a range of reasons for teaching a writing that would forswear simple ideals of focus and thesis, undermine its own foundations, juxtapose incompatible discourses, play, and explore: namely, to promote a general awareness of the multiplicity

of functions language performs; to allow for the possibility of other constructs and uses of language aside from those that preserve the fantasy of mastery and possession of packaged knowledge; to critique and learn to resist prescriptions in language for its interpretation and use; and more generally, to avoid a trivializing betrayal of what we have learned about knowledge and language, about the workings of interpretation and signification—about the uncertainties there, the tricks, ruses, and evasions.

To observe that an institutional obligation to teach serviceable prose stops us from teaching the writings suggested by deconstruction raises a political implication. Forms and styles of writing undoubtedly impose and uphold ideologies and social practices and relations. We may see here what Derrida describes when he declares that tampering with language and its presumed capacity to convey information forthrightly is more dangerous to the institution than “revolutionary ideological sorts of ‘content,’ ” which do not “touch the borders of language” or the “juridico-political contracts it guarantees” (“Living On” 93–95). Cary Nelson, writing about theory in the classroom, notes that “much recent theory is concerned with the political effect of its writing practices,” and the commitment of theory “is not to the technology of interpretation but to various forms of writing, not to schematic and easily teachable methodologies but to complex discursive practices” (xiii). If we can agree with this (and surely there are difficulties, connected with doubts about the political project of poststructuralism and the ideologies and practices it might sustain), then the move by which the implications of deconstruction for writing are bypassed, and deconstruction is instead classed next to invention heuristics and other technologies of reading, looks unfortunate but telling. We may come to think that, compared to the threat posed by altered discursive practices to a smoothly maintained social and ideological order, deconstruction as a technology of reading is only a pastime.

The question of political effect is pertinent especially because so many of the writers I have already mentioned see political implications in what they recommend. Atkins and Johnson, the editors of *Writing and Reading Differently*, suggest that their volume is a “symbolic and political act” (viii) and assert that deconstruction has the capacity “to effect change—in institutions, in disciplines, in individuals” (11). Crowley ends her essay “writing and Writing” with a call to use the empowerment of students to begin “the larger, the cultural project” (99). Kaufer and Waller’s project of teaching reading and writing as the continual reconstruction and rearrangement of

knowledge has a radical political subtext: that knowledge, because it is cultural, ideological, and continually produced, changes and can be altered. Gregory L. Ulmer hopes that the possibilities opened by Derridean Writing for invention will stimulate people to create not only on paper and in art but also “in the lived, sociopolitical world” (*Applied* 264). These writers appear to connect themselves to a politics often associated with deconstruction, a local politics of cultural resistance, subversion, demystification, the undermining of hierarchy—and perhaps of redefinition, recontextualization, bricolage—enacted in a struggle over image and language as part of an emancipatory project. But the apparent compatibility of their projects with the orthodox, or newly orthodox, in the teaching of writing raises the question: Are these writers, as the editors of *Writing and Reading Differently* admit they might be, “dulling and weakening what deconstructionists sometimes regard as a finely honed intellectual and even political weapon”? (10). Or (and here the editors quote Jonathan Culler) are they working “within the terms of the system but in order to breach it”? (2).

The general answer from the current ranks of deconstructionist-compositionists is that their work is a breaching, not a dulling or weakening—or at least that the weakening must be risked because the only breaching comes from within. The writers agree, that is, with Derrida’s assertion that there is no outside to the system—to the institution and its apparatuses, practices, ideologies, languages (see Lietch 17–18). Teachers must derive their political effectiveness from their privileged position in the institution, can only take positions in relation to the structures that govern us, and must make strategic alliances (see Ulmer, *Applied* 169). As Gary F. Waller writes (invoking Foucault), “in order to speak meaningfully to and within a dominant discourse, we must be inserted within it instead of trying to create an alternative outside. Deliberately choosing to be marginalized is a kind of masochism, the root of martyrdom. . . . Discursive structures do change, but they do so from within a given state of affairs” (11). With such a predicament, of course, comes the risk of accommodation, institutionalization, acquiescence. This sense of our situation foregrounds our possible positionings in relation to established teaching practices—and points out that every pedagogical act involves a judgment about its relations to dominant forms of power and practice and either an assent or a resistance to this relation. If we grant these assumptions, one important matter is our analysis of the entry of deconstructionist practice into writing pedagogy, its rela-

tions to other pedagogical practices, and the implications of these relations.

When we see "deconstruction" as a term brought into our critical discourse, and yet see that under its name we receive the familiar, and can carry on writing as usual, what are we to think? Is this a case of strategic alliance, a tactful entry of important change into the powerful social apparatus of the classroom? Or is it complicity, assimilation, naturalization? The contrast between what looks like a radical philosophy and its translation into what looks like familiar writing pedagogies must at least make us consider the possibility that "deconstruction" in our writing about teaching has come mainly to represent only a minor deviation, one allowed within our institutional and disciplinary limits partly to resist larger changes. Perhaps, more starkly, deconstruction functions here as a myth of subversion in which effective difference is overborne by the differences of novelty. Perhaps adopting deconstruction as a technology of reading and as a practice allied with process pedagogy locates it where it can induce the least change and serves to render it easily assimilable into the existing classroom practices and order. If we still want to look to deconstruction to transform our writing pedagogy, we must take such doubts seriously and sharply question the ways it enters our thinking about teaching. If we want to engage the questions of deconstruction's practicality (questions this essay finally and necessarily leaves hanging), and if we want to test the political import and consequences of its discursive practices, it is time to bring deconstructive *writing* into classrooms and begin the examination of its effects.

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