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0521623707 - Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader

Edited by Tom Cohen

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JACQUES DERRIDA AND THE HUMANITIES

The work of Jacques Derrida has transformed our understanding of a range of disciplines in the humanities through its questioning of some of the basic tenets of Western metaphysics. This volume is a trans-disciplinary collection dedicated to his work; the assembled contributions – on law, literature, ethics, history, gender, politics and psychoanalysis, among others – constitute an investigation of the role of Derrida's work within the field of humanities, present and future. The volume is distinguished by work on some of his most recent writings, and contains Derrida's own address on "the future of the humanities." In addition to its pedagogic interest, this collection of essays attempts to respond to the question: what might be the relation of Derrida, or "deconstruction," to the future of the humanities. The volume presents the most sustained examples yet of deconstruction in its current phase – as well as its possible future.

Tom Cohen is Professor in the Department of English at the State University of New York, Albany. He is the author of *Anti-Mimesis* (Cambridge, 1994) and *Ideology and Inscription* (Cambridge, 1998). He is also contributing editor of *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory* (2000).

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For Barbara L. Cohen

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The present volume may be the first overtly *trans-disciplinary* “reader” devoted to Derrida’s work in its current phase. These essays were not only to be “pedagogic” in demonstrating one or more ways to read Derrida’s extensions into these fields. They were called together to ask again why or how, “today,” Derrida’s interventions are to be tracked, and what the consequences of this project stand, perhaps, to be in the institutions of the human sciences or a “Humanities” to come.

Three premises, therefore, underlie the essays gathered here:

(1) That Derrida’s work, “today,” might be tracked by its interface with a series of different “disciplines,” different questions, to make connections for the reader as to how these might work or are underway in scholarship or thinking today: thus, for the first time, a volume in which the somewhat formal questions of Derrida and Law, . . . and Literature, . . . and Aesthetics, . . . and Politics, . . . and Psychoanalysis, . . . and Ethics, . . . and Technology, . . . and Representation, and so on, might be addressed as pretexts for more or less exemplary exploration;

(2) That these essays, virtually or otherwise, would concern themselves less with the polemical contexts of Derrida’s past reception – distracting misprisions of “nihilism” or “relativism” or “linguisticism,” and so on – than demonstrate by interrogation and performance the “*affirmative* deconstruction” that Derrida has, from the first, insisted was the necessarily transformative premise of his thought;

(3) That these essays might have access to more recent work of Derrida’s, or developments which bring into play texts and perspectives (for instance, on hospitality and religion, technicity and the “secret”) either unavailable to or unemphasized in earlier treatments of this text.

Collectively, such a trans-disciplinary volume would ask, implicitly, not only the question of the “future of the humanities” in relation to Derrida’s work (the title of Derrida’s own contribution to the volume) but provide a virtual network or interactive and multi-linked website of

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cross-referencing essays, a virtual if discontinuous ensemble-effect, perhaps, in which an underlying question would resonate: What is the “state” of the translational project of Derrida, “today,” after the narrative and many deaths of deconstruction have been played out, or repeated, or survived? What of the “future” which Derrida’s work seems to wager itself on, in the structure (and thematic) of the promise – what can only keep the door open to a coming “event” it cannot effect or guarantee, but which the model of translation, or crossing, would be attendant upon?

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This volume owes its inception to the late Michael Sprinker, and much of its development and final form to the editorial advice and shaping of Ray Ryan, to whose patience and professionalism the editor is again indebted. I must also extend my professional regard and deep appreciation to Derek Attridge, who lent his time and critical eye to the project from the beginning, and whose input is reflected in the numerous details of the volume itself. Equally decisive, in very different ways, has been the moral and logistical collaboration of Barbara L. Cohen – to whom the volume is dedicated. Throughout the phase of production, review, and organization, Geoff Manaugh has played a critical role in realizing this volume, both in terms of intellectual commentary and technical support. In addition I want to thank Werner Hamacher for discussions and suggestions that helped realize the potential of the project. I would also like to thank Helen Elam and Jason Smith for their generous critical insights.

Biographical chronology

Geoff Manaugh

1930	Born 15 July in El-Biar, French-occupied Algeria; an “indigenous Jew,” not a citizen of France.
1935–1941	Attends nursery and primary schools in El-Biar; Article 2 in the <i>Jewish Statute</i> (3 October 1940) forbids Jews from teaching and Law.
1942	Expelled from classes as part of a general wave of anti-Semitism. Told by a teacher in class, “French culture is not made for little Jews.”
1943–1947	Fails <i>baccalauréat</i> in 1947. Publishes some poems in small North African reviews.
1947–1948	Studies philosophy (Bergson, Sartre) at the Lycée Gauthier, Algiers. Passes <i>baccalauréat</i> in June 1948. Later that year reads Heidegger and Kierkegaard.
1949–1950	First trip to France. Studies at Lycée Louis-le-Grand. Begins readings of Simone Weil and existentialism. Application to École Normale Supérieure rejected.
1950–1952	Periods of ill health, with cycles of amphetamine/sleeping pill use. Meets Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Serres, among others; still enrolled at Lycée Louis-le-Grand.
1952–1953	Enrolls at the École Normale Supérieure, where he meets Louis Althusser (also born in Algeria) the first day.
1953–1954	Befriends Michel Foucault, whose lectures he attends. Writes “The Problem of Genesis in the Philosophy of Edmund Husserl” as his higher studies dissertation.
1955	Fails the <i>agrégation</i> oral examination (a competitive examination for teaching jobs guaranteed by the State) in philosophy.

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- 1956–1957 Retakes the *agrégation* exam, and passes. Receives “special auditor” status at Harvard University, where he begins reading James Joyce. Marries Marguerite Aucouturier (with whom two children will be raised).
- 1957–1959 Performs required military service during the Algerian war, serving as a teacher in a children’s school outside Algiers.
- 1959–1960 Receives first teaching post, at a lycée in Le Mans, where he works with Gérard Genette.
- 1960–1964 Teaching position at the Sorbonne; assistant to Bachelard, Canguilhem, Ricoeur, and Wahl. After declaration of independence for Algeria, Derrida’s family moves to Nice. First publications (in *Critique* and *Tel Quel*). Meets Philippe Sollers. Awarded the Jean Cavaillès Prize for his *Introduction* to Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*. Accepts teaching position at the École Normale Supérieure, where he is invited by Althusser and Jean Hyppolite.
- 1966 Invited by René Girard to participate in a colloquium hosted by Johns Hopkins University, USA, where he meets Paul de Man and Jacques Lacan.
- 1967 Delivers his paper, “Différance,” to the Société française de philosophie. His first three books are published simultaneously.
- 1968 Participates in various marches during the events of May. First teaching post at the University of Berlin, where he presents *Glas* over the course of a seminar.
- 1970 Derrida’s father, Aimé, dies of cancer at age 74.
- 1971 Returns to Algeria for the first time in nearly a decade, where he lectures at the University of Algiers. Delivers, in Montreal, “Signature, Event, Context,” to the Congrès des sociétés de philosophie de langue française.
- 1972 Participates in conference on Nietzsche in Cerisy, where other participants include Deleuze, Klossowski, Lacoue-Labarthe, Lyotard, and Nancy. Three more books are published, but a break is made with Sollers and *Tel Quel*.
- 1975 Begins Fall seminars at Yale, with Paul de Man and J. Hillis Miller.

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Biographical chronology

- 1979 Helps organize, at the Sorbonne in Paris, the Estates General of Philosophy.
- 1980 Defends his own *Thèse d'État* at the Sorbonne. Conference at Cerisy ("On the basis of JD's work") organized by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. Honorary Doctorate awarded by Columbia University, New York City.
- 1981 Visits Prague as part of the Jan Hus Association, which he founds, to teach a "clandestine seminar." Arrested at the airport for allegedly possessing heroin, and jailed. Released upon intervention of the French government.
- 1982 Appears in Ken McMullen's film, *Ghost Dance*. Begins first steps toward founding, with others, the Collège international de philosophie.
- 1983 Elected director of the Collège international de philosophie. Joins the main council of the "Foundation against Apartheid." Death of Paul de Man.
- 1986 Begins collaborations with architect Peter Eisenman, on invitation of Bernard Tschumi, for the Parc de la Villette in Paris.
- 1987 Begins regular Spring teaching appointment at the University of California, Irvine. Honorary Doctorate awarded by Essex University, UK.
- 1988 Honorary Doctorate awarded by the University of Palermo, Italy.
- 1989 Lectures at Cardozo School of Law, New York City, on "Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice." Honorary Doctorates awarded by Williams College, USA; and the New School for Social Research, New York City.
- 1991 Derrida's mother, Georgette, dies.
- 1992 Controversial honorary Doctorate awarded by Cambridge University. Begins Fall seminars at Cardozo School of Law, NYC. Second conference at Cerisy.
- 1993 Honorary Doctorate awarded by the University of Pécs, Hungary.
- 1995 Conference in Tuscaloosa, on deconstruction, around the time of the De Man wartime journalism controversy. Honorary Doctorate awarded by Queens College, Ontario, Canada.
- 1996 Honorary Doctorate awarded by the University of Craiova, Romania.

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- 1997 Third conference at Cerisy. Honorary Doctorate awarded by the University of Katowice, Poland.
- 1998 Honorary Doctorates awarded by the University of Torino, Italy, and Western Cape University, South Africa.

The above chronology is based on Geoff Bennington, “Curriculum Vitae,” presented in G. Bennington and J. Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). The reader is pointed to that work for more information concerning the life of Jacques Derrida. I must also thank David Wills for his input to this chronology.