The Cambridge Introduction to
Jacques Derrida

Few thinkers of the latter half of the twentieth century have so profoundly and radically transformed our understanding of writing and literature as Jacques Derrida (1930–2004). Derridian deconstruction remains one of the most powerful intellectual movements of the present century, and Derrida’s own innovative writings on literature and philosophy are crucially relevant for any understanding of the future of literature and literary criticism today. Derrida’s own manner of writing is complex and challenging and has often been misrepresented or misunderstood. In this book, Leslie Hill provides an accessible introduction to Derrida’s writings on literature which presupposes no prior knowledge of Derrida’s work. He explores in detail Derrida’s relationship to literary theory and criticism, and offers close readings of some of Derrida’s best known essays. This introduction will help those coming to Derrida’s work for the first time, and suggests further directions to take in studying this hugely influential thinker.

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Preface

The implications, range, and sheer volume of the work of Jacques Derrida are huge. They far exceed by any calculation what it is possible to discuss adequately in a modest introductory volume of this kind. For this, and other reasons, I have limited myself to only one of the multiple, variegated threads running through Derrida’s writing: his reading of that body of texts known to audiences the world over as ‘literature’. This book, then, is addressed primarily, though I hope not exclusively, to students of literature with an interest in literary theory, and, more generally, to readers wishing to know more about the already lengthy, infinite conversation between literature and philosophy as it is both interrupted and prolonged in Derrida’s work.

Derrida, as many will be aware, places demands on his readers. This is not only because his writing is dense and at times elliptical; not only because it presupposes at least a degree of familiarity with the main tenets of some of the key texts in the Western philosophical tradition, from Plato, Kant, and Hegel to Husserl, Freud, and Heidegger; not only because his work is deeply informed by a particular philosophical, intellectual, and literary context that has its own complex and specific history, aspects of which may be unfamiliar to Derrida’s non-francophone readership; and not only because it exploits the resources of French language and idiom in ways that border at times on the untranslatable. All this is true. But there is also more: it is that his work challenges readers to rethink many inherited assumptions, up to and including those governing the basis on which thought, writing, language occur at all.

It was no doubt inevitable that the boldness and radicalism of Derrida’s enterprise would meet with resistance, not to say incomprehension and misrepresentation. Readers new to Derrida should however remember, contrary to what is sometimes alleged, that from the very outset Derrida was an implacable opponent of irrationalism and obscurantism in all its many forms, and a writer who took seriously his responsibilities as a thinker, teacher, and public intellectual. Any who know his work well will agree: when it is a matter of rigorous argument, few writers are as lucid, consistent, exacting, scrupulous, or discriminating as Derrida.
Preface

Derrida's reputation, no doubt, is forever indissociable from a word he first coined, then made famous, and in the end accepted reluctantly as a possible description of his work: deconstruction. Deconstruction, like the devil, is all in the detail. In this book, it is therefore not solely with the strategic imperatives of Derrida's thinking that I shall be concerned, but also with much of the specific detail of his readings of literary and other texts. For whoever agrees to present Derrida's work is in a quandary. First, some may wonder, is there any need for an introductory book at all? After all, the most effective introduction to Derrida's work already exists: it is that work itself, which the reader is hereby enjoined simply to read, in as sustained a manner as possible. Some of that work, admittedly, can be difficult. An introductory volume such as this does, then, have a part to play. But in seeking to make Derrida more accessible, is it better to focus on the larger picture, or on the smaller, to confine oneself to always questionable paraphrase, or to enter into the intricate, but all the more revealing detail of individual texts?

Unable to reconcile itself unreservedly, in the end, to either solution, this book has sought to chart a middle course, believing in the end that accessibility, truth, and fidelity each matter in a project of this kind, and that what best assists readers new to Derrida – and all readers, at one point or another, are new to Derrida – is not a digested read nor a digested digest, but a measure of patient preliminary engagement not with the urban myth of deconstruction, whatever the word is taken to mean, but with the writing signed Jacques Derrida in so far as it constitutes one of the essential events in the history of modern thought.

Fidelity, true enough, is impossible, and infidelity inevitable: happily and unhappily. One of the tasks of this book, no doubt, will have been to demonstrate the inescapability of the dilemma, safe only in the knowledge that there is no alternative but to accept and rejoice in it, while acknowledging too the responsibility it implies.

I should like here to record my thanks to colleagues at the University of Warwick who have given me invaluable support in enabling me to complete this book. I am also indebted to many students, in Philosophy and Literature, Philosophy, French Studies, and English Studies at the University, who, over the last decade, have contributed more than they may realise to the pages that follow.

I should like, finally, to dedicate this book to Susie and Juliet: that they too may begin to understand.
Abbreviations

The principal texts by Jacques Derrida to which I refer in the course of this book are identified by the following abbreviations. Where two sets of page numbers are given, the first refer to Derrida's original French text (even when, as in some cases, this appeared in print after the corresponding English translation), and the second to the current English-language edition of the text. For accuracy, consistency, or sometimes clarity, I have here and there modified these translations. Where no English version is currently available, translations given are my own.


List of abbreviations


References to the left- or right-hand columns of Derrida’s text are indicated by the use of a or b respectively.


List of abbreviations


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