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Dissemination



Synopsis

"The English version of *Dissemination* [is] an able translation by Barbara Johnson Derrida's central contention is that language is haunted by dispersal, absence, loss, the risk of unmeaning, a risk which is starkly embodied in all writing. The distinction between philosophy and literature therefore becomes of secondary importance. Philosophy vainly attempts to control the irrecoverable dissemination of its own meaning, it strives "against the grain of language" to offer a sober revelation of truth. Literature "on the other hand" flaunts its own meretriciousness, abandons itself to the Dionysiac play of language. In *Dissemination* "more than any previous work" Derrida joins in the revelry, weaving a complex pattern of puns, verbal echoes and allusions, intended to 'deconstruct' both the pretension of criticism to tell the truth about literature, and the pretension of philosophy to the literature of truth." "Peter Dews, *New Statesman*

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Customer Reviews

Where Derrida is concerned, the translator must be of equal worth to the superlative standards of the text. One of the reasons the man is considered so hard to read is that he exploits ambiguity and wordplay in (his native) language to its fullest extent. For Barbara Johnson, the complexity of the french is not an obstacle, but allows her to search out parallel plays in english that mimic those in the original at the same time that they add their own nuances to this amazingly rich work.

Understanding Derrida is important, but equally important is understanding what he is *not* - particularly when it comes to his philosophical method. This work helps to show clearly what a high regard he holds for the texts he "re-reads", and his particular use of the methods of deconstruction.

For those new to Derrida, I recommend reading this work in conjunction with *Derrida for Beginners* by Jim Powell, published by Writers and Readers press in New York. Powell's book helps you keep your bearings amongst the many twists and turns of *Dissemination*.

For those with minimal background either in deconstruction or Derrida, *DISSEMINATION* as ably translated by Barbara Johnson is not the place to start. In her Translator's Introduction, Johnson tries mightily to provide the tyro with some way to make sense of the forthcoming tsunami that will surely twist the reader into a linguistic pretzel. Johnson places *DISSEMINATION* into the context of the book's being a critique of Western Metaphysics and though she skims over such critical terms as "trace," "supplement," and "difference," it would clearly help if the reader had at least mastered their meanings. Her analysis of Derrida's deconstruction of Rousseau is correct as she notes that "Rousseau's life does not become a text through his writing: it always already was one." I would caution any reader, however, to be immediately suspicious of any claim of Derrida's that includes the phrase "always already" as even the presenting of one case to the contrary quite effectively negates that claim in its entirety. This review is not the forum for a list of such a claim that invalidates deconstruction. For those who do not wish to take my word for it, see *AGAINST DECONSTRUCTION* by John Ellis for a very lengthy list. Fully half of *DISSEMINATION* is Derrida's critique of Plato's *Phaedrus*. The remainder of *DISSEMINATION* is a wandering and very loose series of critiques of Mallarmé that defy both comprehension and summation. The best that I can do in a very few words is to suggest that Derrida's meandering prose style that involves puns, weird printing patterns, and non-English characters is a repackaging of his theory of deconstruction into physical form. Since his long and complex essay "Plato's Pharmacy" is seminal, I shall spend the remainder of this review on it. In "Plato's Pharmacy," Jacques Derrida tries mightily to connect his own theories on twentieth century deconstruction to a close reading of Plato's *Phaedrus*. In this dialogue, Plato sets out what he thinks is so painfully obvious--that speech is "privileged" or favored over writing. Derrida responds by pointing out what he sees as many underlying discrepancies, contradictions, and uncertainties that lie underneath Plato's literal words but which, in his opinion, subvert them so that the reverse meaning appears. "Plato's Pharmacy" is no easy read. Part of the problem is that Derrida assumes that the reader is intimately familiar with Plato's *Republic* as well as his other assorted dialogues. Derrida further uses Greek words and phrases with depressing frequency. Finally, his prose style is bafflingly complex and nuanced, thus reflecting the tenets that underlie his multi-faceted theory of deconstruction. To comprehend Derrida's analysis of *Phaedrus*, one must have a working understanding of deconstruction. So here it is. In an earlier essay,

"Structure Sign and Play in the Discourses of Human Science," Derrida lists several key components of deconstruction. (1) Western thought has wrongly assumed that there exists a "center" to all discourse that is fixed and eternal: God, man, honor, love, truth, etc. This belief is no more than a shared illusion that masks the "true" fragmentary nature of the universe. (2) Using Saussure's system of signs of paired binaries, Derrida "de-centers" this non-existent center, thereby obliterating the formerly comforting notion of a universal acceptance of meaning. (3) These signs now can be seen to point only to other signs, thus never actually pointing to a fixed center that he calls a "transcendental signified." (4) As a consequence of this never-ending pointing of sign to sign, the trail of signs like the bread crumb trail of Hansel and Gretel can only defer and postpone the search for meaning, thus requiring one to accept the shattering notion that there is no "there" there, no Eternal Truth in the universe. And finally (5) as one uses Derrida's list of technical terms like "trace," "supplement," and "differance" what becomes apparent is that the stated meaning of a text or of its author can always be found to really express the opposite of that stated meaning. One should note that the ideas constituting Derrida's basic thesis that no true meaning exists anywhere are not accepted by all critical theorists. See for example, John Ellis in his AGAINST DECONSTRUCTION who persuasively refutes nearly all of Derrida's claims. Derrida begins his long essay to prove that Plato had things backwards when the latter claimed that speech has privilege and priority over writing. Derrida does not come out and bluntly assert that Plato is wrong. In fact, "Plato's Pharmacy" is marked by a series of convoluted and highly allusive twists of logic that Derrida obviously believes proves his own thesis that writing is privileged over speaking. Even when Derrida seems to agree with Plato over some key points, the careful reader will note that Derrida's use of a historical/logical/linguistic context will undermine and subvert Plato's surface intention. In fact, Derrida is cleverly using his own deconstructive technique as a scalpel to dissect Plato's claims about the privileging of speech over writing. Most of this essay uses various combinations of the Greek word pharmakos, which translates into English as "scapegoat" or "sorcerer." The problem is that Plato never uses this word in Phaedrus; what Plato does use is variations of it: pharmakeia and pharmakeus, all of which relate either to speaking or writing. It is precisely here that Derrida begins to weave his deconstructive thread that the absence of one word (like pharmakos) will act as a "trace" that will nudge the reader into associating it with another and similar word (like pharmakon which translates either as "sorcerer" or "wizard"). The word "trace" is a key concept in Derridean thought as it suggests (Derrida hates to define anything since the act of definition tends to support the reality of a transcendental signified so he uses linguistic subterfuge by "suggesting" or "implying" that a wispy ephemeral non-substantive non-object like a "trace" may perform its subliminal magic)

that a word that is not really "there" may be "there" anyway. It is Plato's non-use of pharmakos (scapegoat) that Derrida uses to emphasize via its trace lineage that Athenians would choose one unfortunate individual to suffer for the collective sins of the populace. (See Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" for a dramatization of the theme) Plato refers often to Socrates using one of pharmakos's derivatives (pharmakon). Thus, Socrates is explicitly linked to sorcerer even as he is implicitly linked as scapegoat. Using this same sort of linkage, Derrida is able (for those who accept this logic) to similarly link and thus subvert a wide range of binaries that Plato assumes all point toward a transcendental signified: speech/writing, memory/forgetfulness, living/dead, original/copy, mythos/logos, inside/outside, bounded/unbounded, etc. When Derrida notes that speech is no more than a variation of writing, he asserts that Plato--in his insistence on a sharp demarcation between them that cannot withstand the sort of deconstructive reversal of binaries--has unwittingly subverted his own thesis concerning the privileging of speech over writing. Finally, Derrida points out the irony that Plato uses writing to attack writing. "Plato's Pharmacy" emerges then as an extended exercise in allusion, metaphor, logic-chopping, and deconstructive sleight-of-hand to illustrate that any text may be made to stand on its head if one is sufficiently clever to do so.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) was a French philosopher and writer, best known for developing a form of semiotic analysis known as Deconstruction. He begins this 1972 book with the statement, "This (therefore) will not have been a book. Still less, despite appearances, will it have been a collection of three 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. I will not feign, according to the code, either premeditation or improvisation. These texts are assembled otherwise; it is not my intention to PRESENT them. The question at issue here, precisely is that of presentation. While the form of the "book" is now going through a period of general upheaval, and while that form now appears less natural, and its history less transparent, than ever, and while one cannot tamper with it without disturbing everything else, the book form alone can no longer settle the case of those writing processes which, in PRACTICALLY questioning that form, must also dismantle it. Hence the necessity, today, of working out at every turn, with redoubled effort, the question of the preservation of names: of PALEONOMOLOGY. Why should an old name, for a determinate time, be retained? Why should the effects of a new meaning, concept, or object be damped by memory? (Pg. 3) He starts "Plato's Pharmacy": "To a considerable degree, we have already said

all we MEANT TO SAY. Our lexicon at any rate is not far from being exhausted. With the exception of this or that supplement, our questions will have nothing more to name but the texture of the text, reading and writing, mastery and play, the paradoxes of supplementarity, and the graphic relations between the living and the dead: within the textual, the textile, and the histological. We will keep within the limits of this TISSUE between the metaphor of the *hysteresis* and the question of the *hysteresis* of metaphor. (Pg. 65) Later, he says of the term *pharmakon*, it will also be seen to what extent the malleable unity of this concept, or rather its rules and the strange logic that links it with its signifier, has been dispersed, masked, obliterated, and rendered almost unreadable not only by the imprudence or empiricism of the translators, but first and foremost by the redoubtable, irreducible difficulty of translation. It is a difficulty inherent in its very principle, situated less in the passage from one language to another, from one philosophical language to another, than already, as we shall see, in the tradition between Greek and Greek; a violent difficulty in the transference of a nonphilosopheme into a philosopheme. With this problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the very passage into philosophy. (Pg. 72) He continues, "The truth of writing, that is, as we shall see, (the) nontruth, cannot be discovered in ourselves by ourselves. And it is not the object of a science, only of a history that is recited, a fable that is repeated. The link between writing and myth becomes clearer, as does its opposition to knowledge, notably the knowledge one seeks in oneself, by oneself. And at the same time, through writing or through myth, the genealogical break and the estrangement from the origin are sounded. One should note most especially that what writing will later be accused of---repeating without knowing---and defines the very approach that leads to the statement and determination of its status. One thus begins by repeating without knowing---through a myth---the definition of writing, which is to repeat without knowing. This kinship of writing and myth, both of them distinguished from *logos* and dialectics, will only become more precise as the text concludes. (Pg. 74-75) He observes, "Textuality being constituted by differences and by differences from differences, it is by nature absolutely heterogeneous and is constantly composing with the forces that tend to annihilate it. (Pg. 98) He states (while discussing Plato's *Phaedrus*), "According to a pattern that will dominate all of Western philosophy, good writing (natural, living, knowledgeable, intelligible, internal, speaking) is opposed to bad writing (a moribund, ignorant, external, mute artifice for the senses). And the good one can be designated only through the metaphor of the bad one. Metaphoricity is the logic of contamination and the contamination of logic. Bad writing is for good a model of linguistic designation and a simulacrum of essence | philosophy is played out

in the play between two kinds of writing. Whereas all it wanted to do was to distinguish between writing and speech. (Pg. 149) He continues, "The book is a dialogue or a dialectic" In this book that has run out of voice, the need for the book or the writing in the soul is only felt through lack of presence of the other, through lack of any employment of the voice: the object is to reconstitute the presence of the other by substitution, and by the same token to repair the vocal apparatus The book, then, stands as a substitute for dialogue, as it calls itself, as it calls itself alive. (Pg. 184-185) He explains, "And now we must attempt to write the word 'dissemination.'" And to explain, with Mallarmé's text, why one is always at some pains to follow. If there is thus no thematic unity or overall meaning to reappropriate beyond the textual instances, no total message located in some imaginary order, intentionality, or lived experience, then the text is no longer the expression or representation of any TRUTH that would come to diffract or assemble itself in the polysemy of literature. It is this hermeneutic concept of polysemy that must be replaced by 'dissemination.' (Pg. 262) Not as 'path-breaking' as some of Derrida's other books, those studying Derrida and the development of his thought may still find it quite valuable.

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