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# VIEWPOINT

## An 'Interview' with Jacques Derrida

*M. Derrida preferred not to contribute to our symposium by writing an article, but asked if we could send him some questions to which he could reply. The questions naturally reflect the themes that were prominent in the recent debate.*

*1. The proposal by Cambridge University to award you an honorary degree provided the occasion for a controversy that attracted national, and indeed international, attention. Let's begin with the question of the role of the media themselves. The representation of this debate by newspapers and television (at least in Britain) was partly shaped by certain stereotypes of the 'intellectual' and of the nature of intellectual work. How would you analyse the operation of these stereotypes?*

Can one speak of a debate when newspapers and television seem only to have offered a 'representation', a stereotyped representation, as you yourself suggest? Did a debate actually take place somewhere, at a given moment, which would have been presented and then *represented* elsewhere, in the media? I doubt it. The 'public', 'publicity' in the form they assume in the media, seem to me to have been at the centre, taking a full and not disinterested part in the said debate right from the beginning. And reciprocally, the legitimate 'actors' in the academic debate, the lecturers or professors (some more or less completely than others, some sooner than others) behaved immediately as actor-journalists on the media scene. We come here then to one of the most serious problems of today, in my view, a problem which is at the same time intellectual, political and ethical. It concerns the whole of society, but particularly all those who like us, intellectuals, researchers, or teachers, retain some hope and want to take some responsibility for what I would call the 'Enlightenment' of today and tomorrow (which must not without qualification be reduced or assimilated to the *Aufklärung*, the *Enlightenment*, the *Illuminismo* or the *Lumières* of the Eighteenth Century).

The role of the media in their present form seems indeed to have been a determining one, at least with regard to the national and international dimensions given to the recent debates in Cambridge. This was predictable from the outset, particularly for the Vice-Chancellor's office. Informing me, not without embarrassment, that a non-placet had been voiced (for the first time, so I was told, for thirty years) they warned me that there was likely to be quite a stir in the media, and that the Vice-Chancellor's office would do everything in its power not to go along with this. And, in fact, I wish to acknowledge this publicly, the office has been beyond reproach in this respect. As for myself, as you will have noticed, I took no part at all in the debate and made a strict point of having no contact with the press nor of

making any public statement before the vote and as long as the discussion in Cambridge lasted, even when I could have considered the public declarations of certain of our colleagues, whether they were from Cambridge or not, English or not, not only as falsifying but as insulting and defamatory. Indeed, I was anxious to show respect, not just for the elementary norms of politeness, but for the rules of what was going to be an internal discussion within Cambridge (rules of democracy, academic freedom, absence of external pressure or of argument based on authority). But it must never be forgotten, and it's this that I want to insist upon: *the stereotypes you speak of do not have their origin in the media*. Most of the distorting, reductive and ridiculous talk circulating in the newspapers, on the radio or the television on this occasion was first shaped in the academic arena, through a sort of public opinion transmitted 'on the inside', so to speak, of the university. It is true that this 'interiority' has been radically transformed by the changing structure of the public space, as it is marked out by the modern media. But it is academics, *certain academics*, who are responsible for these stereotypes, and who then pass them on to journalists who are often just as unscrupulous and just as unqualified for reading difficult texts, just as careless about respecting and patiently reading through work that actually requires time, discipline, and patience, work that requires several readings, new types of reading, too, in a variety of different fields. From this point of view, in spite of all the respect I feel for the fact that there was a debate within Cambridge, I have to say that what I read, after 11 June, of a text inviting to vote *non placet*, seemed to me in its style (dogmatic, uncomprehending, ignorant, with no evidence of having read me, in every sentence a misreading or an untruth) comparable to the worst excesses of journalistic misrepresentation. And let me not be accused of denouncing errors of falsehood where I am supposed to have deprived myself of any right to such distinctions, as is so frivolously claimed. I have made this clear on several occasions, most recently in *Limited Inc, Toward an Ethic of Discussion* (Evanston, 1988), and I can only refer those who contradict me to this text. They are not obliged to agree with me or to take my word for it, but are they not under an obligation, should they wish to object to or reject what I say here, to read a little, and if this proves difficult, to make the necessary expenditure of time and effort?

What certain academics should be warned against is the *temptation of the media*. What I mean by this is not the normal desire to address a wider public, because

there can be in that desire an authentically democratic and legitimate political concern. On the contrary, I call *temptation of the media* the compulsion to misuse the privilege of public declaration in a social space that extends far beyond the normal circuits of intellectual discussion. Such misuse constitutes a *breach of confidence*, an *abuse of authority*—in a word, an *abuse of power*. The temptation of the media actually encourages academics to use the media as an easy and immediate way of obtaining a certain power of seduction, sometimes indeed just power alone. It encourages them to appear in the media simply for the sake of appearing, or to use their professorial authority for purposes which have as little to do with the norms of intellectual research as they have with political responsibility. This temptation of the media encourages these intellectuals to renounce the academic discipline normally required ‘inside’ the university, and to try instead to exert pressure through the press and through public opinion, in order to acquire an influence or a semblance of authority that has no relation to their own work. This is an old problem (it was already a problem in Kant’s time, as you know<sup>1</sup>) but it’s getting worse today, when the public space is being transformed by new developments in the structure of the media. As a result, the relation between what is inside and what is outside the university isn’t the same any more. Our responsibility is to redefine rules, to invent others (for journalists as well as for academics), a huge and formidable task, I agree, and by definition an endless one. It is difficult to enter into this debate in any depth here: I am trying to do so elsewhere. But replying to you ‘live’, as it were—and we are implicated here in one of those semi-mediatised situations we have been discussing, even if this review isn’t part of the mass media (this is an interview, the space and time are limited, there is an obligation to simplify and so on)—to illustrate what I have been saying, I will restrict myself to *two examples*, selected from the dozens of such interventions, often of the most outrageous sort, made during the affair surrounding the honorary degree in Cambridge. I do this because it is impossible here to single out and to analyse in detail all of the distorting and malicious presentations of my work (or similar work, because were it merely a question of myself alone, none of this would have unfolded in such spectacular fashion), presentations by colleagues whose every sentence proves clearly that they either haven’t read or haven’t understood one line of the texts they wish to denounce. Likewise it is impossible to refute in a few words their accusations of nihilism, scepticism, or relativism. I have been trying, explicitly and tirelessly, to do this for thirty years (these questions, in particular the question of nihilism, are much more complex than these imperturbable censors seem to believe). Anyone who has read even a little of my work knows this, and it is easy to find out that far from seeking to undermine the university or research in any field, I actively militate for them in ways that, so far as I know, none of my detractors do. But let’s leave this to one side, as we haven’t the right conditions here for more precise

references. Those who are interested will find all this in the bookshops or in the University Library.

Here then are the two examples I promised. They are typical and I will use them to ask two questions.

1. First question. *Where is the fallacy?* (See the letter reproduced on p. 138 below.) First example: for the first time in history, to my knowledge, there has been the spectacle of academics at universities other than Cambridge, not even in England, claiming to protect the institution, that of Cambridge, and of the university in general. They do this not by way of discussion and argument supported by reading and references, as one does in scholarly publications, but through the most powerful organs of the media, in a style reminiscent of the slogan or manifesto, the denunciatory placard or election propaganda. Some twenty of them, from some ten countries, addressed a letter to a ‘great’ newspaper, *The Times* (9 May 1992) to intervene in a debate going on in a university of which not one of them is a member, and a propos of a distinction which was honorific. When and where has such an infringement of academic freedom ever been seen? And such violence directed through the media at a colleague who in this particular case hadn’t asked for anything and was not a candidate for anything? What would have been said if the State or some other power had tried to bring external pressure to bear on those individuals entitled to vote in Cambridge, thus calling into question their ability to decide for themselves in intellectual matters? Suddenly, one felt as though one were dreaming: on the pretext of saving or immunising Cambridge against evil, contagion, decadence, on the pretext of coming to the assistance of a university institution, an exemplary and prestigious one, we saw some twenty academics, their titles on show, trying to form a kind of international consortium and treating their Cambridge colleagues with contempt, offering them advice such as one would bestow on children or illiterates, pretending to enlighten them, as if they had not reached their intellectual age of consent, or had remained intellectually retarded. What can these people have felt threatened by to lose their self-control in this way?

This wasn’t the only betrayal of the very principles this international militia was claiming to defend. Just as serious a betrayal, for example, was their ‘quotation’ of phrases I have never written, phrases fabricated from I cannot imagine what rumours. I challenge anyone to find in my writings the expression ‘logical phallusies’, by which the signatories of this document, in what is a serious and dogmatic abuse of their authority in the press, try to discredit me. Even if they should find these terms in somebody else’s work, nothing can be proved by citing a few words out of context. And let’s not go into the argument according to which the influence of a philosophy on other disciplines or more generally outside the profession is held to signify that it can’t then be philosophy! Here are intellectuals who are using the press to put about the idea that philosophy should only

influence professional philosophers and should not be open to the judgement of scholars of other disciplines! How many examples could one find of the contrary, to remind them that philosophy, in its best tradition, has never allowed itself to be put under house arrest within the limits of its own discipline, to say nothing of the limits of its profession? Moreover would the authors of this letter to *The Times* be so worried if the work they denounce really had no influence on professional philosophers? And how can they pretend to prove what they so calmly put forward on this subject, and on the subject of French or international philosophy, in a letter of only a few lines which it is *ipso facto* impossible to answer effectively (for it is the question of the 'right of reply' which is in fact at issue here, at the centre of the debate on the press<sup>2</sup>)? And how can they say that what I write 'defies comprehension' when they are denouncing its excessive influence and end up by saying that they themselves have very well understood that there is nothing to understand in my work except the false or the trivial? The fact that this is *also* extremely funny doesn't detract from the seriousness of the symptom. In the responses that are called for here, and in spite of the discouragement that can on occasion take over, we must stay sensitive both to the comedy and to the seriousness, never give up either the laughter or the seriousness of intellectual and ethico-political responsibility. Each sentence of the letter<sup>3</sup> violates the very principles in whose name these academics pretend to speak ('reason, truth and scholarship'). This manifesto, the product of an anxious obscurantism, is thrust into the media arena in an attempt to consolidate a power which is perhaps under threat but which is still very strong within the university institution, as a simple analysis of the status, institutions, and respective careers of the signatories would confirm. Backed up by the strength of a paper like *The Times*, by its national and international distribution, this power is indeed formidable. Against it a discourse which is argued through, which is slow, difficult, rigorous, will have but little purchase. Unfortunately, there is little chance of its being heard by a wider public. Let us not forget that the 'Cambridge affair' is part of a whole sequence of events which goes back at least twenty years and which is not an exclusively English concern. One lady signatory of this letter to *The Times*, which a French paper described as attempted 'theoretical lynching',<sup>4</sup> had written from the United States ten years before to a minister of the French government protesting against what she interpreted as my appointment as Director of the International College of Philosophy, whereas I was in fact, in that case also, *elected (unanimously) by my colleagues*.<sup>5</sup>

2. Second example or symptom, and second question: *where is the poison?* This time it is not a journalist, nor even an English journalist, it is an academic, Sarah Richmond, who first says of my 'ideas' that they are 'poison for young people', which *then* becomes *Der Spiegel's* title (*Gift für den Geist*, no. 16, 1992). What

needs to be analysed here is the alliance, surely not accidental, between two dogmatisms: on the one hand certain academics say whatever they like, with no proof and no discussion; on the other hand certain journalists in their turn misuse the formidable powers at their disposal (powers of precipitation, acceleration, reproduction and diffusion, particular to the modern press) by placing them in the service of these academics and the forces they represent. The same weekly quotes Roger Scruton's accusation that my work is 'pure nihilism'. Nobody forces this professor at another great English university to read me, but since for several years now he has made numerous allusions of this type in the press, he should at least begin to find out a little more about my work. If he thinks that it's in vain that I have been protesting for thirty years against nihilism, if he thinks that what I say, literally, quite explicitly, page after page, in favour of *a way of thinking which is affirmative and not nihilist* is not convincing, then let him discuss this using texts and quotations, let him take to argument and stop this throwing around of invective which it is impossible to respond to in the press. I will always judge such behaviour as unworthy of the university which this professor, for instance, claims to represent and to wish to save. Nothing means that I am right, or that I should be believed merely because I say so, but let those who want to criticise take the trouble to do so, let them read, quote, demonstrate, and so on. Yet in one day we have publications like *The Times* or *Der Spiegel*, with an international circulation of millions, putting about what I consider to be lamentable and damaging pieces of nonsense. In an infinitely self-reproducing and self-imitating language the same phrases, the same clichés are repeated, translated and echo one other. The *Observer* only has to call me a 'computer virus' for my photograph to appear a few days later (as always, the question of the modern media is the question of speed) in *Der Spiegel* with the title '*wie ein Computervirus*'. (There would be a lot to say about these questions of poison and of computer viruses, but this is not the place, and I am not going to encumber you further with references to what I have written on this subject, so let's leave it there.) These accusations, made by irresponsible academics and reproduced by journalists who can't have read, properly read, one line of my books – these accusations, as terrible as they are ridiculous, are always highly revealing. Most important, in one single day they reach so many more people than those who in fact read, patiently or laboriously, my own publications! This is the answer I gave to a journalist who was surprised that I found it difficult to improvise a response to what he was asking me to do, that is to define deconstruction 'in a nutshell'! Luckily, naturally, we still have to make this kind of quantitative evaluation more complex. And we continue to hope, perhaps in vain, for a new Enlightenment, and that a small number of clear-minded readers may in the end count for more than millions of the other sort. All of this would be of only limited importance if it weren't so clearly symptomatic of the general situation concerning the relations between

the media and intellectual research or academic life. Though it goes back a long way, the problem is taking on new forms today, and all those presently researching the history of university institutions in relation to the press and the public domain in what, with your permission, I will call a more or less 'deconstructive' style, are attentive to these changes.<sup>6</sup> It is a question here not only of theoretical research but of praxis, of ethics or of a deontology aimed at creating new kinds of contract. This doesn't mean such things as for example a signed charter of formal undertakings, but truly inventive research attempting to redefine in specific situations, each of them different, the co-responsibility which should link together intellectuals, scholars, researchers, students and journalists. Since there are no norms pre-existing or independent of research, of intellectual questioning, of thinking in general, this co-responsibility needs to be reinvented every day and by each of us in particular.

*2. Do there seem to you to be any significant differences between the nature and the extent of the media's interest in such matters in France and in Britain?*

There are interesting differences which would deserve analysis if there were the time or space, but they are secondary to the general structure I have just described, I think. Besides, journalists mostly gather information on this type of subject by reading other newspapers. Unfortunately that's the way they measure the importance of or give importance to the material they select, evaluate, or simply publish. In the present case, there are many indications that the French press started off by reacting to the English press. However, if some (and only some) of the French newspapers seemed to oppose the apparent signs of rejection coming from Cambridge, this wasn't in order to ask more crucial or searching questions about my work, 'deconstruction' and so on (which were treated by the 'popular' French press in more or less the same way, if not even worse, than by the press of other countries), but in order to take these signs of rejection, *wrongly in my view*, as a *simple example* illustrating a general rule (England's isolation, Cambridge's traditionalism, the ancestral hostility between Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy and continental philosophy and so on – in short, another demonstration of nationalism, which was sometimes answered on the French side by another nationalism, a little as if we were at the Olympic Games, or a philosophical tennis tournament). It is true, and this changes things a little, that in one or two cases there are regular philosophical columns in the French newspapers, in general once a week, which are written by journalists who are also professional philosophers with posts in university institutions. But this regularity and monopoly, this institutional situation creates other problems which I can't go into here.

*3. Other differences aside, does the position of the university in the two societies seem to you a crucial part of this*

*contrast, or do you agree with those who see an increasingly common pattern to the role and type of higher education and research in all 'developed' societies?*

To answer this question seriously, one would have to analyse the symbolic position that Cambridge and Oxford occupy, and not only in England. There has never been an 'affair' in the case of the honorary doctorates I have been given in past years by other universities outside Europe (Columbia, the New School for Social Research, Williams College), on the continent (Louvain) or even in England (Essex). Cambridge continues then to play a very particular role for the university consciousness in the world, and this means that what was at stake wasn't merely localisable in Cambridge but also elsewhere (in Paris for example, if you will allow me another allusion, this time rather cryptic, to that letter in *The Times* which was, no doubt, as was said both in private and in the press, more Parisian in its inspiration and in its intended destination than a simple look at the list of signatories would suggest). This exemplary influence of Cambridge, deserved both by its history and by its academic merit, isn't necessarily an object of lament or concern, as long as this tradition does not become paralysing (and we should never forget that in this case it was ultimately not paralysing). Having said this, to answer your question, yes I believe the 'common pattern' you are describing exists. It explains also to a large extent why the Cambridge affair created such a stir, and why what was at stake could immediately be identified as something common to all European systems of education and research, and more widely, to the so-called 'developed' Western democracies.

*4. Your work has, to put it mildly, always stimulated a great deal of controversy, but more than this, you have been attacked in exceptionally violent ways, and denounced as undermining the very nature of intellectual enquiry itself. How do you account for the ferocity and exaggeration of these attacks on your work?*

If it were only a question of 'my' work, of the particular or isolated research of one individual, this wouldn't happen. Indeed, the violence of these denunciations derives from the fact that the work accused is part of a whole ongoing process. What is unfolding here, like the resistance it necessarily arouses, can't be limited to a personal 'œuvre', nor to a discipline, nor even to the academic institution. Nor in particular to a generation: it's often the active involvement of students and younger teachers which makes certain of our colleagues nervous to the point that they lose their sense of moderation and of the academic rules they invoke when they attack me, and my work. If this work seems so threatening to them, this is because it isn't simply eccentric or strange, incomprehensible or exotic (which would allow them to dispose of it easily) but as I myself hope, and as they believe more than they admit, competent, rigorously argued and carrying conviction in its re-examination of the fundamental norms and premises of a number of dominant discourses,

the principles underlying many of their evaluations, the structures of academic institutions and the research that goes on within them. What this kind of questioning does is modify the rules of the dominant discourse, it tries to politicise and democratise the university scene. If these blindly passionate and personal attacks are often concentrated on me alone (while sometimes maintaining that it isn't me but those who 'follow' or 'imitate' me who are being accused – an all too familiar pattern of argument) that's no doubt because 'deconstructions' query or put into question a good many divisions and distinctions, for example the distinction between the pretended neutrality of philosophical discourse on the one hand and existential passions and drives on the other, between what is public and what is private and so on. More and more I have tried to submit the singularity that is writing, signature, self-presentation, 'autobiographical' engagement (which can also be ethical or political) to the most rigorous – and necessary – philosophical questioning. Not that I intend putting the subject (in the biographical sense) at the centre or origin of philosophical discourse (indeed, I would normally be accused of doing the opposite), but I do try in each case to put these questions in their primary terms, to relate them with themes which no doubt must irritate or disturb certain colleagues who would prefer to repress them (for example questions of sexual difference and femininity, the 'proper name', literature and psychoanalysis – but it would be necessary here to review so many other themes, scientific, technical or political). All of this probably explains why my most resolute opponents believe that I am too visible, that I am a little too 'personally' 'alive', that my name echoes too much in the texts which they nevertheless claim to be inaccessible. In short, to answer your question about the 'exceptional violence', the compulsive 'ferocity' and the 'exaggeration' of the 'attacks', I would say that these critics organise and practise in my case a sort of obsessive personality cult which philosophers should know how to question and above all to moderate.

5. *Your own academic background is in philosophy, and your work has involved a prolonged engagement with the Western metaphysical tradition. Yet, as you know, some of your critics have wished to deny that what you write can really be classified as 'philosophy'. Can you comment on the role of this kind of intellectual essentialism in general, and particularly on what seems to you at stake in promoting an exclusive definition of 'philosophy'?*

Allow me to be even more brief, as I have replied too often before to this objection. The question of knowing what can be called 'philosophy' has always been *the very question* of philosophy, its heart, its origin, its life-principle. Since this gesture, which is originally and constitutively a philosophical gesture, is both repeated and examined in everything I write, since my work would have no sense outside its explicit, recurrent and systematic references to Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger and several other authors

(whether in the canon or not), references made over a period of thirty years, the motives of those who want to deny that my work is 'philosophy' must be sought elsewhere. This is their problem, not mine. Most often, I think these inquisitors confuse philosophy with what they have been taught to *reproduce* in the tradition and style of a particular institution, within a more or less well-protected – or rather, less and less well-protected – social and professional environment. There's nothing new about this: each time a philosopher, ensconced in his or her philosophical niche, doesn't understand another philosopher, another philosophical language, other premises, other rules or other logical or rhetorical procedures, other discursive or pedagogical set-ups, each time s/he wants to attack them or remove their legitimacy, s/he simply says: this is no longer philosophy. That kind of behaviour has always been rather facile, don't you think? The history of philosophy is full of such examples for those who are at all acquainted with it, and it is crucial to have some knowledge of this history. Among the many differences distinguishing my work from those who attack it, there is on my side a taking into account of the historical nature of philosophy, an attempt to be as well-informed as possible on this historical dimension. I think that things are getting worse today because of the profound malaise in the profession (this is true for the humanities in general). In all of our so-called developed industrial societies, the teaching and doing of philosophy are being threatened by the State and by a certain liberal logic of the market-place (our activities in the group *Grep* and the International College for Philosophy are a response to this tendency – I refer again to *The Right to Philosophy* on these points). Paradoxically, many professional philosophers are becoming more defensive and protectionist than ever. In every new questioning of philosophy (in areas where they cannot, will not or no longer wish to read) they see a threat to the specificity of their discipline or their corporation. So they construct a phantasm of specificity that they claim to be untouchable, and they confuse the threats which come from the State or the market-place with radical questionings which should, on the contrary, ensure the life and survival of philosophy. Having said this, I would up to a certain point, and after some essential caveats, be in agreement with those who 'deny that what [I] write can really be classified as "philosophy"'. That's true: not all of what I write can be completely 'classified as "philosophy"', and I have spent a good deal of time and many pages explaining why, how and for what reasons that doesn't then mean 'non-philosophical' and still less 'anti-philosophical', nor even simply foreign to philosophy. It is necessary to distinguish between several types of texts here. Some are, I hope, recognisable as being philosophical in a very classical way; others try to change the norms of philosophical discussion from inside philosophy; still others bear philosophical traits without being limited to that. The same goes for the variety of authors and texts which interest me (there are among them a good number of great authors from the canon, but there are also

others; sometimes authors who don't belong to the philosophical tradition at all inspire me more, whether about philosophy, or about questions *bearing on philosophy*). These differences do not always separate my books from each other, sometimes they function within the same book, and, in certain extreme cases, within the same paragraph. In any case, whether I practise philosophy or ask questions bearing on philosophy, on its paradoxical history and on its limits, I always place myself in relation to philosophy. I will always find it hard to understand how it can be said of a question *about philosophy* that it is simply *non-philosophical*. What is more, I am always surprised or amused when I see someone, in the name of a discipline, calmly *classifying* a discourse – for example as philosophical or non-philosophical. I recognise that this can be of use, but what use, and to whom? This introduces a whole set of questions.

6. *In the United States, and to some extent in Britain, your work has had enormous impact upon literary studies. How far do you think your reputation in these two countries has been shaped by the particular tensions which now characterise the discipline of literary studies and the part it had historically played in the wider culture?*

In the last two centuries, literary studies, and more widely, the humanities, have played a determining role in the self-awareness of the 'great' English and American universities. They consolidated exactly that which had given them their structure: national tradition, the works in the canon, the language, a certain social or ethnic hegemony and so on. This situation is changing, as is all too clear. What is called 'deconstruction' is concerned with (theoretically) and takes part in (practically) a profound historical transformation (technico-scientific, political, socio-economic, demographic) which affects the canons, our relation to language and to translation, the frontiers between literature, literary theory, philosophy, the 'hard' sciences, psychoanalysis and politics and so on. Deconstruction therefore finds itself at the heart of what you call 'tensions'. It is a question of assuming these tensions, of 'living' them as much as of 'understanding' them. Those who fear and wish to deny the inescapable necessity of these transformations try to see in deconstruction the agent responsible for such changes, when in my eyes it is above all else a question of trying to understand them, of interpreting them, so as to respond to them in the most responsible fashion possible.

7. *In the case of the Cambridge vote, it was noticeable that quite a few scientists (many of whom, it is probably reasonable to assume, had never read your work) felt that in opposing the award of the degree, they were in some way upholding the standards and procedures which constitute their disciplines. In speaking of philosophy and literary studies, we have raised the question of the cultural role of 'disciplines', but do you think the question takes a different form with those who practise the natural sciences?*

If it were true, as you suggest, that these scientists wanted to protect their discipline against a threat coming from work that *they have not read*, what can one reply to this? I would be content here with a classical answer, the most faithful to what I respect the most in the university: it is better, and it is always more *scientific*, to read and to make a pronouncement on what has been read and understood. The most competent scientists and those most committed to research, inventors and discoverers, are in general on the contrary very sensitive to history and to processes which modify the frontiers and established norms of their own discipline, in this way prompting them to ask other questions, other types of question. I have never seen scientists reject in advance what seemed to come from other areas of research or enquiry, other disciplines, even if that encouraged them to modify their ground and to question the fundamental axioms of their discipline. I could quote here the numerous testimonies of scientists in the most diverse disciplines which flatly contradict what the scientists you mention are saying.

8. *We have been speaking of the attitudes involved in the cultivation and defence of academic 'disciplines'. It is frequently said that those who practise one of the traditional humanities disciplines, such as philosophy or literature, ought to be able to write in a way that is accessible to the non-specialist reader. Do you agree?*

That's very difficult. Everything possible must be done to come close to such accessibility, but on several conditions: 1. *never totally renounce* the demands proper to the discipline (whose complexity is never natural, nor definitively stabilised); *never totally renounce* basically supposes a degree of negotiation and a constant renegotiation of previous compromises, according to the situation, its urgency, and so on. What is essential here in my view is never to lose sight of the rigour of the discipline; 2. as a consequence, we should be aware that there is no immediate and perfect solution to this difficulty, which is a recurrent one. Hence the need to account for all kinds of social mediation: the press and publishing, which also have pedagogical responsibilities, education at school and outside school. This is why 'deconstruction' also takes an active concern in pedagogical reform, and why I am fighting, with others, for the extension of the teaching of philosophy in secondary schools and at university; 3. it should not be believed that there is on one side the 'specialist reader' and on the other side the 'non-specialist reader'. These two categories are riddled with all sorts of internal differences, and in fact have no dependable identity. Some of those one would class as specialists, and sometimes as 'important professors' remain incompetent, or from a certain moment become so, seriously incapable of reading certain texts in their 'own' discipline (see above; this isn't just the case in philosophy, either). Conversely, 'non-specialists' make up a highly differentiated set, constantly evolving and with whom one can attempt a whole range of

mediations, translations and teaching strategies. Only *certain* journalists and *certain* teachers, again in alliance here, try to give credit to the idea that there are only *two* categories of reader, specialists and non-specialists, and thus only two languages (the difficult, which makes no concessions, and the easy, which is supposed to be immediately intelligible). No doubt we should begin by reworking this set of problems, by calling into question these self-interested and protectionist presuppositions. This is all very difficult, I agree.

9. *It has often been alleged of your work (but not of your work alone) that it is intimately bound up with not only a French, but a distinctively Parisian, intellectual situation, and indeed that it loses its force and some of its intelligibility when removed from this context. There is obviously an implicit charge of parochialism here: how would you respond to this allegation?*

Here too it's difficult to respond in a few words. It is true that what I'm trying to do, especially back in the 1960s and principally in *Of Grammatology*, will be better understood if aspects of the French, and more narrowly, Parisian university and cultural scene are taken into account, for example, the hegemony of structuralism, of a certain Althusserian Marxism, of Lacanian psychoanalysis, of Blanchot, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes and so on. So you're right, it is better to take account of this French and even Parisian dimension, of all the signals and signs of complicity that can be found in a work like *Of Grammatology*. One never writes just anywhere, out of a context and without trying to aim at or privilege a certain readership, even if one can't and shouldn't limit oneself to this. That is true even for publications whose project is the most philosophical and the most universal. I can no more reject this French or Parisian reference than an English philosopher would dare claim, I think, that s/he owes nothing to the context of intellectual commerce at Oxbridge. Should I remind you, in addition, that I only ever write in French and that I attach great importance to this fact, as to all problems concerning idiom, natural and national language, traditions of thought, their filiations and genealogies? But here again, one must go further and point out that things are much more complicated. Because very quickly, and perhaps even from the beginning, this complicity with the 'French' or 'Parisian' context also meant conflict, opposition, rupture, estrangement, a certain uprootedness. Not only has the French 'context' been less and less determining for me, but there have been more and more instances of antipathy, rejection or misconception on the part of the French press and the French universities in relation to my work (this is no doubt something separate from the reaction in Cambridge and elsewhere, but not entirely unrelated to it: don't forget that though I was fortunate enough to be assistant lecturer at the Sorbonne, to teach for twenty years in the *Ecole normale supérieure* and now to be *Directeur d'études* in the *Ecole*

*des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales*, I have always been refused a university chair. I could give many similar examples to show how very complex, contradictory and – to use the language of the sixties – overdetermined the situation is here).

Because on the other hand, not only the 'context', the destination, the reception of my work – and correlatively my own activities – have become internationalised, whether by translation or by teaching, but also the thinkers and writers who interest me are not, for the most part, French. This is all too obvious as concerns the canonical philosophers and their work, but it is also true for Kafka, Joyce or Celan, for instance, about whom I have written articles or books.

10. *Media-fed controversies have a short life, but eventually the historians arrive and treat them as symptomatic of larger developments they claim to trace. What significance do you think historians will in future attribute to 'the Derrida affair' at Cambridge in 1992?*

This little event is symptomatic of a number of things, so more than one type of approach would be needed. Some historians might adopt the classical interpretation of a renewed or displaced conflict between philosophical traditions which go back two or three centuries (English, empiricist or analytical/continental, French or German). They might focus on the conflict between accepted models of the university institution and contemporary historical forces (Cambridge and England, Cambridge and the rest of the world). Other historians might look at the problem of professionalisation and the different disciplines, or the relation between philosophy and its 'others' (science and technology, literature, painting or drawing, and newer arts, like the cinema, which the authors of the letter to the *Times* seemed to find particularly disturbing). Others still might concentrate on the media (see above), the present evolution of the European community, with the prospect (threatening for some, welcomed by others) of the unification of the European or Western academic system, or on the series of very rare *non placet* (most often 'political' ones) in the history of Oxford and Cambridge. From this point of view, another historian (that makes a lot of work and a lot of people, doesn't it, but they are necessary and division of labour is necessary, when things are not simple) could emphasise the political dimension, in its most classical and coded form, and ask why, supposing that titles, qualifications and 'scholarship' were comparable – already a very problematic, even fictional hypothesis – why the nomination of an 'extremist' doctor *honoris causa* (say a Marxist or a conservative, from the extreme revolutionary left or the extreme right) would not, probably, have aroused so much anger and disquiet. What does that mean for politics today? For my work? For 'deconstruction'? One would also have to take account of the present situation of Cambridge in England, its relations with the other universities in the country and in the wider context of the Anglo-American university system (all big questions). A



more philosophical historian would see in what has just happened the projection of a disarticulated and overcondensed figure (metaphor, metonymy or synecdoche), amplified out of all proportion, on to a huge media screen (synoptic, synchronous, in 'technicolour', with subtitles or dubbing), a figure representing a crucial philosophical moment. Not a moment of crisis, a critical moment, but (if I may) a moment of 'deconstruction'. At stake here are precisely those themes deconstructive work addresses, to begin with the theme of crisis or critique, but also – the list is unending – that of science, truth, literature, politics, sexual difference, the democracy to come, the Enlightenment of today and tomorrow. But another historian – or the same one – should insist on what in my eyes is an essential fact: unlike so many universities or European academic institutions (the French ones, for instance – here a ten-volume history at least would be necessary) Cambridge was able to organise a public debate, in full daylight, or almost. Cambridge didn't try to conceal the spectacle of conflict, nor the gestures of rejection or censorship which shook its august body, and finally at the end of a debate and a vote that were as democratic as could be, chose not to close its doors to what is coming. If we had the time and space, I would explain why Cambridge is for me always exemplary, in this respect at least, and needs no lessons, particularly not from the French academic institutions which serve, in the half-light, their inglorious and daily *non placet* on so many foreign and French philosophers (thus I am glad to remain, *honoris causa*, a proud and grateful Doctor of the University of Cambridge). Again, other historians could quite as legitimately follow other threads, other causal chains, the analysis of which would be just as necessary. But in that case it would be a question of generalities, of *general conditions* for what I should prefer to call the 'Cambridge affair'. If there had been a 'Derrida affair', and should its micro-history still deserve the attention of the historian of tomorrow, which I doubt, then to approach it one would need to pull on some tenuous and rather peculiar threads, to follow their trajectory through the chain of 'general conditions' which I have just referred to. This is a task I do sometimes apply myself to (I have done so a little more intensely or thoughtfully these last few weeks, thanks to Cambridge) but about which it would not be fitting that I engage your attention any longer here.

Translated by Christopher Johnson and Marian Jeanneret  
Trinity College

#### NOTES

1. Given the restrictions on space and time, for a discussion of such questions I refer you to *Du droit à la philosophie* [*The Right to Philosophy*] (Galilée, Paris, 1990), in particular to the chapters 'Mochlos – ou le conflit des facultés' [*Mochlos – or the conflict of the faculties*] and 'Les pupilles de l'Université. Le principe de la raison et l'idée de l'Université' [*Leewards of the University. The principle of reason and the idea of the University*].
2. To refer to my most recent publications only, allow me to indicate that I have discussed this question of the right of reply, of democ-

racy and of culture in 'La démocratie ajournée' [*Democracy adjourned*] in *L'autre cap* (Minuit, Paris, 1991). English translation by M. Naas and P. A. Brault, *The Other Heading*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1992.

3. I would be very grateful if you would agree to reproduce the letter here in a note. It has to be given the necessary publicity so that your readers can verify everything themselves and study this extraordinary document in detail, in ways that I have neither time nor inclination to do here today. And with respect to intellectual and democratic rigour, to the future of universities and to the level of public discussion, one ought to ask the authors of this letter to justify with texts and precise references each of their assertions, in open forum. The same request ought to be addressed to all the authors of the 'fly sheets' after republishing them.
4. Robert Maggiori, in *Libération*, 16–17 May, 1992.
5. I am alluding here to the 'Ruth Barcan Marcus' affair, Barcan Marcus being the author of this letter to the French government in 1983. For details on this other (or rather, the same) affair, on this kind of 'academic interpol', as I described it, and what goes on 'with chains of repressive practices, and with the police in its basest form, on the border between alleged academic freedom, the press, and state power', allow me to refer again to my book, *Limited Inc. Toward an Ethic of Discussion*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1988, pp. 158–9, note 12.
6. Besides *The Right to Philosophy*, to which you will excuse me for referring again – in particular on the subject of the Groupe de Recherches sur l'Enseignement Philosophique (Grep) [Research Group on the Teaching of Philosophy] and the Collège International de Philosophie [International College of Philosophy] – I mention among other things a volume which will be appearing in the next few weeks and in which I have collaborated with several colleagues, mostly English and American: *Logomachia, The Conflict of the Faculties*, edited by R. Rand, Nebraska University Press, Lincoln and London, 1992.

*The Times Saturday 9 May 1992*

#### Derrida degree a question of honour

*From Professor Barry Smith and others*

Sir, The University of Cambridge is to ballot on May 16 on whether M. Jacques Derrida should be allowed to go forward to receive an honorary degree. As philosophers and others who have taken a scholarly and professional interest in M. Derrida's remarkable career over the years, we believe that the following might throw some needed light on the public debate that has arisen over this issue.

M. Derrida describes himself as a philosopher, and his writings do indeed bear some of the marks of writings in that discipline. Their influence, however, has been to a striking degree almost entirely in fields outside philosophy – in departments of film studies, for example, or of French and English literature.

In the eyes of philosophers, and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour.

We submit that, if the works of a physicist (say) were similarly taken to be of merit primarily by those working in other disciplines, this would in itself be sufficient grounds for casting doubt upon the idea that the physicist in question was a suitable candidate for an honorary degree.

M. Derrida's career had its roots in the heady days of the 1960s and his writings continue to reveal their origins in that period. Many of them seem to consist in no small part of elaborate jokes and puns ('logical phallusies' and the like) and M. Derrida seems to us to have come close to making a

career out of what we regard as translating into the academic sphere tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists or of the concrete poets.

Certainly he has shown considerable originality in this respect. But again, we submit, such originality does not lend credence to the idea that he is a suitable candidate for an honorary degree.

Many French philosophers see in M. Derrida only cause for silent embarrassment, his antics having contributed significantly to the widespread impression that contemporary French philosophy is little more than an object of ridicule.

M. Derrida's voluminous writings in our view stretch the normal forms of academic scholarship beyond recognition. Above all – as every reader can very easily establish for himself (and for this purpose any page will do) – his works employ a written style that defies comprehension.

Many have been willing to give M. Derrida the benefit of the doubt, insisting that language of such depth and difficulty of interpretation must hide deep and subtle thoughts indeed.

When the effort is made to penetrate it, however, it becomes clear, to us at least, that, where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial.

Academic status based on what seems to us to be little more than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth and scholarship is not, we submit, sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university.

Yours sincerely,

BARRY SMITH  
(Editor, *The Monist*)

HANS ALBERT (University of Mannheim),  
DAVID ARMSTRONG (Sydney),  
RUTH BARCAN MARCUS (Yale),  
KEITH CAMPBELL (Sydney),  
RICHARD GLAUSER (Neuchâtel),  
RUDOLF HALLER (Graz),  
MASSIMO MUGNAI (Florence),  
KEVIN MULLIGAN (Geneva),  
LORENZO PEÑA (Madrid),  
WILLARD VAN ORMAN QUINE (Harvard),  
WOLFGANG RÖD (Innsbruck),  
EDMUND RUGGALDIER (Innsbruck),  
KARL SCHUHMAN (Utrecht),  
DANIEL SCHULTHESS (Neuchâtel),  
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RENÉ THOM (Burs-sur-Yvette),  
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JAN WOLENSKI (Cracow),  
Internationale Akademie für Philosophie,  
Obergass 75,  
9494 Schaan, Liechtenstein.  
May 6.

FROM A PAINTING BY SEURAT

*Nobody's here. The quay  
is almost sandy, tanned  
light nestles in the free  
grooved stanchion-bollards and,  
though some are still afloat,  
low tide keeps boat from boat*

*along the farther shore  
that reaches up to dunes  
which might be marram, more  
clutter, and then the moon's  
electric sister white  
lighthouse whose longer, bright*

*reflection makes to reach  
down through unswaying sea  
but lies across it, each  
delicate ripple, free  
to break it, failing; lies,  
bracing the tower's rise*

*with its pretended weight.  
Some houses' red-tiled roofs  
help to triangulate  
the eyes' questioning moves  
across this reverie  
of noon perpetually*

*unpeopled – but the bare  
visible skeleton  
art leaves is the despair  
of any saying. Noon  
no, but a minute past,  
and it would like to last*

*forever. If the torn  
heart that has watched a white  
electric socket yawn  
like suicide can't quite,  
sleepless at midnight, say  
yes to this endless day –*

*well, in this radiant  
bemusement and becalmed  
harbour, it may be meant  
not to be wooed or charmed  
but simply to receive  
things not its own to grieve.*

LACHLAN MACKINNON