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L'Affaire Derrida

Yet another display of academic fatuity and bad faith has been playing itself out recently, this time in the letters column of *The New York Review of Books*. The occasion was Thomas Sheehan's review last January of *The Heidegger Controversy*, a collection of essays edited by the historian Richard Wolin about Martin Heidegger's now infamous connection with Nazism in the 1930s. (For details of that connection, see Roger Kimball's article "Heidegger at Freiburg, 1933" in our June 1985 issue.) The protagonist is none other than Jacques Derrida, the second most overrated French intellectual in history.

A little background. The name of Derrida has been an unfortunate enchantment to hapless professors of literature and their graduate students since the mid-Sixties. As the chief architect of "deconstruction," the grim academic parlor game that did so much to destroy literary studies over the last three decades, Derrida has been the darling of irresponsible professors the world over. He has also been a darling of academic publishers. Derrida spawned an entire industry. Not only have his own books sold in the tens of thousands, but also an army of Lilliputian deconstructors—epigones brimming with Derridean slogans and hauteur—have tirelessly offered up their scribblings, interpretations, and hermeneutical hobbyhorses to the god of tenure and parochial notoriety.

Two things above all have endeared Derrida to his acolytes. First, there is his manner of writing. Impenetrable and exquisitely condescending, bloated by an anemic obsession with violence and outré sexuality, it has denatured a generation of literary scholarship, doing to academic prose what methanol does to whiskey. Second, there is Derrida's corrosive cynicism, the generalized intellectual destructiveness of deconstruction. This finds expression (to take a few examples from his invitingly titled book *Of Grammatology*) in Derrida's attempt to "decompose" "the signification of truth," in his insistence that one "cannot hold on to the difference between signifier and signified," in his suggestion that "the names of authors" "have no substantial value" and "indicate neither identities nor causes." In short, as Gertrude Stein said of Oakland, Derrida holds that there is no there there.

Susceptible academics have found all this—the poisonous prose, the make-believe kinkiness, the infatuation with nihilism—irresistible: one draught and they

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are hooked. In the present context, what is most risibly ironic is Derrida's deconstruction of authorship. It turns out that Wolin, who teaches at Rice University, had translated and included in *The Heidegger Controversy* an interview that Derrida gave to *Le Nouvel Observateur* in 1987. Having discovered that the French publication, not Derrida, held the reprint rights to the interview, Wolin applied to the journal and paid for permission to translate and reprint the interview. That permission was granted, and the volume was duly published by Columbia University Press, also one of Derrida's American publishers.

Alas, Wolin did not ask Derrida himself for permission to reprint the interview. This would not have mattered—in fact, Wolin had been advised *not* to bother the busy philosopher with such a mundane request—if Wolin had not also had the temerity to *criticize* Derrida for his pompous evasions about Heidegger's political activities in the 1930s. No one who has followed Derrida's career will find it surprising that, as Wolin put it elsewhere, he “deconstructs into nonexistence the gravity of Heidegger's Nazism.” Derrida did the same thing when the literary critic Paul de Man was discovered to have written scores of articles for pro-Nazi newspapers in the late Thirties and early Forties. But Derrida does not take kindly to criticism. When he discovered Wolin's book in a New York bookshop, he immediately had his lawyer write Columbia University Press threatening legal action. Never mind that Derrida had no case: the intimidation worked. Columbia let the book (which was selling briskly) go out of print and bullied Wolin into withdrawing a planned paperback edition even without the Derrida interview.

What, has Derrida decided that “the names of authors” have some “substantial value” after all? Does he now believe that a byline “indicates” an identity, maybe even a cause? Perhaps so. In his review of the paperback edition of *The Heidegger Controversy*—which MIT has just published sans the Derrida interview—Thomas Sheehan meticulously recounted the grisly tale and Derrida's shameful part in it. Derrida shot back an angry letter to the editor: “Do I not have the right to protest when a text of mine is published without my authorization, in a bad translation, and in what I think is a bad book?” He accused Sheehan of “falsification” and Wolin of “unbelievable, shocking and inadmissible behavior.” Derrida also declared flatly that “no one ever threatened the existence of Mr. Wolin's book.”

There has followed a flurry of letters—a baroque filigree of charges, counter-charges, counter-counter-charges—from the pusillanimous director of the Columbia University Press, Derrida, Wolin, and a long roster of academic groupies pathetically eager to stand up for their idol. Hélène Cixous, doyenne of dour French feminism, has even contributed a sub-literate letter complaining about the “hatred Mr. Sheehan spreads across the pages of his letter [answering Derrida]” and his mistranslation of a French dative. Sheehan himself, although he feels called upon repeatedly to

assure readers that he “is no enemy of deconstruction,” has patiently exposed every lie, evasion, and misrepresentation in the whole sordid case.

“No one ever threatened the existence of Mr. Wolin’s book,” Derrida sniffed. Yet on November 22, 1991, Derrida’s lawyer wrote to Columbia University Press to assert Derrida’s right “to procure the seizure of the book that you published without his agreement,” and requiring as a condition for not suing that “all passages concerning him [in the book be] suppressed.”

“No one ever threatened the existence of Mr. Wolin’s book.” But on February 10, 1992, Derrida himself wrote to John D. Moore, director of the Press, asking him to promise never to republish the interview and threatening that, if such a promise were not forthcoming, “we should have to demand . . . that all copies of *The Heidegger Controversy* be withdrawn from sale, including the first edition.”

“No one ever threatened the existence of Mr. Wolin’s book”? In fact, as Sheehan has shown beyond doubt, Derrida, “for the basest of reasons, forced Richard Wolin’s book out of print.” For many years now, our premier literary critics have been teaching themselves and their students to see the world in quotation marks, to deny that there is such a thing as intrinsic literary merit, objectivity, truth, facts, reality. Derrida’s latest eruption—and the collusion of his admirers—provides a sterling illustration of what these ideas mean when they are translated into what the rest of us think of as the real world.

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