10-1997

Review of Derrida's *Archive Fever* and Caputo's *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*

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Jacques Derrida
Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression.
Trans. Eric Prenowitz.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1997.
Pp. viii + 113.
US$17.95. ISBN 0-226-14336-8.

Jacques Derrida
Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida. Ed. John D. Caputo.
New York: Fordham University Press 1997.
Pp. xvi + 215.
US$25.00 (cloth: ISBN 0-8232-1754-X);
US$17.95 (paper: ISBN 0-8232-1755-8).

Derrida's beautifully written and clear *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* is concerned with the establishment of Freud's London house as a museum or archive, with the interpretation of Freud's public and private texts as the source or archive of psychoanalytic science, and with the identification of sources and beginnings generally. Derrida's focus is on how psychoanalytic insights themselves problematise this identification. He takes the concept of the archive as paradigmatic for all these concerns.. The word 'archive' itself, as Derrida points out, derives from the Greek *archē*, meaning 'beginning' or 'ruling principle', and more specifically from the house of the *archōn*, the person in political authority, where official documents were kept (2). The concept of the archive therefore includes both descriptive records of beginnings and records of what has been actively or performatively initiated through law.

Derrida argues for both the necessity and the impossibility of establishing ultimate beginnings, in either the descriptive or the normative senses. One's recovery of the beginning is always mediated through the records of the beginning, and these records post-date that beginning. There is always an interpretive gap between the actual event of the beginning and the means of access we have to it. Even if we are simply present at the beginning, the event still requires to be accounted for by an interpretive act. This account, being an inevitably questionable interpretation, necessarily unsettles the axiomatic, unquestionable status of the beginning event as the source of what follows it, hence as the true beginning. Further, the account will refer to what precedes the event and also to what follows it (the purposes of the initiated act, for example). Even here, the beginning is not simply present to the witness or even to the agent of the event, but is what it is because of what precedes and follows it.

The 'immediate,' 'spontaneous' or 'lived' event, then, the present moment, the beginning 'experienced in itself' without archival records, is really what it is only in being partly what is external and secondary to it. It is not identical to itself. Derrida famously describes this necessary externality as a supple-

ment. The records in the archive are such a supplement, actually constituting the events they *appear* to record only supplementarily, as copies of the original untouched by them.

Derrida illustrates this non-self-presence/identity of even the 'immediate event' by explaining how the word 'impression' in the title came to him, condensing three meanings 'in an instant' (25). As it happens, the vagueness of the word 'impression', in contrast with, say, 'concept', fits very well the need to find an articulation of the non-self-identical being of things and events which the rigid self-identity of a 'concept' can no longer capture. I shall return to this point. Derrida, however, notes that the three meanings of impression 'overprinted each other from the back of my memory' (25). His choice of words is deliberate, a reference to Freud's theory of imprintable psychic surfaces which account for memory, and hence for rational thought. Ideas and experiences are retained by being *im-pressed* on the psychic surface. Our spontaneous thoughts, then, *presuppose* something like an archive, a set of 'secondary' copies. That is, Derrida is concerned to note not only the non-self-identical character of events one might immediately witness, but the non-self-identical character of the very witnesses, ourselves.

This is where the insights of psychoanalysis and those of deconstruction coincide: the identities of the thinker and of the apparatus of thought itself, which logic, concepts and the principle of identity presuppose, are not self-identical. The putting into operation of the principle of identity itself, the necessary principle (*archē*) of rational thought, presupposes non-self-identity.

Derrida's book is structured in keeping with its theme. The first 82 pages of the 101 page text consist in an untitled prefatory section, an 'Exergue', a 'Preamble' and a 'Foreword'. A 'Postscript' begins on p. 97, preceded only by a 13-page 'Theses'. Derrida himself draws attention to the connection between this organisation and his theme. The book is largely a discussion of Y.H. Yerushalmi's book, *Freud's Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*. Derrida writes that most of this book 'constitutes a kind of long preface, an exergue, a preamble, or a foreword' (40) for the final chapter, a fictional dialogue with Freud whose logic undermines the possibility of the preceding scientific discussion. And Derrida's first sentence, in the untitled initial section, is 'let us not begin at the beginning, not even at the archive' (1). The point is that one never can begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive, since the identification and status of the beginning is undermined by the always interpretable character of what it originates.

But it is crucial to be aware that one cannot *not* begin at the beginning either. Beginnings are impossible, but also inescapable and necessary: one can only have a supplement, a repetition or copy if an original is given (95). The 'violence' of instituting a law, deriving from its at best incomplete justification as a (not pure) beginning, cannot but *also* involve a proper beginning. The whole point of this fine book, as of Derrida's work generally, is not that we need to abandon classical logic, metaphysics and concepts, but that we need a new way of thinking with them: they are inescapable and

necessary as well as impossible, and that means that we need to rethink everything from the ground/ungroundedness up. Hence, I suggest, terms like 'impressions' and, another term frequenting this text, 'spectres.' These terms involve *both* immediate presence, in some present either lived or recorded, and an insufficiency of that presence at any time.

'[T]he limits, the borders and the distinctions have been shaken by an earthquake from which no classificational concept and no implementation of the archive can be sheltered. Order is no longer assured' (5). No classificational concept: this includes those with which we might interpret and react, positively or negatively, to Derrida's work. The implications of his work need to be thought via a different kind of impression before they can emerge, before we know what we are reacting to.

Caputo's *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida* sets out specifically to correct widespread failures by Derrida's critics to notice the novelty of the implications of Derrida's position (48). The book consists in a 26-page record of Derrida's responses to six questions by some of the Villanova University faculty, followed by Caputo's lengthy commentary on the responses, with substantial reference to Derrida's writings. It is a fairly lightweight book, aiming successfully to be readable and clear. It bristles, however — and necessarily — with paradoxes which will still be unpalatable to those who are liable quickly to dismiss Derrida. For example: 'Deconstruction is the relentless pursuit of ... things whose possibility is sustained by their impossibility' (32), a statement to which I shall return.

The first commentary elaborates on Derrida's claim that his 'deconstruction' of the history of philosophy is sympathetic to the philosophical tradition and institution (4ff.). Caputo argues against accusations that deconstruction is irresponsible. He points out that deconstruction is, instead, motivated to criticise the tradition only by a spirit of 'unlimited responsibility' (51), a truly *democratic* concern that no-one should be unjustly treated as a result of a failure to rethink especially our most basic beliefs and commitments (58ff.).

Second, Caputo supports Derrida's claim that deconstruction is serious scholarship, very carefully attentive to *both* the canon *and* what is new and disruptive within it (8ff.). Caputo details an example of Derrida's reading of Plato. Here Caputo slips a little, I think: 'Derrida is deeply resistant to "essentialism"' (101) — forgetting his own insistence that the deconstructively demonstrated 'impossibility' of things, including essences, is also what sustains their possibility (as quoted above).

Third, Caputo elaborates on Derrida's statement that 'it is because I am not one with myself that I can speak with the other' (14), a statement summarising Derrida's thinking on community and relations between persons and communities. 'Of course,' Derrida writes, 'we need unity' or identity (13), but an understanding of identity which 'prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism, and so on' (13-14).

Fourth, Caputo ably defends deconstruction's relevance to justice. Deconstruction aims to uncover and address the unique or singular, beyond calculative, systematic thinking, for which the singular drops out of sight.

Now '[t]he singular is what is always and already overlooked, ... excluded, structurally, no matter what law, ... what universal schema, is in place' (135). Hence deconstruction in fact *is* justice, the practice of redressing wrongs.

Fifth, and along the same lines, Caputo comments on the 'messianic' dimension of deconstruction, its rigorous openness to what cannot be anticipated: 'deconstruction turns on *faith*' without religion (165). And sixth, in connection with Derrida's work on Joyce, Caputo ably emphasises deconstruction's structurally positive, hopeful character.

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Evan Fales
A Defense of the Given.
Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield 1997.
Pp. xv + 225.
US$62.50 (cloth: ISBN 0-8476-8305-2);
US$23.95 (paper: ISBN 0-8476-8306-0).

This book is a partial defence of foundationalism, the view that our knowledge of the world is based on something given to us in perception — 'partial' because Fales limits himself to arguing for the reality of the given. His approach is phenomenological; he resolves to refrain from all theorizing about the nature of the given. In his final chapter he states the limited nature of what he has done: 'The sort of theory of knowledge according to which the given, as I have described it, provides the foundations has not been fully made out here. No such theory could fully satisfy us unless it could show how the sorts of propositions we usually take to be known, or at least well justified, could be so. Nor could such a theory be considered complete until it had been integrated with a theory of perception and supplied with an adequate ontology' (209).

Foundationalism, according to Fales, is a hierarchical view of knowledge. The foundation of empirical knowledge consists in primary or noninferential judgments based on perceptions; its higher levels are composed of secondary judgments inferred from primary judgments, or, in general, inferred from other knowledge. Since inference plays a part, 'the validity of certain rules of inference must be given, and possibly other *a priori* principles' (14). His task in this book is 'not to discover how the edifice of beliefs that we incline to honor as knowledge can be constructed from a foundation' but 'to show that there *is* such a foundation' (xii).

So what *is* the given according to Fales? 'From the subject's perspective,' he says, 'what is first given is what first emerges into consciousness' (90). By