

# Forum

Members of the association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the editor. The authors of articles discussed will be invited to respond.

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## Presidential Address

To the Editor:

I was fascinated by J. Hillis Miller's "Presidential Address 1986. The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base" (102 [1987]: 281-91). Miller suggests that "the resistance to theory" is one factor in the "almost universal turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward language as such" (283). I want to suggest another factor, one rooted in the very nature of the process by which ideas spread from their originators to others.

Let us consider deconstruction. Much of its rhetorical force comes from its immediate intellectual tension with the Western metaphysics it criticizes. First-generation deconstructionists, such as Miller, reached intellectual maturity fully within Western metaphysics. For Miller and his peers, deconstruction is thus something they arrived at after other philosophical commitments, such as phenomenology, fell apart. For these critics deconstruction has a strength and necessity that comes from the struggle they endured to create it.

The situation is quite different for those of us who first encountered deconstruction in graduate, or undergraduate, school. For us, deconstruction has been just one intellectual option among others. When we learned deconstruction we of course learned of the crisis in Western metaphysics. But it is one thing to learn of such a crisis, much as one learns, for example, about the Renaissance, and quite another thing to run into that crisis while trying to advance within Western metaphysics. For *them*, the crisis has been and is an immediate fact of their intellectual experience. For *us*, our knowledge of the crisis is, in Platonic fashion, but a copy of the original crisis.

Thus deconstruction can never be as compelling to us as it is to its originators. Our intellectual world is, by virtue of their effort, significantly different from theirs. Within this difference, many of us see deconstruction primarily as a great leveler. The distinction between the world and its representations retreats behind an infinite regression of signs. All texts become vessels for containing contradictions in Western metaphysics. Just as all cats appear gray in the dark, so all texts appear the same under deconstruction.

In short, to those young enough to be removed from the immediate crisis, the boring sameness of deconstruc-

tion's results can easily become more compelling than its logical rigor or its sense of intellectual urgency. The social process of creating and disseminating knowledge moves inevitably toward routinization. Ideas that taxed the full powers of the best thinkers of one generation become the routine intellectual property of ordinary thinkers in succeeding generations. Deconstruction is so tied to the passing moment of its initial necessity that its force weakens as its accomplishments become routine. That, as much as resistance to theory, is why younger critics have turned from language-centered theory, such as deconstruction.

I am not entirely happy with this situation. I think that we really are in trouble, that we need to establish new intellectual frameworks. But I am not at all sure that deconstruction has succeeded in doing much more than turning our deep intellectual problems into a rhetorical device called "the crisis in Western metaphysics." The move "toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context" may well be theoretically naive; it may even spring, in part, from "the resistance to theory." But I don't think that deconstruction's repeated encapsulation of intellectual crisis is rich enough to overcome that resistance.

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To the Editor:

In his Presidential Address, J. Hillis Miller makes a forceful and convincing case for theory and deconstruction. I admire the artful way in which Miller has woven together the various strands of his two central themes (the thinness of North American culture and the triumph of theory) to make his point. If the goals and practices of the critics of deconstruction are as he says they are, then I am all for them. I cannot imagine that any thoughtful literary critic would want to quarrel with the sort of intelligent, open, responsible, self-questioning, and ultimately humbling reading of texts that he proposes.

There are two areas in the paper that trouble me, however. First, I am somewhat confused about what constitutes the "material base" and the relations of the parts of that base to one another. At the beginning of the paper, we are presented with the idea of the material base as something similar to the land or the soil: out of this nurturing substance some cultures (e.g., European cul-