The Infrastructures of Deconstruction


Roughly a decade has passed since the respective doyens of speech act theory and deconstruction confronted one another in an ill-fated, though by no means meaningless, attempt at communicating with one another in the Glyph papers. As the "exchange" developed its readers soon began to realise that John R. Searle was not going to grant deconstruction its fundamental critical claims, nor that Jacques Derrida was likely to abstain from poking fun at "Sari's" mechanical metaphysics, that the former could not but return to the Frege/Russell/Austin/Ryle camp, while the latter was bound to settle back in his career in the lineage, to put it crudely, of Nietzsche, Husserl, Saussure and Heidegger. Thus the stand-off, pre-Hegelian, continues to mark philosophy.

At the same time, judging by the enthusiasm with which the French philosopher was celebrated first in French and Comparative Literature departments and more recently across the Humanities, it seemed that literature was going to profit enormously from the Derridean critique of theorising in the West. Viewed more soberly, what has actually happened is that literature has largely pillaged Derrida's philosophical system to shore up its Post-New Critical practice of free-play readings and a quite un-Derridean metaphoricity.

It is this double denial of Derrida's theoretical accomplishments by analytical philosophy and literary criticism which makes Rodolphe Gasché's book The Tain of the Mirror a significant and highly valuable contribution to contemporary thought. By foregrounding the theoretical depth of Derrida's critique of philosophy Gasché challenges the dismissal of deconstruction as rhetorical self-destruction; by demonstrating its systemic nature Gasché has managed to pull together the major theoretical strands in Derrida's oeuvre for the benefit of a large number of readers not familiar enough with the history of the philosophy of reflection. Certainly, Gasché pursues his goals by embedding deconstruction firmly in its philosophical tradition. And if this relational reading at times appears to sharpen Derrida's contribution at the expense of those of his precursors, the bias should be noted; it could hardly put in question the book's overall achievement.

The twin objections to a philosophical reading of Derrida, on the grounds that only the earlier work warrants such an approach and that it totalises a writing which is at pains to avoid subsummation, are met by two answers. The first is a quotation from Derrida's "The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations": "all of the problems worked on in the Introduction to The Origin of Geometry have continued to organise the work I have subsequently attempted" (4); Gasché's second response is to stress his aim of showing not so much the totality as the relative systematicity of Derrida's heterology as a dynamics of "infrastructures."

Southern Review, 21 (July 1988)
The Tain of the Mirror has three main goals: to situate Derrida’s philosophy with respect to the problem of reflection; to “link together a multitude of motifs in Derrida’s oeuvre in order to demonstrate the consistent nature of this philosophical enterprise”; and to analyse a number of his concepts which have been “absorbed into deconstructionist criticism” (5). This triple aim is reflected in the three main parts of Gasché’s study. Part I offers an overview of the philosophy of reflection as a basis for the analysis of Derrida’s major concerns. Part II focuses on Derrida’s thought from the perspective of “infrastructures” which, according to Gasché, “seemed to represent the most economical way to conceptualize all of Derrida’s proposed quasi-synthetic concepts” or “undecidables” (7). In Part III the author has selected the terms “writing,” “textuality,” and “metaphor” to demonstrate the philosophical task they are meant to perform in Derrida’s writing. All three Parts are linked at the same time with one another through the title metaphor of the “tain of the mirror,” that “lusterless tinfoil” which we tend to repress. Derrida’s philosophy, though not itself strictly a philosophy of reflection, is seen both as having grown out of that tradition and as being “engaged in the systematic exploration of that dull surface without which no reflection and . . . no speculative activity would be possible” (6).

It is not feasible to trace Gasché’s full argument in the brief frame of a review article, but not to attempt at least an outline of his analysis were to do an injustice to his book. Without being able, then, to follow the author’s many subordinated motifs this paper will present as faithfully as possible a summary narrative of Gasché’s contentions. Part I, “Toward the Traits of Reflection,” opens with a definition of philosophical reflection and ends by bringing the history of the concept up to Derrida’s immediate predecessors. Useful in the discussion of philosophy since Plato, reflection becomes a principle par excellence only since Descartes. But since that moment “it has signified the turning away from any straightforward consideration of objects . . . toward a consideration of the very experience in which objects are given” (13). Consequently, reflection shifts from its emphasis on objects and propositional contents to the “modalities of object perception” and the subject (13). The metaphysics of the “world” now turns into a “metaphysics of subjectivity.” At this point Gasché draws a neat parallel between the emancipatory seed embedded in the Liberum est quod causa sui est, the cogito, and Kant’s transcendental investigation which isolates the “inner conditions that constitute the objects in general that present themselves to our experience” (14). With reference to the implied metaphoricity of light, Gasché now offers a preliminary definition: “reflection is the structure and the process of an operation that, in addition to designating the action of a mirror reproducing an object, implies that mirror’s mirroring itself, by which process the mirror is made to see itself” (16-17).

If Descartes turns the cogito into a cogitatum and Kant sees reflection as an enquiry into the “subjective conditions under which we are able to arrive at concepts,” the Idealism of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel requires an expansion of Gasché’s definition, to include “the unifying dialectic
between the mirror and its object, as well as between the mirror and itself” (18, 21). This, Gasché says, is achieved in Hegel’s critique of reflection which inscribes reflection in the domain of the Absolute and so overcomes the dualism of objectivity and subjectivity. The concepts which mark this moment in Hegel’s philosophy are those of “absolute reflection,” “speculation” and “totality.” It is the latter which leaves nothing unmediated and so can encompass all opposition as well as mediation itself. Or, as Gasché puts it, “Absolute reflection is the full exposition of all the logically possible moments of the logos, a process that is completed as soon as the logos is folded back onto itself” (54). Within the frame of totality, reflection, self-reflexivity, and their mediation are annulled in “absolute indifference” (54). Totality in Hegel, then, is conceived as the “unity of itself and of the disunion that such a unity must presuppose” (57).

Gasché characterises Hegel’s critique as a climax in the philosophy of reflection and then proceeds to list a number of criticisms aimed at disproving or bypassing the law of totality. One such critique, the rejection of reflexivity by logical positivism, is given short shrift: “Exorcising reflexivity from the discourse of philosophy through positivistic and analytic arguments could only be a short-lived and short-sighted way of dealing with the problem” (75). Likewise, John L. Austin’s speech act resolution to the propositional bias is described, somewhat harshly, as “nothing more or less than the surreptitious reintroduction of the problem of reflection” which hinges “the entire representational function of language… on a constituting self-reflexivity of the linguistic act” (76). Gasché much prefers Herbert Schnädelbach’s approach in *Reflexion und Diskurs, Fragen einer Logik der Philosophie* which avoids the flaws of a mentalist theory by grounding reflection in a Habermasian theory of discourse. But the way out of the Hegelian aporia of totality, according to Gasché, leads in a very different direction. This is the topic of the concluding chapter of Part I, “Beyond Reflection: The Interlacings of Heterology.”

Such alternative perspectives can be found in Nietzsche (“nosce te ipsum would be the recipe for ruin”), Dilthey (“‘Life’ forever escapes reflection”; it is “the non-reflexive source of reflection and self-reflection”), Brentano, Husserl, Scheler, Jasper, or Heidegger (81). What their very different positions have in common is the heterogeneity of both reflection and self-reflection. Heidegger in particular is singled out as a precursor of Derrida’s heterologous approach. Instead of regarding reflection as philosophical unification, Heidegger foregrounds structures which “serve as path-breaking, breaching traces, according to which the manifold, the contradictory, is laid out” (85). Likewise, Derrida’s style of enquiry is seen as a critical search for the “ultimate foundation of all possible knowledge,” not in terms of positing a totality, but on the contrary by way of a non-essential heterology.

At the centre of Gasché’s introduction to Derrida’s procedure is the Platonic *sympleke*, or weaving, in the most advanced form of which opposite strands are intertwined. *Sympleke* reappears in Husserl, Heidegger, Freud and others as *Verflechtung* and *Geflecht*, and in Derrida as
l'entrelacement: “dialectics is also an art of weaving, a science of sum-ploké.”4 But Derrida's weaving process does not in the end produce a totalisation; indeed, his heterology questions the very possibility of a foundational principle. In this sense, heterology is neither strictly philosophical nor literary; rather, it turns to the paradoxical form of the regressus of an infinite chain of mirrors reflecting objects and themselves at the same time. This new generalisation of reflexivity, Gasché suggests, constitutes “the end of reflection and speculation” (102).

An important consequence of replacing the homogeneity of totalisation in reflection by a radical heterology is that the notion of the Other, e.g. negativity, which in the former is stipulated as unitary, becomes in Derrida's work irretrievably plural, a chain of undecidables, a field of radical alterity. Or, as Gasché puts it, “the Otherness of unconditional heterology is the undecidable reserve of negativity” (104). It is from this reserve, Derrida says, that “dialectics draws its philosophemes” (Disseminations, 127). Yet the alterity of heterology cannot yield the formal emptiness of logical principles; rather, it always points to a certain “irreducible impurity” (104), a certain conceptual contamination.

The centre piece of The Tain of the Mirror, entitled “On Deconstruction,” focuses on three main concerns: the immediate philosophical sources of deconstruction, its methodological tools, and the general system which emerges from Derrida's writing. That Gasché should wish to return to Husserl and Heidegger in order to show how Derrida's concept of deconstruction develops does not mean that Derrida is being dragged back to philosophical origins he is at pains to escape. It is helpful at this point to remember that Derrida initially used the word deconstruction as a translation of Heidegger's Destruktion5 and that both Husserl in Ideas and Heidegger throughout his work employed the term Destruktion rather than Zerstörung. For the Germanised Latin of Destruktion retains the contradiction between the prefix “de-” and “struere” (to build), while in the German Zerstörung both the prefix “zer” (apart) and “störung” (disturbance) collude in producing the sense of chaos.

Gasché discovers traces of deconstruction in Heidegger's Being and Time6 of 1927 where Destruktion in the sense of kritischer Abbau (critical dismantling) plays a decisive methodological role. In the later The Basic Problems of Phenomenology Heidegger writes, “there necessarily belongs to the conceptual interpretation of being and its structures, that is, to the reductive construction of being, a Destruktion — a critical process in which the traditional concepts, which at first must necessarily be employed are deconstructed (subjected to kritischem Abbau) down to the sources from which they were drawn.” Like Derrida's use of the texts of the past, Heidegger's interest in early Western philosophy is not a “historical return . . . a return to a beginning . . . that never occurred as such” (116). And yet, Gasché argues, although both Heidegger and Derrida strive for a discourse outside of metaphysics, it is only the latter who manages to escape from that system.

In the chapter “Deconstructive Methodology” Gasché describes the major devices by which Derrida studies, in his own words, “the philosophical text in its formal structure, in its rhetorical organisation, in the
specificity and diversity of its textual types, [and] in its models of exposition and production." Central to Derrida’s critique is the dubious assumption of the purity of concepts, since, after all, “the property of a concept depends entirely on its difference from the excluded concept,” a difference which contaminates the formal structures of conceptuality (129). Furthermore, concepts are always members of systems in which they are bound to other concepts “by virtue of the differential play” (129) and so are affected differently in different discursive constellations. It is such “discursive inequalities” and “discrepancies” which Gasché shows Derrida has discovered in standard philosophical procedures. But these “variegated discursive and conceptual disparities” are not, Gasché points out, reduced to “one model of divergency” (135), they are instead made to yield the generality and irreducibility of heterologous elements. From this Gasché concludes that “deconstruction is . . . the attempt to account for the heterogeneity constitutive of philosophical discourse, not by trying to overcome its inner differences but by maintaining them “(135; my stress).

Before detailing Derrida’s toolkit of “infrastructures” Gasché warns that deconstruction must not be confused with a process of neutralisation or annulment; that on the contrary it aims at foregrounding the asymmetrical nature of philosophy and its “violent hierarchy.” What, then, Gasché asks, does deconstruction do with philosophical contradictions? It attempts to deal with them by way of founding them in “infrastructures” (142). Gasché sees Derrida’s infrastructural “grounding” of philosophical constructs as one of his major contributions to philosophy. On the one hand, infrastructures operate as “formal rules” which regulate, always differently, “the play of the contradictions in question” (142); on the other, their application requires the inclusion in the procedure of the speaking subject’s self-consciousness.

According to Gasché, infrastructures can be understood best in relation to the concept of structure. “To know why one says ‘structure,’” writes Derrida, “is to know why one no longer wishes to say eidos, ‘essence,’ ‘form,’ Gestalt, ‘ensemble,’ ‘composition,’ ‘complex’ . . . ‘totality,’ ‘idea,’ ‘organism’ . . . ‘system.’” At the same time Derrida has led us to see what “structure” owes to those other concepts, namely “closure” (144). By contrast, infrastructures are plural and constitute a “connection, ratio, rapport” which can account for “the differences, contradictions, aporias, or inconsistencies between concepts, levels, argumentative and textual arrangements” (147). Gasché interprets Derrida’s infrastructures as prelogical, synthetic and strategic devices. One such infrastructure, différence, is said to precede the oppositions of being and nothingness, or presence and absence. Its synthetic character emerges in the form of its “intermediary discourse” bringing to the fore “a middle in which the differends are suspended and preserved”; and it has a strategic economy in the sense that it can account for “a maximum of phenomena with a minimum of concepts and logical traits” (151, 153).

But, according to Gasché, it would be a misrepresentation of the Derridean enterprise if one were to assume that infrastructures can act as a new grounding for philosophy. The notion of ground from which
concepts are generated, engendered, or produced is replaced in deconstruction by that of "inscription" which contextualises and so heterologises unitary concepts. As such, inscription, "or mise en rapport," is seen as a strategy of "accounting" (161), not in terms of writing a critical inventory but with the aim of "overturning and displacing the conceptual order" (Margins of Philosophy, 329). Nor is there the security of a logical point of departure: "we must begin wherever we are: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be."31 The unavoidable "metaphysical complicity" (Writing and Difference, 281), or Derrida's return to philosophical oppositions, together with a procedure of displacement amounts, as Gasché shows, to a "double gesture" (172), the asymmetrical structure of which sets it radically apart from traditional reflection.

In "A System Beyond Being," the concluding chapter of Part II, Gasché interrelates Derrida's various infrastructures into a network. The arché-trace is summed up as a "structure of referral" in that it allows us to inscribe differences between terms and entities (223, 190); différance is the non-unitary ground for all possible kinds of differentiation, differing and deferring; supplementarity "designates the law according to which the possibility of the unbreached plenitude of an entity is dependent on the absence of an Other" (223); iterability marks the relation between repetition and alteration and so acts as a critique of pure identity; and lastly, the re-mark is that infrastructure which in preventing terms and concepts from achieving closure "accounts both for the necessary illusion of totalization and for its simultaneous displacements" (218). Yet the "system" of infrastructures, i.e. the fact that they all serve the same critical motivation, should not lead us, Gasché cautions, to construe them as a unity, or worse, another totality. Such a move would mean a return to the surface of the mirror. What is required, and what deconstruction offers, is the possibility of looking through the reflective surface "at the tain of the mirror" (238).

Nevertheless, what allows the heterology of infrastructures to operate as a system of sorts is not any shared semantic field, but a quasisyntactical relationship; they act like syncategoremata or function words. In this sense, Gasché suggests, Derrida's infrastructural system could be characterised as a philosophical grammar of an indefinite number of final and "overdetermined syntactical objectivities" (249).

The third part of Rodolphe Gasché's study addresses the relationship of philosophy and literature in Derrida's work. Again, historically and conceptually Gasché discovers a far greater degree of systematicity in Derrida's writings than the critical commentary has led us to believe existed. Since Aristotle's Poetics literature has been understood as a pursuit of the signified at the expense of the specificity of the signifier. But even the more recent search for literariness by Mallarmé and the Russian Formalists is unmasked as a continuation of the "logocentric subjugation" (257) which fetters "the play of form to a determined substance of expression" (Of Grammatology, 59). As Gasché neatly sums up Derrida's twin attack: "mimetologism and literarity are the birth and death of literature" (257). From this basis Derrida is shown to launch his critique of a range of reading positions: thematic criticism is dubious
because it is monological and ultimately always a form of totalisation; *polysemic thematics* merely conceals and postpones its "horizon of the final parousia of a meaning at last deciphered, revealed, made present in the rich collection of its determinations" (*Disseminations*, 350); while *formalist and structuralist criticism* are dismissed as insufficient both on account of their inability to address the historical inscriptions in the text and their failure to come to terms with the specificity of signification. At the end of his analysis of Derrida's critique of literary readings Gasché points out that Derrida himself has not provided a systematic exposition of particular literary infrastructures; they have to be derived from the general system which can be demonstrated. On the other hand, Gasché alleges, literary deconstructive criticism has illegitimately borrowed such terms as "supplementarity," "mise en abyme," or "re-mark," without being able to grasp their concepts in terms of a debate with philosophy.

The concluding chapter, "The Inscription of Universality," discusses three issues: writing, text and metaphor. As to writing, Gasché outlines how Derrida is able to link the conceptual condemnation of writing with its unacknowledged, metaphorical rehabilitation. From Plato to Saussure this contradiction between writing's condemnation and its unavoidable use in making that very point has characterised philosophy. Gasché traces Derrida's argument from the unmasking of that contradiction, which rests once more on a totalisation, to the redefinition of writing as the plurality and operation of referring to "irreducible Otherness, of grafting one form of writing onto another" (277).

In a similar vein Gasché details the systemic way in which Derrida theorises the notion of the text. His generalised concept of text subsumes its three definitions: as "empirically encounterable transcription of oral discourse"; as "signifying organization"; and as "the dialectical sublation, either as 'form' or 'content,' of both its sensible and ideal determinations" (278-79). At the same time "text" no longer has any boundaries. It is at this point that Gasché warns against reading "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" (*Of Grammatology*, 158) to mean the text is about itself. For Derrida could as well have written, "there is no inside of the text" (281). The text does of course also refer to itself, Gasché concedes, but such a reading never arrives at a final destination. Far from being a literary argument, Derrida's "general text" is described as belonging to a debate mainly with Heidegger, in the sense that the text could be regarded as "the unthought of Being." Constituted by traces rather than signs the "general text" allows for the "margin of the opposition of texts and textuality"; it is "the frame of the textual difference" (288).

Finally, the book presents a commentary on the term "metaphor." Here Gasché reminds us that for Derrida metaphor is part of a fundamental critique of philosophy rather than merely an item in a rhetorical game. Because Derrida deconstructs metaphor, he is able not only to broach its opposite, the proper or literal, but also to move to the more general level of metaphoricity as a "structure that accounts for the difference between the figural and the proper" (295). Gasché further suggests that Derrida's treatment of metaphor is an extension of Heidegger's "as-structures" (as
what, as such) which underlie all forms of understanding. Ideation, for example, is shown to be "the intuition of the as what of species and singularities" (306). Through tropes, then, can we discover the "non-essence" of the proper, and so conceptual universality can be described as derivative of metaphoricity. But when everything turns out to be metaphorical, Gasché notes, both metaphor and the proper disappear, and it is for this reason that Derrida introduces the notion of "quasimetaphoricity," or the "source" of the universality of concepts. In this sense, Gasché believes, quasi-metaphoricity achieves a double displacement of the Heideggerian Being, since it is inscribed in a system of differences and so becomes "merely a function of quasimeta- morphicity" (314).

This is one of the points in The Tain of the Mirror where Gasché asserts rather than argues; another similar one being his assumption, uncritically transferred from "Différance," that différance has replaced the ontico-ontological difference. Both contentions may well turn out to be acceptable, but they require a more carefully argued case. Gasché concludes his study by stressing once more that Derrida's metaphoricity operates at a more general level than that employed in literature and that deconstructive criticism must take philosophical enquiry seriously if it wishes to avoid the common falsification of Derrida's concerns.

The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection is competently published by Harvard University Press. It should be regarded as an indispensable source of information for teachers and students alike and the most authoritative introduction to Derrida's writings available to date.

Murdoch University

Horst Ruthrof

12 See Horst Ruthrof, "Identity and Différance," Poetics (forthcoming), passim.
Notes on Contributors

PENNY BOUMELHA has written on Thomas Hardy, George Eliot and 18th-century manuscripts. Her forthcoming book on Charlotte Brontë will be published by Harvester Press.

JULIANA DE NOOY, having worked in the French Department at Queensland on "sabotaging literary opposites," was institutionalised at Université de Paris 7 where she is writing a thesis on (or between) psychoanalysis and deconstruction.

COLEEN DONNELLY researches Barthes at the University of Colorado at Denver.

DIANE FAHEY has published two books of poems, *Voices from the Honeycomb* (1986) and *Metamorphoses* (1988); "Syrinx" was collected in the second of these.

BILLY MARSHALL-STONEKING is a frequent reviewer of Aboriginal writing. He is the author of *Lasseter, the Making of a Legend* (1985), and has edited *Stories of Obed Raggett*, translated and illustrated by Obed Raggett (1980).


STEPHEN OLIVER, a New Zealand poet, has published a poem-sequence, *Earthbound Mirrors*, and is working on a collection, *Welcome to the Pace Train*. A film made from one of his poems was recently shown in Australia.

DAVID REITER has published widely in Australia and Canada, and a collection of his poems, *The Snow in Us*, is forthcoming. He edits *Redoubt* at the Canberra CAE.


CORINNE TEMPLEMAN has had stories published in *Meanjin, Ling, The Phoenix Review* and on radio, and is currently writing a novel. She lives in East Fremantle.

MICHAEL TOLLEY has published widely on Blake, crime fiction and science fiction. With John E. Grant and Edward J. Rose, in association with David V. Erdman, he is editing Blake's illustrations to Young’s *Night Thoughts*.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE's most recent books of poetry are *The Amorous Cannibal* (1985) and *I'm Deadly Serious* (1988); his novel, *Splinters*, was published in 1981, and his bilingual Selected Poetry is forthcoming in Italy.

ROBERT WILSON has published widely on postmodernism in Canada and the US, and participated, with Shirley Neumann and Robert Kroetsch, in *Conversations with Robert Kroetsch* (1982).