

## BOOK REVIEWS

Derrida and the Economy of Differance, by Irene E. Harvey. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986. pp. 244 and notes. \$24.95 cloth. Reviewed by Albert E. Cinelli, The University of Kansas.

The difficulty facing anyone who tries to read or write on Derrida, the "academic" difficulty, is that of placing Derrida's open, outside text within the closed, inside context of an economy of review, analysis, or explanation. The "metaphysical" desire of the critic is to submit texts to hierarchization--to make judgments of right and wrong, good, bad or evil. Two strategies of reading or writing on Derrida can be taken. By the first, the reader, often a tenured professor of philosophy, reading Derrida at the behest of an apparently bright graduate student, will pick up a copy of, say, On Grammatology, and after reading a few pages, put down the book in contemptuous confusion, muttering something about Derrida's use of the aprioristic perfect "always already" as being "not grammatically well formed." By the second strategy, an ambitious young scholar, ideologically committed to the concept of being open to new ideas, usually, here, a romance language, English literature, or contemporary continental philosophy specialist, or specialist to be, will grab at the Derridian opening, buy all the books, learn the Derridian terminology/jargon, and develop a style of writing on Derrida that will be understandable by those to whom the Derridian text is equally familiar. One can imagine, here, a gradation in the ability of those adopting the second strategy to do so successfully.

What Irene Harvey attempts, in Derrida and the Economy of Differance, is to apply a third, more difficult strategy of analysis, that of trying to read and write on Derrida so as to set his thought within its overall philosophical framework. The difficulty here is to "explain" Derrida's text in a manner accessible to those who are not necessarily or not yet, specialists in the Derridian or post-structuralist fields of discourse (who, however, are at least intellectually open to these). What sets Harvey's attempt apart from other attempts to explain Derrida is the locus of her explanation, the framework she attempts to set Derrida in. Most attempts at Derridian exposition are made in

the spirit of explaining the "textual strategies" involved in deconstruction, of showing the implications of Derrida's work to, primarily, literary criticism. What Harvey seeks to do is to draw out the philosophical context in which the work of France's most prestigious living philosopher is set. Harvey seeks to demonstrate Derrida's importance to a wider range of philosophic inquiry.

Derrida and the Economy of Differance proceeds as an examination of the principal themes of Derrida's philosophy, and their relation to this larger realm of philosophic discourse. Harvey's strategy, in writing on Derrida, is to place him within the context of the metaphysical tradition of which his work is a critique. Derrida is out to deconstruct metaphysics, not destroy it. Indeed, he must have recourse to what he calls "the western metaphysical tradition" in order to situate his writing. What Harvey traces is the relationship between this tradition and the movement within it, of what Derrida calls "differance." Harvey tries to "recognize," if not explain the role of differance in the "the apocalyptic play of the world."

To those unfamiliar with Derrida, and even to some who are, the notion of differance is a difficult one to grasp. It is a French neologism coined by Derrida, taking the sense of the term difference, as differing and deferring (differing considered as "spatial"--discernible; deferring, as a temporal putting off, as a denial of a "present" "now"). The alternative spelling of differance (-ance rather than -ence) is used to indicate "graphically" that, as the signifier differance is not properly a word, so its signified does not properly exist. Harvey points out that differance bears a certain resemblance to the Heideggerian notion of Ereignis as "appropriation," except that differance embodies a certain "inappropriateness," a recognition of an "other," a difference, or a movement of differing. Harvey explains this movement as a kind of "oscillation" between an "opening" in space and a "postponement" in time. Harvey answers her own question--"What is this differance which we find structures itself in the form of an economy that is always elusive, always on the move, that has no place in the system of signs which circumscribe the meaningful?" (212)--obliquely, pointing to differance as a "nick name" for that which is fundamentally unnameable.

This brief account of differance illustrates two related problems faced by anyone who tries to "explain" Derrida. The first, pointed out by Harvey in her prefatory "Open Letter to Derrida," is that the interpretation or explanation of any text embodies a certain degree of misinterpretation. Particularly, the interpretation of as difficult and idiosyncratic a text as Derrida's must involve, as Harvey claims, "an unavoidable violence" to that text (xii). It is difficult to

explain Derrida's writing without either oversimplifying or misreporting it. Harvey acknowledges Derrida's direct assistance in writing her book, yet she recognizes that this provides no guarantee of accuracy or truth. Derrida himself has posed questions as to the validity of the notion that the presence of an author's "signature" is indicative of the author's 'propriety' over the meaning of his or her own writing.

The second problem, less general, more apropos to analyzing Derridian writing and difference, arises out of the context-bound nature of the Derridian critique. Harvey claims, with Derrida (Collingwood, for example, held a similar view), that the meaning of terms is (largely) determined by their context, and that, decontextualized, they have no meaning. By analogy, the individual aspects of the Derridian philosophy are stripped of much of their argumentative value outside of the context of this philosophy as a whole. The problem this presents for Harvey is that, in order to explain those elements of the Derridian philosophy that she desires to, she must reproduce as much of the Derridian context as she can. This fact serves as a justification for the style of Derrida and the Economy of Differance. The book proceeds largely as an exegesis of Derrida's writings, set against the framework of his philosophical predecessors: Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, Husserl, Saussure, and Heidegger. However, Harvey is unable, for reasons of textual necessity or not, to transcend this contextualization. The problem, thus, is that it is difficult to gain assent for Derrida's analysis from those who do not already adhere to this thread of a tradition of which Derrida is the culmination. Moreover, it is difficult to clearly explain to non-Derridians even what it is that is up for the consideration of assent. The only solution to this problem is for Harvey to provide enough 'contextuality,' so that the reader might carefully pick her or his way through Harvey's (and ultimately Derrida's) text, and thus, in this manner, come to an understanding of what is being argued for.

An example of how difficult it would be to explain Derrida's text without also explaining its context can be seen in the first section of the book. In discussing the Derridian notion of deconstruction, Harvey points out that Derrida defines it "more by what it is not than by what it is" (23). Among the things that deconstruction is not are: "'philosophizing with a hammer,' as per Nietzsche," "dialectics, as per Hegel," "hermeneutics, as per Gadamer," "archeology, as per Foucault," and "the celebration of a Wake, as per Joyce" (23). Harvey's discussion of this negative definition is indicative of the difficulty of remaining faithful to the Derridian text while at the same time making clear just what it is that this text says. Harvey claims that in providing a negative definition

of deconstruction Derrida is able to illustrate the interdependence of the oppositions that constitute "metaphysics." What "properly" belongs to deconstruction is a question that defies definitive answer. Within metaphysics, meaning is granted to a thing by the fact of its being capable of definite definition. Deconstruction, as an activity that puts such metaphysical biases into question, is thus not amenable to such rigorous definition. This does not mean that deconstruction is neutral. Harvey quotes Derrida as insisting that deconstruction is not neutral but "intervening" (24). The result of this textual play between the metaphysical need to stand on one side of an opposition, and deconstruction's activity of undermining oppositions, is that, for Harvey, the question of "le propre" of deconstruction is rendered illegitimate. Harvey poses the paradox:

If deconstruction both is and is not metaphysics, or is both inside and outside it (which is the same thing), then there must indeed be a level or aspect or stage of deconstruction that can be described within metaphysical determinations; i.e., answer to the question "what is?" (24).

Harvey claims that this question can be answered, albeit incompletely, by showing the "economic" relations of deconstruction to metaphysics and to differance. Again, Harvey can only show these economic relations by inscribing Derrida's text in a chain of differences; by showing to whom and to what he is placing his theory in "opposition" by giving Derrida's context.

Within the framework of the Derridian language in which it must be posed, Harvey's analysis and exegesis is rigorous, careful, studious, and at the same time broad ranging. However, given the two types of readers posed earlier, it is doubtful whether any of the first type would be swayed in favor of Derrida by her argument. To these, they must be left to their own philosophical agoraphobia. The second type of reader will find much profitable in The Economy of Differance, as more explanation of the difficult Derridian thematic. As for a third type of reader, those curious to understand Derrida's philosophy, curious to know what all the fuss is about, their curiosity can only be satisfied given a willingness to set aside prior philosophical prejudices. To the end of gaining some understanding of Derrida, a careful reading of Harvey's text can only prove valuable.

# ANNOUNCEMENTS

## NINTH BIENNIAL MATCHETTE PRIZE COMPETITION ANNOUNCED

The Board of Officers of the APA is pleased to announce the ninth biennial Matchette Prize competition, made possible by the generous support of the Franklin J. Matchette Foundation. The prize is awarded biennially to the author of a book of outstanding philosophical merit published since the closing date of the last competition.

Eligibility for this competition is restricted to books bearing an imprint of 1985 or 1986. Authors must have been under the age of forty at the time of the book's publication.

To be considered for the prize, a book must be nominated by one member of the APA other than the author. Books placed in nomination will be read by a subcommittee of the Committee on Lectures, Publications, and Research. Letters of nomination, therefore, need not address the merits of the book but need only state the title and publisher of the book and the date of birth of the author. Nominators should notify the authors of the book in question; authors are responsible for ensuring that two copies of the book are sent to the National Office for review by the prize committee. Authors should not hesitate to submit their own books for consideration, provided they obtain a supporting nomination from another APA member. (Members should note that both the eligibility requirements and the nomination procedures have been revised by the Board since the previous prize competition.)

The amount of the prize is \$5000. The deadline for receipt of letters of nomination and copies of nominated books for the ninth competition is September 1, 1987.

Books by philosophers over the age of forty at the time of publication and books for which two copies and one letter of recommendation have not arrived by the competition deadline will not be considered by the prize committee.

Letters of nomination and books for consideration should be sent to:

Shirley Anderson  
Administrative Services Coordinator  
American Philosophical Association  
University of Delaware  
Newark, DE 19716

Ethics announces a student essay competition. The best essay by a student submitted by September 30, 1987, will be published in the first available issue of Ethics.

The winner will also receive \$150.00 worth of books from The University of Chicago Press and a free two-year subscription to Ethics.

The first two runners-up will receive free two-year subscriptions to Ethics.

The second two runners-up will receive free one-year subscriptions to Ethics.

All acceptable submissions will be published in Ethics.

Contestants should send their papers to:

The Editor, Ethics  
University of Chicago  
Pick Hall  
5828 South University Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois 60637.

Entries must be received by September 30, 1987. Papers submitted should conform to the requirements set out in "Information to Contributors" (published in each issue of Ethics) in every way including the length limit. Entrants from outside the U.S.A. and Canada need submit only one copy. Entrants are asked to ensure that there are no references in the paper identifying themselves or their institutions, and to indicate in a cover letter that the submission is intended for the Student Essay Contest.