



Philosophy Beside Itself: On Deconstruction and Modernism (Theory and History of Literature)

Stephen Melville

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The writings of French philosopher Jacques Derrida have been the single most powerful influence on critical theory and practice in the United States over the past decade. But with few exceptions American philosophers have taken little or no interest in Derrida's work, and the task of reception, translation, and commentary has been left to literary critics. As a result, Derrida has appeared as a figure already defined by essentially literary critical activities and interests.

Stephen Melville's aim in *Philosophy Beside Itself* is to insist upon and clarify the distinctions between philosophy and criticism. He argues that until we grasp Derrida's philosophical project as such, we remain fundamentally unable to see his significance for criticism. In terms derived from Stanley Cavell's writings on modernism, Melville develops a case for Derrida as a modernist philosopher, working at once within and against that tradition and discipline.

Melville first places Derrida in a Hegelian context, the structure of which he explores by examining the work of Heidegger, Lacan, and Bataille. With this foundation, he is able to reappraise the project of deconstructive criticism as developed in Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight* and further articulated by other Yale critics. Central to this critique is the ambivalent relationship between deconstructive criticism and Lacanian psychoanalysis. Criticism—radical self-criticism—is a central means through which the difficult facts of human community come to recognition, and Melville argues for criticism as an activity intimately bound to the ways in which we do and do not belong in time and in community. Derrida's achievement has been to find a new and necessary way to assert that the task of philosophy is criticism; the task of literary criticism is to assume the burden of that achievement.

Stephen Melville is an assistant professor of English at Syracuse University, and Donald Marshall is a professor of English at the University of Iowa.

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