

based on them, through St. Augustine to the Italian Renaissance. The theater of Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Schiller represents a continuation of this tradition in a slightly different form. We must also recall that the classical poetry of Homer, Dante, and Chaucer was meant to be spoken or sung aloud. If "the scar on the paper," were to replace all this, colossal cultural damage would of course be the result.

Western language is therefore not only logocentric, but also *phonocentric*: that is to say, western language recognizes the primacy of the spoken language over the written language. "The system of language associated with phonetic-alphabetic writing is that within which logocentric metaphysics, determining the sense of being as presence, has been produced" (*Of Grammatology*, p. 43).

Derrida obviously cannot deny that spoken language "came first." He also cannot escape the fact that while the spoken word (*parole*) is a sign, the written word (*mot*) is the sign of a sign. He tries to go back to a mythical form of writing in general that might have existed before Socrates and Plato came on the scene, calling this *arche-écriture*, (*arch-writing*) but this is plainly nothing but a crude *deus ex machina* hauled in to substantiate a thesis that has nothing going for it. In the Book of Genesis, Adam creates language under the direct tutelage of God by giving names to animals and other objects. But Derrida is hell-bent on reducing everything to writing and texts as the only sense data the individual gets from the world.

### Black marks on white paper

In order to attack the *logos* and reason through the spoken word, Derrida sets against them his notion of writing: *l'écriture*. Derrida explains that what he means by writing is "a text already! written, black on white" (*Dissemination*, p. 203). That means a text already written, black on white. Black marks on white paper, plus excruciating attention to spaces, numbers, margins, paragraphs, typefaces, colophons, copyright notices, plus patterns, groups, repetitions of all of the above and so on in endless fetishism. Since it is probably clear by now that Derrida, posing as the destroyer of western metaphysics, is only spinning out very bad metaphysics in the process, we can feel free to say that Derrida attempts to establish the ontological priority of writing over language and speech. Nothing in the way of proof is offered in favor of this absurd idea: The argument proceeds through a "we say" and ends by lamely hinting that the computer revolution will also help reduce all spoken words to black marks on the page: "The entire field covered by the cybernetic program will be the field of writing" (*Of Grammatology*, p. 9).

This is Derrida's new pseudo-science called "grammatology," which studies the marks (*grammata*) on the paper. Each grammè or grapheme can be endlessly commented upon. The word comes from a nineteenth-century French dictionary by Littré and has been more recently used by

## Gulliver travels to Stanford University

*Judging from what has been coming out of the Stanford-based Modern Language Association recently, there is strong evidence that when Mr. Lemuel Gulliver took his third voyage to the Pacific in the year 1707, he entered some sort of time-warp, which landed him at the Stanford campus in 1993; obviously, Mr. Gulliver considered that the true story would be received by the public with such disbelief, that he decided to disguise the institution's name as the Grand Academy of Lagado, located on the isle of Balinbari. Nevertheless, we believe that the attentive reader will readily see through this crude ruse.*

*Below is part of Mr. Gulliver's account of his visit to that institution, as passed on to us by Mr. Jonathan Swift.*

The first professor I saw was in a very large room, with forty pupils about him. After salutation, observing me to look earnestly upon a frame, which took up the greatest part of both the length and breadth of the room, he said perhaps I might wonder to see him employed in a project for improving speculative knowledge by practical and mechanical operations. But the world would soon be sensible of its usefulness, and he flattered himself that a more noble, exalted thought never sprang from any other man's head. Every one knows how laborious the usual method is of attaining to arts and sciences; whereas by his contrivance, the most ignorant person at a reasonable charge, and with a little bodily labour, may write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, law, mathematics and theology, without

I.J. Gelb in the title of his book *A Study of Writing: The Foundations of Grammatology*.

For Derrida, the black marks on the white paper are the only reality, as he very radically asserts in *Of Grammatology*: "The axial proposition of this essay is that there is nothing outside the text." Since the notion of the "text" has already been expanded to include all language, and since real events are reduced by Derrida to "discourse" about those events, the deconstructors argue that this is not as fanatical as it sounds. But the fact remains that for Derrida, the sense data we have are the texts. There is no other perception. Better yet, as he says, "I don't believe that anything like perception exists" ("Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in *The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore, 1970), pp. 272 ff., "Discussion").

the least assistance from genius or study. He then led me to the frame, about the sides whereof all; his pupils stood in ranks. It was twenty foot square, placed in the middle of the room. The superficies was composed of several bits of wood, about the bigness of a die, but some larger than others. They were all linked together by slender wires. These bits of wood were covered on every square with papers pasted on them; and on these papers were written all the words of their language in their several moods, tenses, and declensions, but without any order. The professor then desired me to observe, for he was going to set his engine at work. The pupils at his command took each of them hold of an iron handle, whereof there were forty fixed round the edges of the frame, and giving them a sudden turn, the whole disposition of the words was entirely changed. He then commanded six and thirty of the lads to read the several lines softly as they appeared upon the frame; and where they found three or four words together that might make part of a sentence, they dictated to the four remaining boys who were scribes. This work was repeated three or four times, and at every turn the engine was so contrived, that the words shifted into new places, as the square bits of wood moved upside down. . . .

We next went to the school of languages, where three professors sat in consultation upon improving that of their own country.

The first project was to shorten discourse by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles, because in reality all things imaginable are but nouns.

The other was a scheme for entirely abolishing all words whatsoever; and this was urged as a great advantage in point of health as well as brevity. For it is plain, that

every word we speak is in some degree a diminution of our lungs by corrosion, and consequently contributes to the shortening of our lives. An expedient was therefore offered, that since words are only names for *things*, it would be more convenient for all men to carry about them such *things* as were necessary to express the particular business they are to discourse on. And this invention would certainly have taken place, to the great ease as well as health of the subject, if the women in conjunction with the vulgar and illiterate had not threatened to raise a rebellion, unless they might be allowed the liberty to speak with their tongues, after the manner of their forefathers: such constant irreconcilable enemies to science are the common people. However, many of the most learned and wise adhere to the new scheme of expressing themselves by *things*, which hath only this inconvenience attending it, that if a man's business be very great, and of various kinds, he must be obliged in proportion to carry a bundle of *things* upon his back, unless he can afford one or two servants to attend him. I have often beheld two of those sages almost sinking under the weight of their packs, like peddlars among us; who when they met in the streets would lay down their loads, open their sacks and hold conversation for an hour together; then put up their implements, help each other to resume their burthens, and take their leave.

Another great advantage proposed by this invention was that it would serve as an universal language to be understood in all civilized nations, whose goods and utensils are generally of the same kind, or nearly resembling, so that their uses might easily be comprehended. And thus ambassadors would be qualified to treat with foreign princes or ministers of state, to whose tongues they were utter strangers.

## Deconstructing Plato

Derrida exalts writing over speech, but logocentric-phonocentric western thinking refuses to go along with him. Derrida directs his rage against Plato by "deconstructing" the dialogue *Phaedrus*. The result is the essay "Plato's Pharmacy" which appears in *Dissemination*. This is classical Derridean obfuscation, playing on the multiple meanings of the Greek word *pharmakon*, which can mean variously poison, remedy, magic potion, or medicine. But the fields of meaning are even more complicated: Socrates, at the beginning of the dialogue, recounts the story of the nymph Orithyia who was playing with the nymph Pharmakeia when Orithyia was blown over a cliff by Boreas, the north wind. Pharmakeia was herself associated with a healing fountain. *Phaedrus* has brought some written texts for Socrates to read, and these are compared to a drug (*pharmakon*) which has lured Socrates

to leave Athens in order to meet with him and see the texts. Are these texts a healing drug or a poison? Socrates narrates the fable of the Egyptian god Theuth, a Hermes-Mercury figure who had invented counting, geometry, astronomy, dice, and letters (*grammata*) for writing. Theuth wants to share all these arts with the people of Egypt, so he goes to Amon Ra (Thamus) and offers them to him. Amon Ra rejects the letters, explaining that these will weaken memory and make available only the appearance and presumption of knowledge, but not true knowledge. Derrida explodes with rage against Socrates and Plato: "One begins by repeating without knowing—through a myth—the definition of writing: repeating without knowing. . . . Once the myth has dealt the first blows, the *logos* of Socrates will crush the accused." (*Dissemination*, p. 84). He then proceeds to an obsessive recounting of the Isis-Osiris story. Derrida also makes much