

Book Reviews

Sharon Crowley.

A TEACHER'S INTRODUCTION TO DECONSTRUCTION.

Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1989.

63 pp., \$8.25.

This slim volume is the first in a projected series from NCTE aimed at providing accessible introductions to some of the latest theoretical and scholarly developments in the field of literary studies. The present publication and the series in general are aimed at "the intellectually curious teacher" as a means towards whetting the appetite for further reading. It is to Crowley's great credit that she has in this "bite-sized book" largely been able to fulfill this difficult objective. She succeeds not only by guiding us diligently through some of philosopher Jacques Derrida's centrally important but troublesome ideas, but also as she continually keeps before us the dialectical relationship between deconstructive theory and the possibilities for pedagogy and practice.

The book itself contains three chapters. The first and most difficult, "Reading/Writing Derrida," ranges widely over Derrida's entire project and touches along the way on such staples as Derrida's attack on the phonocentric and logocentric foundations of Western philosophical thinking, foundations which gave rise to a "metaphysics of presence." In addition, Crowley draws attention to other key Derridean concepts like *differance*, supplementation, *arche-writing*, and the intentions of a deconstructive "reading" of a text. In the latter instance, Crowley lays to rest the common perception that a deconstructive reading is a **destructive** reading by showing that such a reading does not try to tie the text to some "overarching system of meaning," but rather tries to tease larger motifs out of the gaps or inconsistencies in a text in order to expose the "dissemination of meaning beyond what an author might have intended." Crowley certainly works at a challenging level of abstraction but rarely loses sight of her audience, a fact that she confirms in the last two

chapters where a reader's patience is amply rewarded as she brings deconstruction to earth in the politics of the English profession and as she deconstructs writing pedagogy itself.

A deconstructive approach to texts destabilizes interpretation; as Crowley notes, "literary texts do not hold still and submit themselves to repeated identical readings." On the one hand, this tendency poses a threat to the institutionalized study of literature, but on the other hand from more radical critics, deconstructive readings are considered "politically bankrupt," since they offer "no program for changing the status quo." Clearly, deconstruction provides a response from many points on the political spectrum within the English profession, a situation which Crowley considers healthy since it serves notice that teaching people to read is not an activity that is "innocent of theory." Deconstruction highlights the necessity for teachers to articulate a rationale for their pedagogy and to understand how ideological the ramifications of their teaching strategies really are.

In her final chapter, Crowley turns her attention to writing pedagogy and criticizes the notion that writing "begins with an originating author." The idea of authorship has been a favourite target of many structuralists and post-structuralists including Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida. They have all challenged in different ways notions of language as a transparent representation of the world and the idea of a writer's self who possesses a unified intention and carries it out with more or less success. Crowley wants to shatter this "illusion of authorial sovereignty" and to recognize instead our immersion in "the flow of differance." Under this conception, writing would be reconceptualized as collaborative and contextual and its reception "multiple [and] public." Consequently, students would disseminate their writing into the larger flow of public discourse and would engage in issues which concern them directly. In other words, writing involves students in the politics of voice and in inscribing a human face on the textual surface of the world.

Crowley's brief introduction to deconstruction is an undertaking which labours under the constraint of having to build a scaffold for readers while asking that they not lean too heavily on it at the same time. Given this constraint, Crowley keeps her promises remarkably well and has produced a work that unapologetically goes about its business of stimulating thought and shedding light. A promising beginning for the series, and one that points teachers in a number of provocative and fruitful directions for personal reflection and collective discussion.

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