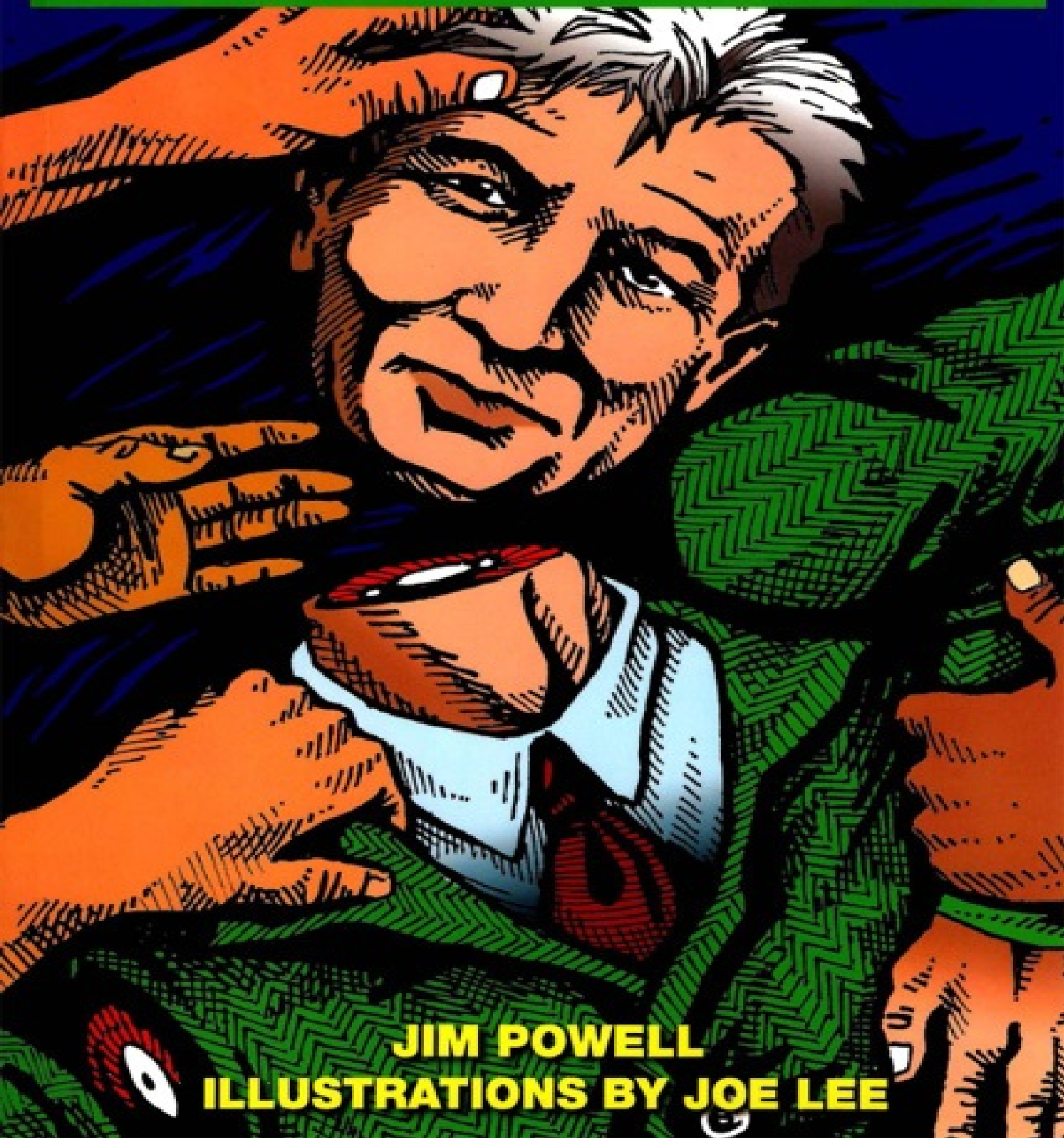


# DECONSTRUCTION

F O R B E G I N N E R S



**JIM POWELL**  
**ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOE LEE**

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FOR BEGINNERS



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**Coyote:** Well, I thought you had kicked the bucket!

**Twain:** Actually, rumors of my death are greatly exaggerated. And who might you be?

**Coyote:** My name is Coyote, and I have been thinking of, ummm, going back to school, you know, to pursue an .... ummm .... education, and I was

wondering if you would, ummm, care to advise me on this issue.

**Twain:** I would rather get tarred and feathered and run outta town on a rail than t' get more schoolin', cause there's lots a fellow just can't get from books. But if you're dead set on book learnin' I must tell you that our universities have been taken over by deconstructors and that you'll be up to your eyeballs in textbooks with titles such as:



• Screw Your Gender; • The Revenge of the Margins; • Splitting the Difference: Point of View in the Inverted Female Body; • Kicking the Perpendiculars Outa Right Angles; • Teledildonics: The Queerying of Virtual Lesbianism; • Wrestling with the Canon: Annals of Sodomy and Female Authority; and • Expansions of Naught in the Intertextual Apocalypse of the Absent Body!

**Coyote:** For real, dude?!

**Twain:** I ain't being economical with the truth.

**Coyote:** Then, tell me, how did all this come about?

**Twain:** Well, starting in the 60's the Algerian-born philosopher Jacques Derrida, father of deconstruction, published a series of revolutionary books. Many suspected that these works killed philosophy outright, and in cold blood at that. Derrida's fingerprints were all over the crime scene. For this scholarly act Cambridge University awarded the murderer an Honorary Degree in Philosophy, although many at Cambridge opposed his being offered the award and felt that instead he should be dubbed Commanding Officer of Obfuscation, Prime Minister of Mystification, Emir of Evasion and Furher of Fraud!!!!

**Coyote:** Well, why did he get the degree?

**Twain:** He's got a knack for writing books that mystify almost everyone who attempts to read them and for standing sober, mind you, in front of a sober audience, and carrying on and on about putting transcendental signifieds under erasure and disemboweling the cock-eyed metaphysics of presence, why just as if he were talking about nothing!



**Coyote:** Transcendental signifieds? Metaphysics of presence?

**Twain:** That Derrida spits out so many ten-dollar words you'd swear that he's getting paid for them. Any professional lecturer knows better than to use the

word “metropolis,” when he can get the same money for “city.”

But Derrida struts on stage, usually after a lengthy introduction made up of half a hog’s share of two-bit words. He faces his audience; his face as inscrutable as the Sphinx. Not knowing quite what to expect, the audience fidgets and squirms and farts and squiggles. Suddenly, the Sphinx smiles, opens its mouth, and then the fountains of its eloquence spurt forth: Its tongue gets as busy as a one-legged — man at an ass-kicking contest, raining down the thirteen parts of speech for forty days and forty nights, burying its audience under such a desultory deluge of linguistic debris that not a particle of sense survives undamaged above the tossing waves of dislocated grammar and discombobulated pronunciation.

At first, it seems to the audience that these soliloquies possess a certain inexplicable charm—a freshness and breeziness that conveys an exhilarating sense of emancipation from all sorts of moral conundrums, cares and responsibilities. This almost makes his audiences feel as if the years they had labored toiling and slaving to be properly understood had been a colossal waste of time!

Yet, soon enough, this same audience begins to learn that deconstruction is a dangerous weapon and a deadly weapon—and a weapon with only one fault: You can’t hit anything square with it.

**Coyote:** Well, why not?





**Twain:** ‘Cause it don’t shoot straight. If you were to aim it at a deuce of spades nailed to an oak, you’d likely end up hitting a mule standing thirty yards off to the right. So if Derrida should start out talking about a Transcendental Signified or some other highfalutin philosophical fancy, he’ll shoot holes through every other notion within range before he hits the very varmint he’s aiming at. This, in fact, is the actual method by which he kills his audiences!

**Coyote:** Kills his audiences??!!



**Twain:** That’s right! His audiences don’t die right off, of course. But soon after he starts talking, they begin to sicken and suffer so that they WISH they was dead. And HOW they suffer! They suffer, and suffer and suffer!!! He goes on hour after hour as if he will never stop, till their eyes turn dreary, their eyelids start drooping down to their chins, and their heads start nodding down to their knees. Yet he stands there babbling with the absolute confidence of Adam, knowing that what he speaks no other man hath spoken before.



And just when you think the poor souls in his audience can't look any sicker or sorrier, well, they turn green and yellow and keel over like corpses. Of course that Sphinx pays no heed, but merely stands there pontificating while contemplating this growing sea of stiff. After a stretch of time so long that most of the corpses have begun to stink, the Sphinx smiles with the tranquil satisfaction of one who has just relieved his mind of a considerable load.



Now, most listeners, of course, are not killed off. If they possess enough horse sense, they soon start questioning themselves as to what state of things he's talking about, and end up questioning whether he's talking about any state of things at all. They get up and high-tail it outta there before the lecture turns fatal. But those poor souls who lack this deep sagacity, those unfortunate souls who remain, those heedless souls who suspect there must exist some kernel of profundity hidden deep in that verbal deluge, why they begin to be swept along in that torrent of verbosity, that hypnotizing current that rolls along in its sweeping and incessant rippling rhythms like the wide, ever-rolling and rogue Mississippi, and they slowly succumb to the hypnotic sound of that mighty current, which is like the suction of a whirlpool sucking the spirit out of a

swimmer's strokes, and eventually they are swept into the very Center of that irresistibly chaotic verbal deluge—and they drown!!!



**Coyote:** Drown!?!?!!

**Twain:** Yet, all is not lost. Though they have been drowned in intellect, they experience a species of magical rebirth. They rise from the dead and live again! The moment they leave that auditorium they are reborn as high-priests and priestesses of deconstruction. Their corpses spring back to life. They fan out in an infinite chain to form a great and holy Mystical Body—a great babbling brotherhood of deconstructionists who form a veritable “island” of deconstructionism with surging rivers of language as deadly as Derrida’s.



**Coyote:** Hmmmm. Well, do you have to know that deconstructionist language to get chicks?!

**Twain:** Chicks, Schmicks! Let me tell you something: The universities of this here land were at one time magnificent centers of intellectual debate, where some made lean matters fat and others made fat matters lean, where sharp debaters ripped apart conclusions, hypotheses and arguments of their opponents as savagely as vultures tearing apart a piece of rotting meat tossed into the air. But when deconstruction arrived, the clashings of warring theories, ideas, notions and schools once thundering through the halls yielded slowly to the dogmatic drone of the following chant, which now echoes from every classroom:





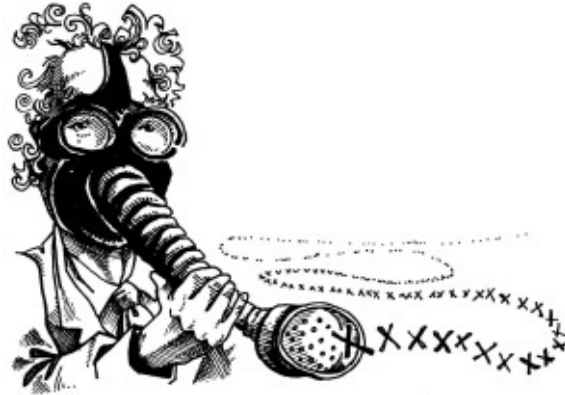
Now, 'X' stands for "race," "gender," "sexual preference," "class," etc. And the implication is that all our ideas about these things are so full of hog slop that they can be readily discombobulated, dismembered, disemboweled and deconstructed—and of course the world will be a better place because of this!!!

That chant is chanted in every tongue that Babel bequeathed to earth, and flavored with whisky, brandy, kava-kava, beer, cologne, sozodont, tobacco, garlic, onions, grasshoppers—everything that has a fragrance to it—through all the long list of things that are gorged or guzzled by the sons and daughters of Adam. I've never smelt any chant as often as I have smelt that one; never have smelt any chant that smelt so variegated as that one.

Thus you never could learn to know it by its smell, because every time you thought you had learned the smell of it, it would turn up with a worse smell.

On the whole Island of Deconstruction there is not one high priest professor who is able to cork that chant inside his or her belly and not let it out—and survive!

A typical student must listen to that chant, smell that chant, and chant that chant an average of eight-thousand-eight hundred-and-eighty-one—or sometimes eight-thousand-eight-hundred-and eighty-two—times every single day! That chant is in every single book, and I have even heard that it existed prior to the original Word that God spoke, and furthermore, that it existed even before the Vedas!



Instruction in our universities is now based upon the manifold subtleties of this chant. This instruction of course is limited to the seven liberal arts—the trivium (chanting melody, chanting harmony, chanting meter) and, somewhat less, the quadrivium (hymen-pricking, leech craft, mystification and breast-fondling). Now, it is taught that the memorization and recitation of the chant develops the student's sense of meter and rhythm. But they say it must not be thought that by memorizing the seven words of this chant students are merely stuffing themselves full of empty knowledge! No! Certainly not! The chant produces an educating, refining and broadening of a student's whole personality! After all, they teach that ideal learning is only partially achieved if one does not have the chant as one's model. For the chant comprises the entire education in worldly wisdom and ethical principles and moral conduct.



I HAVE NEVER ENCOUNTERED THIS MYSTICAL ISLAND WHOSE INHABITANTS LIVE ACCORDING TO THE DOGMAS OF DECONSTRUCTION. TELL ME, HOW DOES ONE BECOME AN INHABITANT AND LEARN WHAT DECONSTRUCTION IS?

WHY, I HAVE HEARD THAT BY MERELY LISTENING TO A PAGE OF DERRIDA, WITH DEEP REVERENCE, TILL THE WORDS KNOCK YOU OVER THE HEAD AND KILL YOU, YOU WILL BE REBORN THERE. SHALL WE GIVE IT A GO?

WHY NOT?







**Uma:** According to Jacques Derrida, it is impossible to define the word “deconstruction.” In fact, he has said that any sentence that takes the form “deconstruction is...X” misses the point.

**Twain:** Well, if you were FORCED to define deconstruction, then what would you say?

**Uma:** Well, I suppose that if someone were holding a gun to my head, I would say that deconstruction is a way of reading a text.

**Twain:** How does it differ from the normal way of reading something?

**Uma:** Usually people read a text in order to learn what it means, right? Suppose you are driving and you see a sign that says ‘STOP’. You read the stop sign, and probably stop your car.



**Twain:** OK.

**Uma:** But if you are fond of deconstruction, then you ask not WHAT the sign means, but HOW it means.

**Twain:** HOW the sign means?

**Uma:** Yes. The word “Stop” is ambiguous. Does it mean stop driving, stop reading the sign, or stop breathing? After all, you are doing all these things when you read the sign. And how do you know the sign is speaking to you rather than to Mr. Coyote or to someone else?

**Twain:** So, deconstruction is a way of reading that calls into question the “normal” meaning of a text?

**Uma:** Yes. That’s why gay people, and ethnic minorities, and animal rights activists, and ecologists and others are fond of deconstruction. It allows them to question if it is really normal to be heterosexual, or white, or to hurt animals, or to cut down forests.

The problem is that people who are fond of deconstruction are often fond of using a lot of buzzwords that they never define. After all, according to Derrida, definitions are dangerous because they say WHAT something means rather than exploring HOW it means.

**Twain:** Well, what are some of these buzz words?

**Uma:** One of the most terrible is the term phallogocentrism!

**Twain:** Why, I’ve never heard of it! What is this phallogocentrism?

**Uma:** Well, if something were to stand erect, all by itself, depending on nothing else, asserting itself and seeming self-evident, it would be phallogocentric!

**Twain:** You mean like a stop sign, or a traffic cop who insists the stop sign means “Stop the car,” rather than “Stop reading traffic signs”?



**Uma:** Yes! That cop thinks his interpretation of the sign is absolutely correct and that there can be no other reading of the sign! So, a phallogocentric attitude is what people who are fond of deconstruction like to deconstruct.

**Coyote:** I would assume that a phallogocentric attitude might assume MANY forms!

**Uma:** That’s correct. Whenever a particular person, or group, or text or school of

thought assumes that something is natural, normal or self-evident, then that can be a phallogocentric attitude.

**Coyote:** For instance, when people think that they are naturally superior to coyotes, and have the right to kill them?

**Uma:** Yes, or when white people think that blacks are naturally rhythmic and sexually potent, or when people think that women are naturally nurturing, or when someone says that everyone knows that all Muslims are terrorists.

**Coyote:** Well, if you were to create a caricature of phallogentrism, what kind of character would you create?

**Uma:** Well, phallogentrism is not only in the West, but also in Eastern thought. So, if I were to create a character, I think I would create an old Hindu holy man named Shrishri108matparamahansapativrajakacharyaswamibaskaranandasaraswatishishy. He would be the best representative of phallogentrism!

**Twain & Coyote:** Shri WHAT?????!!!!



**Uma:** Shrishri108matparamahansapativrajakacharyaswamibaskaranandasaraswatishishy

**Twain:** You don't put an "Esq." after it?

**Uma:** No, that is not necessary.

**Twain:** Well, what does the 108 stand for?

**Uma:** The “108” stands for the number of words in his name, but in Sanskrit they run all words together. Everyone calls him Shri Shri Shiva Linga Anand a for short, and there are actually a lot of guys in India called that!

**Twain:** Well, what does the name mean?



**Uma:** It means The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus—the most phallogocentric name in history!

**Twain:** Well how would a character like that act?

**Uma:** I would portray him sitting in full lotus posture, atop a thirty-seven-foot high anthill, a position he has occupied for ten thousand years in complete silence, when suddenly he dictates to his astonished devotees the following proclamation: Om Om Om Om Om Om Om Om Om Om Om Know! O Devout!



Shri Shiva Lingo Ananda Announces!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Brood Upon Your Third Eye During Sexual Union BUT!!!!!!! WithOUT Orgasm to Discern the Golden PHALLUS-Egg of Yore



**Twain:** Well I'll be washed, starched and ironed if that isn't one of the most inspiring speeches ever given in the entire history of the galaxies! Tell me though, what is so phallogocentric about this guy The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus?

**Uma:** Well, honey, for starters, he is so cock-sure.

**Twain:** So this being cock-assured is one of the main characteristics of phallogocentrism and one of the main things deconstructors deconstruct? I think I know what you're gotten at: Why, phallogocentrism is nothing more than the serene confidence of a Christian playing poker, and holding four aces. But I'll tell you this: Even our best built certainties are but sand houses and subject to damage from any wind of doubt that blows.

**Uma:** You're RIGHT—um—perhaps. At least that's one part of it. You see,

Mark, phallogocentrism is a hybrid of the word phallocentrism and the word logocentrism.

**Twain:** Well what is logocentrism?

**Uma:** It is a term coined by Jacques Derrida. Let me give an example: The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus, and all of traditional Hindu culture, believes that there is a Divine Word or Logos dwelling at the very Center of the entire Universe!

**Uma:** That Word is "Om." He feels certainty because he feels this Divine Word will guarantee the truth of everything he speaks. It's like the Word of the Law in the law books that the traffic cop depends upon when he gives you a ticket for not stopping at the stop sign.

**Twain:** Well isn't that just like the Christian belief that the Divine Word or Logos dwells at the very basis of creation?



**Uma:** Yes, so you see, logocentrism exists in both the West and in the East.

**Twain:** What else does a logocentric attitude imply?

**Uma:** Logocentrism also means that our own consciousness can perceive the world so intimately that there is nothing in between our consciousness and the world.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** In my infinite awareness I see the world purely. The world is fully present to my infinite consciousness.



**Uma:** And also, logocentrism implies that awareness can be fully present to itself, can know itself nakedly.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** In my mystical state of bliss my inner awareness swims within itself—knowing itself—and knowing that the mystical vibration of Om dwells at the basis of my entire Universe.

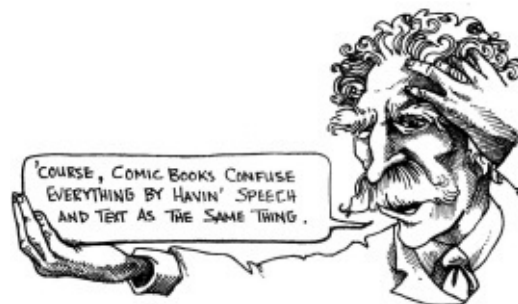
**Uma:** This type of thinking Derrida calls onto-theology. It is a theology of Being.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Out of the full presence of my pure consciousness flow my thoughts. From my thoughts flows my speech. And from my speech flow my writings. (Although I never write, but leave it to my stupid, unenlightened disciples to write down what I say—because writing is dirty, slimy and perverted!)

**Uma:** So you can see that logocentrism, on a more mundane level, is the belief that speaking is more natural and meaningful than writing.

**Twain:** Why would anyone think such a thing as that?

**Uma:** First of all, because a speaker is always present to the listener, just as I am present to you now—face-to-face. Thus, for many philosophers—Eastern and Western—speech is primary and writing is secondary.



For if you merely read something I have written—and I am not present—you

might not understand it.

Secondly, people talked before they wrote. So, a logocentric attitude sees speech as prior to writing and as the origin of writing. Thus, people who do deconstruction often deconstruct notions of an absolute origin—an origin from which other things are derived. For instance, many claim herbalists in India or China will claim that is a the tradition of herbalists in their family dates back to some mythical great-great-grandfather herbalist in the ancient mythologies. However, this claim is a prime candidate for deconstruction.

**Twain:** What then is phallogocentrism?



**Uma:** Phallogocentrism—a word often used by Jacques Derrida and deconstructionists—means the opinion that the male and his viewpoint are the natural and universal standard by which to size up everything. This, of course, means that the male is superior to the female.

**Twain:** Holy castrati! That's gotta be one of the most beautiful concepts I've ever come across. But what then is phallogocentrism?

**Uma:** Well you only have to take one look at the words of The Glorious, Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus to see that they combine the belief in unerring male authority and the notion that this authority spurts forth from a Logos or Word at the Origin of All Things and at the Center of All Things.

**Twain:** So the Centrism part of the phallocentrism thing is as ornery as the Phallo part?

**Uma:** Absolutely! In fact, people in almost every culture cherish their own idea of a sacred Center to the universe. For the Buddhists, the Buddha is at the Center. For Christians it is the Word of God, Christ. For a Swahili, it is Bumba. But for the Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus, it is the Phallus-Egg itself and the hum of Om!



**Coyote:** How can Christ, Bumba, Om, Yahweh, Allah, Buddha and Krishna all be the Center of the Universe??!!

**Uma:** Well that's what's so wrong with Centers! All these desires for a fixed Center are desires for a secure, stable presence that will form a strong, certain foundation for belief systems. But Centers marginalize and tyrannize people and things. For instance, if the male is central, then the female is pushed to the margins. If speaking is central, then writing is pushed to the margins. Let's say you are a worshiper of this Christian icon. Christ is at the Center. Anything that lies outside the universe idealized by this icon is pagan, heathen, fit only to be converted or killed. In fact, Derrida, has said that our minds work by way of binary opposites.



**Twain:** Binary what?

**Uma:** Binary opposites. They form pairs:

East/West  
Male/Female  
Mind/Body  
Christian/Pagan  
Muslim/Pagan  
Sacred/Profane  
Aryan/Non-Aryan  
Black/White  
Speech/Writing

**Coyote:** Man/Coyote

**Uma:** Our minds make use of this kind of either/or logic to put everything in the world into neat little categories.

**Twain:** Well, what in the Sam Hill is wrong with that?

**Uma:** The problem is that we tend to privilege one member of the pair, and repress and oppress the other. For instance, we tend to privilege male over female, Christian over Pagan, phallus over clitoris, etc. And this kind of phallogocentric thinking governs not only our social life, but our philosophical, scientific, literary and legal thought as well.

The way in which we try to reduce everything to binary opposites is like the famous ambi-gram showing a candle and faces:



You will notice that you can't see both the candle and the faces at the same time. If you contemplate this figure, you will notice that your mind plays back and forth between the two possibilities. It does not remain fixed on one. But usually human minds, in their anxiety for security, will create a Center. They will attempt to privilege one member of a pair of binary opposites. It is as if we were to draw in some eyes and nostrils on the faces, so that it would be difficult to notice that the candle exists even as a possibility. By drawing the eyes we have created a Center that limits and even fixes the play of this system. We want people to see only the faces, not the candle. We might then be called Face-ists and even practice a kind of Fascist Face-ism. We might worship this Face and even find the presence of divinity in it. In fact, we might even throw Candleists into prisons or insane asylums because they might threaten the security of our little phallogocentric worldview.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** And that Face-ist worldview is obviously false and wicked. For ANY fool can see that it is the CANDLE, not the Face, that is the real Truth—even though it is only a cheap imitation and copy of my Phallus, which is the REAL Center of all things.

**Uma:** Please just disregard him!

**Twain:** So deconstruction is a way of reading HOW a text generates meaning, and it focuses on texts that are phallogocentric?

**Uma:** Yes. But then deconstruction often seizes upon something undecidable in the text, as with the STOP sign, which can mean: stop the car, stop breathing or stop reading ...

**Twain:** Well, can you give us an example of how deconstruction works in a literary sense?

**Uma:** Let us take for an example the following:

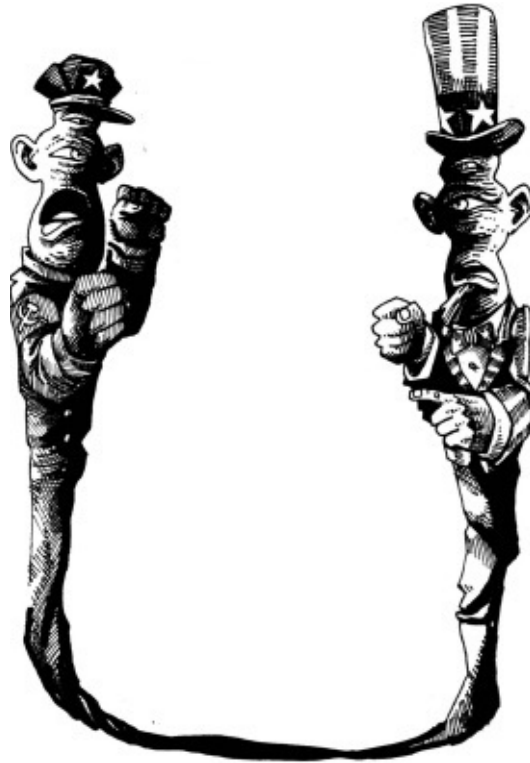


**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Now hold on! Just where the dickens are the Beatles back in? The US or the USSR?

**Uma:** Well, that's just the point. When you hear the Beatles singing those lines, it is impossible to decide. And the line "Moscow girls make me sing and shout/That Geor ... Geor ... Georgia's always on my mind," complicates the undecidability of the song even further. Because George is a Beatle's name, and Georgia is a state in the US and also a republic in the former USSR. It is undecidable what they are referring to. Thus, people who are fond of deconstruction might call the line an undecidable. Derrida borrowed the concept of undecidables from thinkers such as Freud and Godel. An undecidable upsets the logic of binary opposites.

**Twain:** You mean that undecidability shows that neither the US nor the USSR can be shown to be central in the line: "Back in the US Back in the US Back in the USSR."?

**Uma:** Yes. Undecidability problematizes any final decision about the meaning of a text.



**Twain:** Well I've always said that language is a treacherous thing, a most unsure vehicle, and it can seldom arrange descriptive words in such a way that they will not inflate the facts by help of the reader's imagination, which always ready to take a hand and work for nothing, and do the bulk of it at that. But doesn't this mean that the song can mean just about anything? And doesn't this make Derrida a relativist—a person who thinks that truths depend upon the individuals or groups that believe in them?

**Uma:** Actually, no. Derrida is not a relativist. Let's say that The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus is a member of the Communist Party in the former USSR. He would probably argue that the song is about the glorious, glorious wonders of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. And if he were an American he might argue, on the other hand, that the song is about the glorious glorious wonders of the United States of America. In both cases the Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus would be absolutely cock-sure, and would base his statement on some Absolute Truth supposedly at the Very Origin and Center of the Universe.

Now, the relativist would say that all we have are different cultures, and that no culture or viewpoint is in possession of Absolute Truth. But Derrida is not a relativist. Derrida would surely say that these two opinions are different. And he



would say that we need to pay attention to their differences.

**Twain:** Wouldn't he say that the line: "Back in the US Back in the US Back in the USSR" is indeterminate?



**Uma:** No. Derrida has never taken the position that meaning is indeterminate. Undecidability, after all, is not indeterminacy. In fact, a word in a text is always determined. For instance, when one first hears the first two phrases in the line: "Back in the US Back in the US ..." one first thinks that the line refers to the United States. But when it continues with "Back in the USSR," another context is provided. One realizes that the line could also refer to the USSR. And because there is the competition between these two different contexts and two different, and very DETERMINED possibilities, UNDECIDABILITY can arise. So it is not the case that there is indeterminacy. If anything, there is TOO MUCH determinacy!

**Twain:** And each determined possibility is determined by the context?

**Uma:** Yes. You see how deconstruction looks at HOW a text makes meanings rather than looking for one meaning?



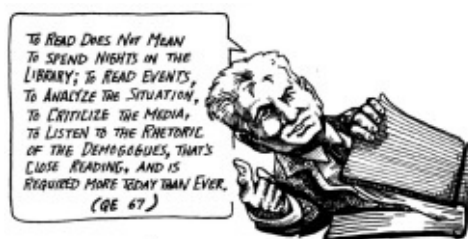
**Twain:** Give me another example.

**Uma:** For instance in the haiku poem:

How mournfully the wind of autumn pines Upon the mountainside as day declines.

In the context of the first line, one thinks that “pines” is a verb, like pining for or longing for one’s lost love. But in the context of the second line, the reader sees that pines can be a noun, also—that it can refer to pine trees upon the mountainside. In fact, Derrida says that there is nothing outside of the text. And, by that he means that there is nothing outside of the context. Both of the contexts in which the word “pines” occurs make its different meanings very well-determined. But that is precisely the problem. These different contexts, and the meanings they produce, are in competition with each other.

**Twain:** You’ve got to admire men that deal in ideas of that size and can tote them around without crutches. But tell me, Derrida says that there is nothing outside of the text, does this mean that deconstruction is just a bookish kind of thing that cannot be applied to action and to life?





**Twain:** Well, I would say that piloting a Mississippi steam-boat starts with undecidability, too. You take them alligator reefs, for instance. They're one of the main difficulties about piloting. The damned things are so slippery and shift around so that they never lie still five minutes at a time. You can tell a wind reef—which is a bluff reef—straight off, by the look of it. It ain't nothing more than the river trying to tell you a lie. You can tell a sand reef, which is a real reef. That's all easy.

But an alligator reef doesn't show up worth anything. Nine times in ten you can't tell where the water is; and when you do see where it is, like as not it ain't there when you get there, the devils have swapped around so, meantime.

**Derrida:** They must be dreadful!

**Twain:** Well, it ain't so much the case now, because the government keeps them down. But they used to be in many places, here and there, where the river was wide and shoal. Years ago, in very low water; there was hardly a trip that we didn't get aground on gators.

**Derrida:** But, you say you can't distinguish them most times from deep water?



**Twain:** That's right'. You can hardly tell them from a deep channel—and I'm thinking that a pilot, when he sees a streak of dark on the surface of the river, and he's trying to decide whether it is a sign of deep water, and to run it, or if it is a sign of an alligator reef, and to back up the engines ... well, I figure that's your moment of undecidability pure and simple.

**Derrida:** "If I am in front of a problem, and I know that the two determined solutions are as justifiable as one another. From that point, I have to take responsibility which is heterogeneous to knowledge" (QE 66).

**Uma:** Well I would hope that my lover would be intimate with the fine points of my two possibilities!

**Derrida:** "Yes, but if the decision is simply the final moment of a knowing process, it is not a decision. So the decision first of all has to go through a terrible process of undecidability, otherwise it would not be a decision, and it has to be heterogeneous to the space of knowledge" (QE 66).

**Uma:** The space....of knowledge???

**Derrida:** "If there is a decision it has to go through undecidability and make a leap beyond the field of theoretical knowledge. So when I say 'I don't know what to do,' this is not the negative condition of decision. It is rather the possibility of a decision" (QE 66).

**Uma:** You don't know what to do!!!!

**Twain:** In such cases, if we don't know what to do, then what do we turn to? Do we just rely on ignorance?



**Uma:** That concerns me, too. How much pleasure can you give me if you are completely ignorant of how to navigate my possibilities? Tell me frankly! What are you going to do with them?

**Derrida:** “Not knowing what to do does not mean that we have to rely on ignorance and to give up knowledge and consciousness” (QE 66).

**Uma:** Well I should certainly hope not!

**Derrida:** “A decision, of course, must be prepared as far as possible by knowledge, by information, by infinite analysis” (QE 66).

**Uma:** Uuuuummmmm! I like it when you prepare my determined possibilities, but if the analysis is infinite, then my pert possibilities will lose their proud points and shrivel like prunes by the time you decide to pounce!

**Derrida:** “At some point, however, for a decision to be made, you have to go beyond knowledge, to do something that you don't know, something which does

not belong to, or is beyond, the sphere of knowledge” (QE 66).

**Uma:** The sphere ... of knowledge...?

**Derrida:** “Without this terrible experience, however, there would be no decision, there would simply be a serene application of a programme of knowledge and then we could delegate decisions to scientists and theoreticians” (QE 66-67).

**Derrida:** “Of course we have to know as much as possible, but when we make a decision—if we make a decision—we don’t know and we shouldn’t know. If we know there would be no decision” (QE 68).



**Uma:** But, when contemplating the book of my body, for my body is my text, when contemplating the beauty of my two possibilities, you can’t decide whether to kiss my two possibilities or the rest of my body .... Just what do you call this horror of undecidability in this situation?

**Derrida:** It’s called an aporia—or non-way. When the shadowy contradictions and subversive paradoxes of a text start to surface ... this aporia, this undecidability over which very determined possibility to pursue, is not paralysis, but the very condition of deciding which breast to kiss. And certainly, in this instance a very close reading of your “text” reveals that both possibilities are firmly determined, each within its own context.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** So then, if I want to make the ethical decision, to kiss the correct breast, and if I can’t decide between the right

and the left—because both are so alluring—and I experience, temporarily, an aporia, a time of undecidability—is this indecision, then deconstruction?

**Uma:** No. However, many who have written about deconstruction understand it to be about paralysis in the face of a decision—in short, that deconstruction finds its beginning and end in aporia. But that is not really deconstruction. Remember, deconstruction is about questioning the “normal” meaning of something. But if that questioning ends in mental paralysis—that is not deconstruction. Deconstruction is about undermining binary opposites and the very hierarchies they depend on.



**Twain:** Well, can you offer us an example?

**Uma:** Suppose I am a princess in ancient India, and that The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus is my lover.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus: Groovy!**

**Uma:** And because you are an Indian Holy Man, and are educated in the Sacred Scriptures relating to the Art of Love, you know that specific areas of a woman's body become sexually sensitive in accordance with various phases of the moon. You know, for instance, that the ancient scripture called the Breast Sutra declares that a woman's breasts become aroused four days before the full moon.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Well, that goes without saying!

**Uma:** Furthermore, The Breast Sutra declares that if you kiss my breasts on the fourth night before the full moon, that my breasts will become the very Breasts of the Goddess of the Entire Universe! The Breasts of the Goddess of the Entire Universe will be FULLY PRESENT in my breasts!



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Swell! I can see eye-to-eye with that, (even though, everyone knows that my Phallus is really the Center of the Universe).

**Uma:** So let's say the fourth night before the full moon has arrived. We have spent the night listening to sitar music. Bathed with scented breezes from the Indian Ocean, our bedchamber glows in the cool moonlight. I lay stretched out beside you, afloat in deep, wine-scented sleep. My slumbering beauty is like that of a dark lotus in a vast nocturnal pool. My eyes and mouth are closed like lotus petals folded with night, awaiting the dawn to re-open them. My body is fragrant as a water lily. I slumber restlessly, full of erotic desire: lying as if stunned by a bolt of lightning, my hair in disarray, and my jewelry scattered about me, my anklets fallen from my feet, my garlands fallen to the floor, my girdle unclasped, my skirt slipped back. Moonbeams play among the sleeping swans of my breasts. In my dreams I savor your lips and tongue, my passion aroused. Desiring to make love with you, I move sensuously as a nocturnal river, my



thighs like shores, my belly like rippling waters, my face like a blossoming lotus, my amorous desires like crocodiles, my sensuous body like a riverbed.



As you behold me, your desire mounts. You watch my dreaming eyes darting back and forth like little minnows under my closed, tremulous eyelids. You contemplate my smooth thighs, my deep navel, my undulant, golden-limbed body swimming in the dark flowing river of my hair. You inhale my breath, fragrant as a flower. You kiss my nectar-like lips, my mouth sweet as a mango. Then, my gazelle-like eyes—my eyes like dark lotus blossoms, my ambrosial eyes-open.

You contemplate my alluring, high, close-set breasts. You know it is the fourth night before the full moon. You know that if the ritual of love is to succeed, if I am to embody the Goddess, you must kiss my breasts. Your mouth approaches my breasts like a thirsty tiger coming to drink from a river. Yet, my entire body is hungry for you. I take your head in my hands, pulling your mouth towards my belly...

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Tight! Tubular! And I want your entire body!



**Uma:** But you do not want to offend the Goddess! You know that the Breast Sutra declares that you should kiss only my breasts, not my belly, and that if you don't kiss my breasts, they will not embody the Presence of the Goddess. You do not want to make love with me contrary to the Sacred Scriptures—and yet—because you are my lover, you also want to please me. After all, my belly is now surging so sweat-sheened, so subversively, so a-scripturally ... that you cannot decide whether to please ME by attacking my belly, or to please the Goddess, by kissing my breasts only.

And so, you enter undecidability, you enter an aporia, or non-way, as the shadowy contradictions and subversive paradoxes of the text of my body and the text of the Breast Sutra begin to surface.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Yes, I can see those shadowy pair o' doxes surfacing now!



**Uma:** So, what we have here then, is a binary opposition and hierarchy! On the one hand we have my breasts. On the other hand, we have the entire sensuous universe of the rest of my body.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Well, I can harmonize with that, also.

**Uma:** And in the context of the Sacred Scriptures, in the context of the Breast Sutra—my breasts are privileged. If you kiss them, then they become the very Breasts of the Goddess of the Entire Universe. However, the rest of my body is then somehow lacking, deficient, even perverse, impure or corrupt! Or illegal. If you fondle or osculate or caress it, it will never become the Body of the Goddess.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Hmmm. Yes. That is disturbing.

**Uma:** The text of my body, then, is involved in a hierarchy. My breasts are privileged, whereas the rest of my body is perverse. However, I want you to kiss my belly and my thighs, my .... They are hungry for your mouth!



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** So this is deconstruction?!

**Uma:** Remember, deconstruction is about overturning a hierarchy.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** You mean, to kiss your hungry, unholy belly instead of your scripturally-ordained breasts?

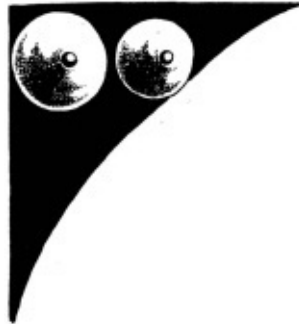
**Uma:** No, for that would only be a reversal of the hierarchy. That would only make my hungry unholy belly the holy thing to kiss. It would only institute another hierarchy.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Then how do I undermine the hierarchy?

**Uma:** It is actually your undecidability—your aporia—that begins to dismantle the hierarchy privileging the breasts. This aporia begins to undo the phallogocentric privileging of the breasts over the rest of my body. After all, there exists a breasts/rest of my body binary opposition— and deconstruction wants to problematize the metaphysics of presence associated with it.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Now wait just a minute! How is a man supposed to get physical and decide just what to kiss when he has simultaneously to contemplate de-phallogocentrizing the metaphysics of presence? Whatever that means!

**Uma:** Well, metaphysics—which is talk about the Origin and Source of All Things—depends upon presence. In the present example you know that according to the Breast Sutra, my breasts are the right thing to kiss, to caress and to fondle.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Right on the mark!

**Uma:** Because they actually embody the Goddess. They actually become the breasts of the Goddess when you kiss them on a certain phase of the moon!! They become Her actual breasts, Her eternal breasts, and by kissing them you bring Her so close to you, so near to you, that you are in immediate contact with Her, with the real substance of Her Breasts, with nothing in between.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Right on target!

**Uma:** Furthermore, my breasts, which have become the very Breasts of the Goddess, totally fill the present moment, without any delay or deferral.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Awesome!



**Uma:** So my breasts are HERE NOW. They are THE here-and-now, so that they carry FULL PRESENCE. My breasts have become for you the very Essence of Existence, the very Truth. They exist in the Eternal Presence of the Moment.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Well, I suppose I could say your Breasts are the Truth also, as long as their "Truth" is just a moment in the eternal Truth of my Phallus.



**Uma:** In the same way, PRESENCE lies at the basis of many philosophical notions. For instance, many people think that the soul of the author is present in his thought, speech and written word—or that the soul of an artist is present in his painting. Others believe that God is present in the Bible, or that Allah is present in the Koran, or that Brahman is present in the Vedas, or that some channeled spirit is present in the speech of some New-Age charlatan. But Derrida points out that nothing is simply present. For instance, the presence of Allah, depends upon the absence of Brahman, Yahweh, God, etc. The presence of the Goddess in my breasts depends upon Her absence in the rest of my body, according to the Breast Sutra. However, this privileging of my breasts over the rest of my body is overturned by your undecidability.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** And yet, I do not remain paralyzed in my aporia...

**Uma:** That is true, your undecidability—your deadlock—is only the FIRST part of your DOUBLE READING of the text of my body, and a double reading of the Breast Sutra. Your inability to decide where to kiss me merely OVERTURNS

the BINARY OPPOSITION and the HIERARCHY set up by the Breast Sutra. Your temporary undecidability exposes the inability of my privileged breasts to assert themselves as simply PRESENT——WITHOUT reference to the non-privileged and hungering rest of my body. Thus, with your undecidability, you begin to overturn the hierarchy. Your undecidability calls into question the mastery of my breasts to announce themselves as the Origin and Source and Measure of All Things. But again, this is only the first step! If deconstruction stops here it remains impotent!

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Great galloping gonads!!! What should I do?



**Uma:** Perhaps, in a desperate attempt to calm the anxiety of your decision, you reach for the Sacred Scripture, The Breast Sutra, which lies on the bed-side table. It is written in the Sanskrit language, on palm leaves. You point to the very opening verse of the The Breast Sutra, which reads:

So, in order to persuade you, I say (subversively) that the meaning of “abreast” is undecidable. Therefore, the sentence can be read in two ways:

1) “It is good to keep a breast.”

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Yes, as in: It is good to keep a breast in one's mouth, to keep kissing a breast.



**Uma:** And another meaning can be:

2) “It is good to keep abreast:”

a) keeping aware of, or

b) keeping side-by-side with.

So the undecidability of the word “abreast” shakes the breast/non-breast binary opposition to its very core. If we plug this undecidable back into The Breast Sutra, then it could mean that you should keep abreast of my desires, keep aware of my desires, keep side-by-side with me, keep my breasts side-by-side, crushing them together, and attacking them both at once while kissing my belly. These many meanings open up the text of The Breast Sutra and the text of my body to a free play of all possibilities. For if you keep abreast of my desires—which might mean at times NOT fondling my breasts at all—I might really become a Goddess for you! So this, then, is the SECOND step of deconstruction. This step reinscribes or puts the undecidable “ABREAST” back into the text, back into the situation. From that position, the undecidable “abreast” can intervene, penetrating and shaking the hierarchy set up by The Breast Sutra and shaking my body—to the very core!

The undecidable “abreast” intervenes by displacing the either/or mode of thinking that leads to binary opposites and to deadlocks. “Abreast,” pulls the rug out from under the binary opposition breasts/rest of my body. It displaces the either/or logic or structure of this opposition. The undecidable “abreast” plays through the text, titillating it, freeing the play of erotic possibilities within the text.





**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** So, the goal of deconstruction is not to replace the privileged position of the breast with the belly, but to displace the entire either/or-logic of binary opposition?

**Uma:** Yes. And deconstruction always happens within a specific situation, such as this. There is no “undecidability” in general. You have to be undecided in a specific situation. Therefore the undecidable term “abreast,” which works to shake and to problematize the breasts/rest of the body binary opposition in The Breast Sutra, cannot be easily applied to other situations or texts.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** So if we are caught up in another undecidable situation, we cannot keep (the term) “abreast”?

**Uma:** Exactly! For the term “abreast” has exposed itself as undecidable within this particular situation, as a part of your undecidability in a certain decision-making process. It has shown you that my breasts cannot be simply present, all by themselves, representing the entire universe. In deconstructing the Breast Sutra, we have seen HOW the text means, rather than WHAT it means.



**Uma:** Derrida's suspicion of presence came from his readings both of phenomenologists, such as Husserl! and of structuralists, such as Claude Levi-

Strauss.

Phenomenologists such as Husserl, who founded phenomenology, believe in full presence in the present moment. And Husserl distinguished between perceptual qualities and abstract qualities. Take for example, the present example, my breasts: Breast A and Breast B. They are both the color of honey. The honey color of Breast A, according to phenomenology is located in the space Breast A fills. Similarly, the honey color of Breast B is located in the space filled by Breast B. You can perceive the honey color with your eyes. But the perceptual qualities of the honey color in Breast A and Breast B are NOT the same, because they exist in different spheres, and one breast may be shadowed differently by the light, its curvature, your imagination, etc. If I had a thousand breasts, the same shade of honey color would be divided into a thousand different instances. Yet, all these thousand honey-color instances are the same shade. Therefore there is an abstract honey color of which all the thousand honey colors of my breasts are merely perceptual instances. Phenomenology asserts that you can have a direct perception of the thousand instances of these honey colors and of the abstract honey color. This direct perception of the abstract honey color is the essence of all the 1,000 perceptual instances that see with your eyes.



**Uma:** And this direct perception of abstract honey color appears in a moment of full presence.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Yes, I should say so!



**Uma:** But this is where the problem with phenomenology arises, according to Derrida. Because Husserl also argues that the moment is never fully present. It contains traces of the past, and anticipates the future. For instance if you contemplate my breasts, then you are comparing them to breasts that may have made an impression on you in the past. It is as though when listening to a melody, you hear a note, but that note is not really part of a melody all by itself.



It is only a note in a melody if while listening to it, you remember the notes that preceded it. And probably, if you have heard the melody before, you will have some anticipation of the notes that are to follow it. Thus, the “present moment” with its promise of full• presence—is ALWAYS divided. And if it is always divided, then the present, and presence, the very foundations of phenomenology, are a myth!

Another philosophy from which Derrida inherited a suspicion of presence is Structuralism. Deconstruction is sometimes considered to be Post-Structural thought, but it borrowed some concepts from structuralism.

And the father of structuralism was Ferdinand de Saussure. He was a Swiss linguist who founded modern linguistics. However, he died before publishing

his insights into the nature of language. It was his students and a couple of his colleagues who compared their notes on his lectures and thus produced a book of his thought, published as *A General Course in Linguistics*.

One of Saussure's most brilliant notions is that language is a system.



**Twain:** A system?

**Uma:** Think for example of a system of traffic lights:

Red = Stop

Yellow = Slow

Green = Go

What is important in a system is the relationships between the parts. The parts themselves are not so important in themselves. For instance, we could just as easily create a system of traffic lights with a purple light to mean “Stop.” Similarly, the game of chess is a system. If a queen were the only thing in the universe, sitting in the middle of space with nothing else, she would lose her queenness—her queenicity. In isolation, the queen means nothing. It is only within the system of chess that she takes on meaning.



In the system of chess, the meaning of the queen depends upon all the other pieces. Moving the queen does not just change the position of that particular piece, but influences the positions and relationships of all the other pieces as well.

**Twain:** So how is language a system, then?

**Uma:** Let us take the word “dog,” for instance. For Saussure all words are SIGNS. And all signs are elements in a system of differences. ALL signs are composed of two parts:



(1) a sound: “d-o-g”

(2) a concept or meaning: dog

But the sound “dog” has no natural relationship to the mammal we call a dog. Nor does the sound have a natural relationship to the concept of a dog. In Chinese a dog is called “gou”; in Spanish it is called “perro.” The sound “dog” is an element in a system of differences. For instance, the sound “dog” can be ITSELF only by being slightly different from other sounds in the same system or language. “Dog” is NEITHER “Dawg” nor “Doug” nor “dug” nor “dig” nor “cog” nor “wog” nor “fog” nor “log” nor “hog.” Just like the queen in relationship to the other chess pieces, the relationship of “dog” to these other sounds is NEGATIVE—the sound “dog” IS because it is NOT them—not the

other sounds. It is slightly different.

And it is the same with the CONCEPT or MEANING of the sign “dog.” The CONCEPT “dog” can be itself only by being slightly different from other concepts in the system: a dog is NEITHER a cat nor a bear...

Coyote: Nor a coyote.



**Uma:** Right! Saussure called the sound the Signifier, and he called the concept the Signified. For Saussure, the Sign is a unity: Signifier and Signified are joined together. But, for Derrida the signifier and the signified are not so stable. For Derrida, meaning does not involve a guaranteed correspondence between signifier and signified—sound and concept. For Derrida, the signified does not exist in a stable fashion. Thus, meaning never really arrives in a stable way!

**Twain:** But won't a dictionary give me a stable, authoritative definition of a word?

**Uma:** Well suppose I get a dictionary, and I want to know the meaning of the word “dog.” I read that a dog is “A domesticated carnivorous mammal, *canis familiaris*, raised in a wide variety of breeds and probably originally derived from several wild species.”

So then, the sound “DOG” is the SIGNIFIER, and the sounds “A domesticated carnivorous mammal...” are the signified. But if I don't know English, then every PART of this signified, of this meaning, is just sounds also. Thus the signified is not really a signified; it becomes a new signifier. For instance, the

sound “mammal,” becomes a signifier. What does it signify? In order to find its signified, I must look up “mammal,” and “domesticated” and “carnivorous,” etc. If I look up “mammal” I find that it means: “A class of vertebrate animals of more than 15,000 species, including many distinguished by self-regulating body temperature, hair, and in the female, milk-producing mammae.” However, all these “meanings” or signifieds I now realize are just sounds, also. Which I must then look up. So I can never arrive at a meaning for the word “dog”



**Twain:** Well, come to think of it, I have often read the dictionary like that, but I never could discover the plot. So, I’d say that the sound ‘ “dog” trying to catch it’s meaning is like a town-dog trying to catch a coyote—especially if that dog has a pretty good opinion of hisself.

The coyote will go swinging gently off on that deceitful trot of his, and every little while he will smile a fraudulent smile over his shoulder that will fill that dog entirely full of encouragement and worldly ambition, and make him lay his head still lower to the ground, and stretch his neck further to the front, and pant more fiercely, and stick his tail out straighter behind, and move his furious legs with a yet wilder frenzy, and leave a broader and broader, and higher and denser cloud of desert sand smoking behind, and marking his long wake across the level

plain! And all this time the dog is only a short twenty feet behind the coyote, and to save the soul of him he cannot understand why it is that he cannot get perceptibly closer; and he begins to get aggravated, and it makes him madder and madder to see how gently the coyote glides along and never pants or ceases to smile; and he grows still more and more incensed to see how shamefully he has been taken in by an entire stranger, and what an ignoble swindle that long, calm, soft-footed trot is. And next he notices that he is getting fagged, and that the coyote actually has to slacken speed a little to keep from running away from him—and then that town-dog is mad in earnest, and he begins to strain and weep and swear and paw the sand higher than ever, and reach for the coyote with concentrated and desperate energy.



This “spurt” finds him six feet behind the gliding enemy, and two miles from where the chase began. And then, in the instant that a wild new hope is lighting up his face, the coyote turns and smiles blandly upon him once more, and with something about it which seems to say: “Well, I shall have to tear myself away from you, bub, but business is business, and it will not do for me to be fooling along this way all day” and forthwith there is a rushing sound, and the sudden splitting of a long crack through the atmosphere, and behold



that dog is solitary and alone in the midst of a vast solitude!

And it seems to me that signifiers are pretty much like that town-dog. They have such a high opinion of themselves that they feel they have already caught their signified, and that they can drag that signified under some sage bush and make a meal out of meaning. They think that in the end they will be able to lick the fat off their jowls and be thoroughly convinced that language is a pretty satisfying affair.

**Uma:** There are even some signifiers that have very, very high opinions of themselves—signifiers such as “God,” “Goddess of the Universe,” “World Spirit” and “Idea” are all transcendental signifiers—signifiers that feel they so directly relate to their transcendental signified that they have already caught it, dragged it off under that bush, gnawed it down to the bone, sucked its marrow and are now indeed one with it. They feel that they make it present. Such signifiers seem to form a solid basis for entire systems of philosophy and theology. But according to Derrida, there is no transcendental signified that can ground any signifier. Just as there is no meaning or signified of the sign “dog” that the signifier “d-o-g” can catch up to. For, as we have seen, all signifieds turn out to be nothing but signifiers.



**Twain:** But if Derrida has pulled the rug out from underneath PRESENCE and STABLE MEANINGS, then what is language?

**Uma:** Language is made up of traces.

**Twain:** TRACES of what?

**Uma:** Traces of traces. For example we have seen that language is made up of differences, not of positive, solid elements:

For instance the mark **A** can be read as either an “A” or an “H.” What “is,” is thus determined by how it is different from, yet similar to, other marks in the same system of language. The “H” is similar to the “A,” and yet it is slightly different.

If we read the “A” in  $\begin{matrix} & T & \\ C & A & T \\ & E & \end{matrix}$  as an “H,” then the “A” is not really present.

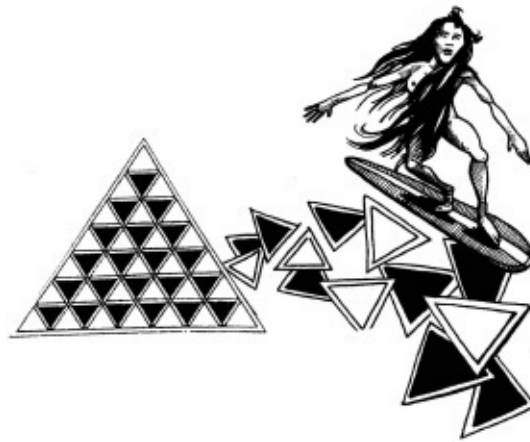
**Twain:** But is it really absent?

**Uma:** No, because “H,” in order to be “itself” depends upon all the other letters—from which “it” differs—in the same language system. An “H” sitting alone in outer space really means nothing without all the other letters in the system. Thus, the “A” and all the other letters of the alphabet are, in a sense, present in the “H.” They are all present as TRACES in the “H.” And the “H” could not be an “H” without these traces.



As TRACES, they are never simply present nor simply absent. And because the “H” depends upon these “absent” letters to be what it “is,” the “H” is never simply present nor simply absent either. The “H,” also, is just a trace of these other traces. I will give you a visual example: If you stare at this configuration of

triangles, you will notice that wave after wave of triangles appears and disappears before your eyes. Each wave is made up of the traces of waves that have come before. A letter or sound or concept in any language is just a trace of a trace, like any one wave of triangles that arises when you contemplate this configuration of triangles. The “presence” of each wave is always already dependent upon an “absent” wave. Similarly every SIGN, made up of a signifier and a signified, depends upon a play of presence and absence AT ITS VERY ORIGIN. As Derrida puts it in *Positions* “No element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. This inter-weaving results in each ‘element’ ... being constituted on the basis of the traces within it of the other elements of the chain or system” (P 26).



So no “element” is ever simply present. Full presence and meaning are impossible for any “element.” Yet, each configuration of triangles appears to be present—for an instant. Thus, the trace presents a mirage or an illusion of presence. Similarly, all language is made of this play of presence/absence, at its very foundation. There is no origin that existed before the trace. The trace or archi-trace is what makes the sign—and thus language—possible.



**Derrida:** “The trace is in effect the absolute origin of meaning in general. This is a way of saying, once again, that there is no absolute origin of meaning in general” (Gram 59).

**Uma:** Even philosophical words such as “God,” “Truth,” “Consciousness,” “Goddess of the Universe,” with very high opinions of themselves, cannot escape this play. After all, they are signs—and thus traces. They can never escape this play of presence and absence at their very origin. Thus the elusive “coyote” of meaning is never fully present to them nor fully absent either. These terms can never catch up to, gnaw down to the bone, and digest full presence, as they would pretend to be capable of doing.

**Twain:** So language is composed of differences.

**Uma:** Yes. Language is composed of differences. Sounds differ slightly from other sounds in the same system. Concepts differ from other concepts. Written letters of the alphabet differ from other letters.

**Twain:** Well I am all for differences, after all, it is difference of opinion that makes horse races.

**Uma:** And because in language there are only differences, meaning appears due to a HORIZONTAL relationship of differences of signifiers from other signifiers and of differences of signifieds from other signifieds. Meaning is not a vertical relationship between signifier and signified. It is a horizontal relationship of differences between signifiers and signifiers on the one hand, and signifieds and signifieds on the other.

Thus the signified—the meaning is always DEFERRED, delayed. The meaning of a word in the dictionary is defined by other words, which themselves depend upon definitions consisting of words, which depend upon definitions consisting of words. So the signifier—like a dog—is always chasing after the coyote-like signified, but can never catch it.

In order to demonstrate these differing and deferring or delaying qualities of language Derrida has invented his own species of coyote, and it is called differance.

Differance, however, according to Derrida, is “neither a word nor a concept.” Yet it is differance that makes words possible.

**Coyote:** Neither a word nor a concept?! Well then, what does “DIFFERENCE” mean—to defer or to differ?

DIFFERANCE



**Uma:** Differance (like “abreast”) is an undecidable. It means nothing. On the one hand difference, in French, when spelled with an “e” does have a meaning. It means difference—and thus is related to the French word differer: to differ and to defer.

**Coyote:** But Derrida spells “difference” with an “a.”

**Uma:** So, when he says “differance” then you cannot tell—so to speak—the difference. You can only tell the differance when somebody writes it!

**Uma:** That’s correct. In this way, writing gets its revenge on all those idiots like Plato and Rousseau who (as we shall see) claimed that writing is inferior to speech.

But “difference” also means “delay.” After all, there is always a gap, a space or distance between a sign and what it means.



**Twain:** And speaking of DELAY—that varmint of an “a” keeps differance from EVER catching up with a stable meaning!

**Uma:** That’s right! Except when it is spoken and you can’t tell the differance.

**Twain:** But tell me, if Derrida is right, then all of language is always already inhabited with difference just as the French word “difference” is always already inhabited with difference.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** Speaking of difference, does Derrida ever look at pictures of naked girls?

**Uma:** That’s a good question. In fact he has written his thoughts on a sequence of photographs, many of them of naked women making love with one another. The book, *Droit de Regardes* (Right of Inspection) begins with one woman’s hand caressing the thick vegetation of another woman’s Venus mound. The viewer senses the fragrance of moist pudenda—the allure of the dark double-butterfly hidden within this vegetation...



This is the first photograph—in a series of some 287—by Marie-Francoise Plissart. It marks the beginning of a series of several photos of two women in bed making love, taken in a number of poses, the soft curves of their arms, legs, torsos and necks tracing writhing arabesques of light and shadow, their bodies undulant, white, sullen waves: arms entwining arms, loins pressing loins, nipples probing nipples, fingers disheveling hair, lips sucking supple teats.

**Derrida:** And then, for one frame, tranquility: the repose of slumbering lovers.

**Twain:** But are they truly tranquil? After all, their eyes never meet.

**Derrida:** Nor will their eyes ever meet, nor will their eyes ever meet our eyes, which regard theirs. “The figures look at one another but never look at each other at the same time, their gazes never intersect. They see one another all the time but never see each other—one watches the other who doesn’t see her, or one looks at herself in a mirror but doesn’t see the other” (RI).





**Uma:** One of the women holds the tip of a cigarette too close to the other's shoulder, offending the other. The offended one gets up, dresses, leaves. But "in the end" these two lovers embrace again and make love. Thus the work "begins" and "ends" with the embrace of these two lovers.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Fortunately, in between we get to see photographs of women getting dressed and undressed, of women reflected in mirrors, of women hurrying up and down staircases, of women running towards fountains, of women falling, of women being photographed, of women taking photographs, of women being taken (sexually and photographically), of women running through empty rooms, of women posing dramatically with a man who smokes a cigarette and breaks a glass, of women opening doors, of women looking at photographs, of women ripping up photographs, of women playing checkers, of women making love with each other, of women sitting

pensively and writing and of women running down more stairs....

**Coyote:** Where are they running?

**Uma:** They are running through empty rooms, through empty plazas, down empty stairs ... searching ...?

**Coyote:** For what?

**Uma:** For each other? For someone who has the right to look at them directly, in the eyes? For meaning? For a plot? For discourse? For an author?

**Coyote:** For an acting job on MTV?

**Twain:** But what in tarnation is the genre of this collection of photographs? Is it a photo-novel?



**Derrida:** “Imagine a photo-novel where the words have been erased or lost: It is up to you to reconstitute them” (RI).

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** Nice! It is up to me to find words for the women, the naked women, making love? But why do these photos of naked women making love make me want to talk about them? What kind of book is this?

**Derrida:** “It is a machine for making talk—inexhaustibly ... and what interests me ... is ... the ‘positioning,’ otherwise called the pose, all the poses ... the photographic one ... the positioning of bodies” (RI).

**Twain:** Now wait one cotton pickin minute here! How can a collection of photographs without words, with out speech balloons such as you find in comic books, and without captions or a narrator be a photo novel?

**Derrida:** “The work ... recalls a photo-novel, brings it back at the moment it departs from it” (RI).

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** In a photo-novel, a book with photos and words, the words lay down the law. They control the images by laying down a single interpretation.

**Derrida:** “As soon as the author, narrator, or character speaks, the visible reduces to a single meaning, or a least a single focus of meaning” (RI).



**Twain:** Well, as we gab about these photos, isn’t that what we are doing?

**Uma:** No. You see, because our comments are not part of that book.

**Coyote:** Yes, our words are completely separate from those photos. But in a photo-novel, the words tend to reduce each image to just one single meaning.



**Derrida:** In this scene the two women are lying on a bed. One is pensive, the other perhaps sleeping. Have they just made love? A photograph hangs on the bed above them.

**Uma:** But was the photograph an image taken in the past, or does the photograph represent what at least one of the women could be thinking or dreaming?

**Derrida:** Both psychology and photography involve “a reading of the significant ‘detail’ in a blowup” (RI). In fact, psychology and photography form “two religions or two cultures of the ‘detail,’ well, in fact two or one and the same, and they are also techniques or systems of knowledge, as well as fine arts, magnificent arts, arts of magnification. One becomes adept at enlarging or magnifying the minute and discrete element. Thus, whether deliberately or not, it necessarily becomes possible to idealize it, to dematerialize or spiritualize it, to charge it with significance .... What does it mean to play at checkers or women? That is the question” (RI).

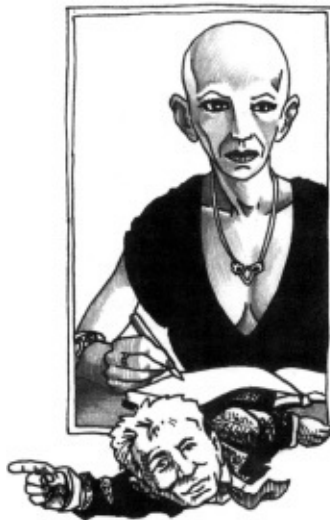
**Coyote:** Well, here we are right back at square one, with no answers. These photos are as tricky as my antics, and will make your mind dance in circles.

**Derrida:** “We are bewitched by the image of an open circle” (RI).

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** But we must tie this down! There must be a simple and single meaning to all this! What do Derrida's musings about *Right of Inspection* mean?

**Uma:** Well, Derrida, one must understand, has the tendency to talk about almost everything, everywhere. If one begins to analyze one of his ideas, one will quickly find it interwoven with all of his other ideas.

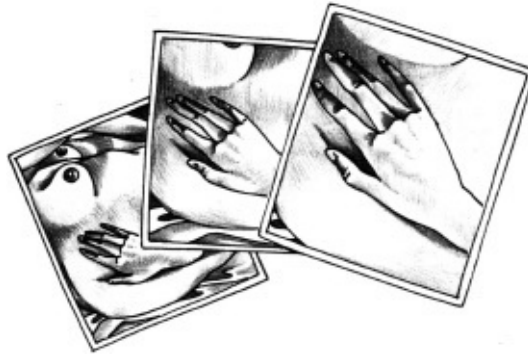
In *Right of Inspection* there are many voices having a sort of conversation. Not even one of the "speakers" is identified, though at least one of them appears to be of the female gender. What they "talk about" is, for starters, photography. And they talk about the relationship between photography and words. It seems to be some sort of sin to call words "words," in these heady circles, however. As we have seen, if you have one word you call it a "sign," and if you have a bunch of them you either call it a "text," a "narrative," or "discourse." So one of the areas being explored here is the relationship between photography and discourse, or what Derrida calls writing. What relationship is there between written words and photography?



And, as we have seen, writing is not simply writing on a page, but a form of archi-writing: a way of marking differences.

Derrida refers to photography as "photography," a form of archi-écriture or archi-writing. Arche, in Greek, means "origin." and archi-writing, as we have seen, is Derrida's subversive term for the play of the trace, the play of presence and absence, that makes the sign unstable. Thus, speech is a form of archi-

writing, and so is what we call writing.



And this series of photographs might also be called writing, because photography becomes an undecidable in Derrida's hands.

**Derrida:** Photography, like archi-writing, is a play of “phantasms, or phantoms, as a brilliance or flash of light against a dark background, as a play of black and white lines, a luminous writing” (RI). However, photography, unlike the other arts “is unable to suspend its explicit reference on an external referent” (RI).

**Twain:** Say what!?

**Uma:** A writer may write about a unicorn that doesn't exist, a painter may paint one, a sculptor may sculpt one. But a photographer, must have a real object—a referent—before him to photograph. Without it, the photography would not exist.

**Twain:** So what's the big deal about that?

**Uma:** A referent is something like a stable, transcendental signified that can ground the photograph. In a way, a photograph of naked women making love is about the real naked women making love in front of the camera.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** But what if the referent—the naked women making love being photographed—is itself a photograph of naked women—or a photograph of a photograph of naked women making love? After all, this happens often in this series of photographs. Then it seems to me that I could never get my hands on the naked women. And this is very sad. There is no real referent grounding the photographs.

**Uma:** Yes, the referent in such a case is endlessly elusive, like a dog trying to catch a coyote, or a signifier trying to catch its signified.

**Twain:** So then, in a sense, this photography is like archi-writing. It has no stable referent, basis or origin.



**Uma:** Yes. And the philosophical or Christian idea of a pure origin is another thing that Derrida finds very suspicious. And it doesn't matter whether this "pure" origin is thought of as a Golden Age, or an Immaculate Conception, or a Virgin Birth, or a Prime Mover, or Nature or Freud's idea of the unconscious as the origin of memory.

**Twain:** The origin of memory?

**Uma:** According to Freud, the unconscious is like a storehouse of memories that were once present to the mind. But according to Derrida the unconscious stores impressions of a past that was never really present and never will be. This is because our perception of the "present moment" is always influenced by images of the past within our psyche. But these images of the past, themselves, were

never based on a perception of a pure, present image. They, in turn, were influenced by other “impure” images from the past.

So what we find in the unconscious is no pure origin of memory or perception, only traces of traces, or images of images.



SAY WHAT!?

**Twain:** This all reminds me of my trips to Niagara Falls. Actually, I had to visit Niagara Falls fifteen times before I succeeded in getting my imaginary Falls gauged to the actuality and could begin to sanely and wholesomely wonder at them for what they were, not what I expected them to be. When I first approached them it was with my face lifted toward the sky, for I thought I was going to see an Atlantic ocean pouring down thence over cloud-vexed Himalayan heights, a sea-green wall of water sixty miles wide and six miles high, and so, when the toy reality came suddenly into view—that beruffled little wet apron hanging out to dry—the shock was too much for me, and I fell with a dull thud. It is a mistake for a person with an unregulated imagination to go and look at an illustrious world’s wonder. For when a thing is a world wonder to us it



is not because of what we see in it, but because of what others have seen in it. We get almost all our world wonders second hand. It may be the Taj Mahal, and when you see it you cannot keep your enthusiasms down, you cannot keep your emotions within bounds when that soaring bubble of marble breaks upon your view. But these are not your enthusiasms and emotions—they are the accumulated emotions and enthusiasms of a thousand fervid writers, who have been slowly and steadily storing them up in your heart day by day and year by year all your life; and now they burst out in a flood and overwhelm you. And you could not be a whit happier if they were your very own. But by and by you sober up, and then you perceive that you have been drunk on the smell of somebody else's work. You realize that "your" view of the Taj—acquired thus at second-hand from people to whom, in the majority of cases also, acquired "their" view at second-hand—has no origin at all! And this is just like the photographs of photographs in *Right of Inspection*. They have no pure origin or referent, just as my anticipations and memories have no pure origin or referent.



**Uma:** That's correct. And that's why Derrida says that the questions raised in the book relate to psychology and to psychoanalysis—and also to meta-physics—which, as we have seen, is based on the notion of pure origins.

**Twain:** Well if Derrida is suspicious of pure origins, then what is he left with?

**Uma:** Well, it is impossible to escape origins completely, so he is left, of course, with what he calls "non-originary origins," such as we have seen at play in "abreast" and "differance" and in the Beatles song—"Back in the USSR." Undecidables!

**Twain:** Where I come from, we call undecidables fence-straddlers, and I'll tell you one thing: If you see a turtle straddling a fence post, you know it didn't get there by itself.



**Uma:** Derrida does invent many of his own fence-straddler terms. But he does this in order to demonstrate that life is already full of fence-straddlers. He seems certain that our certainty has no solid ground to stand on. It's turtles all the way down! In fact he plays with some rather vacillating phrases in *Right of Inspector!* For instance, the words pose and expose, as well as the word taken, produce both sexual and photographic possibilities. The French phrase *partie de dames* shows almost as many faces as the moon, implying a game of women, insinuating a game of checkers and all the while hinting at a game of kings

(dames). And that's not all. *Partie* is also a past participle of the French verb *partir*, "to leave." And as the translator of the work points out "the game that takes place from photograph to photograph is structured by women leaving the scene" (RI). Another wishy-washy term Derrida plays with in this piece is the French term *genre* (English: genre or gender), and the work also plays visually with gender.

The photographs not only confront us with the issue of genre (do they form a photo-novel or a porno-novel, or, like, what?), but also force many viewers to face some queer questions regarding sexual gender: Are these gals gay or bi, or —what? Derrida's piece seems a meditation on how we come to terms with something he calls "the Other." This Other could be lesbianism or the seeming Otherness of photography—how it is different from writing and discourse. Derrida points out that we keep telling ourselves stories about these photographs, even though photos may seem completely Other than discourse, Other than stories, Other than words.



**Twain:** What are some of the other ideas Derrida explores in viewing these photographs?

**Uma:** Well, one is the philosophical notion of a privileged, value-free point of view. This position is at first symbolized by the bald babe who seems to have some distance from the action. Like the idea of a Center, she seems to remain apart from the play, even though she seems to structure it in some way.

Derrida names her Pilar. She seems to him “a fascinating figure of authority, she presides, whether sitting or standing, like a master of the game” (RI).

But he also points out that she, too, is just another photograph in this play of photography. At first she seems apart from the play, but in “the end” is only a part of the play. In this way, she is like the title of the work, which seems to exercise a sort of authority over it. But the title itself says nothing. It is undecidable. *Right of Inspection*. It has no verb. Is it about the right of the women being photographed to inspect each other? Is it about how the structure of the series of photographs limits the way we look at it-about how the Other

limits us? Is it about our right to look at the photographs? Thus, the title, like *Pilar*, is not apart from the play, but is really just a part of the play.

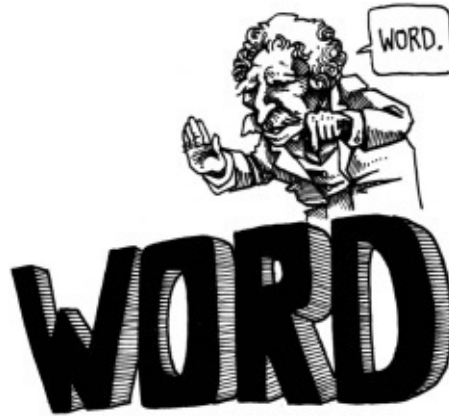


**Twain:** But why have we been concerning ourselves only with this somewhat marginal and unknown work of Derrida? Why don't we look at some of Derrida's most influential texts?

**Uma:** Because deconstruction, like psychoanalysis and photography, often focuses on some marginal detail. And as we have seen, Derrida voices many of his most central concerns ... even while doing something as supposedly marginal as contemplating photos of women making love.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** But suppose we did want to look at the central Derridean texts—which ones would we read?

**Uma:** Well, we would have to start with Derrida's most influential work: *Of Grammatology*.



In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida focuses on three writers, the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss, and the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau. In deconstructing Saussure, Derrida aims at his notion that speech is a self-contained system superior to writing. Writing, for Saussure, is external to speech, and a perverse distortion of speech. It is an artificial, corrupt, deceptive trap. But Derrida argues that both writing and speech share the same characteristics. They are dependent upon the sign. And the sign, as we have seen, is composed of the play of presence and absence, of the trace and of difference. This play of the trace, of difference, of presence and absence, are all characteristics of what Derrida calls *archi-écriture*. Thus it is with *archi-écriture* that he pulls the rug out from under logocentric theories of the sign. As we have seen above, the play of the trace, of presence and absence and of difference, make the sign unstable at its very foundation.

The other major philosopher Derrida discusses in *Of Grammatology* is the French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss spent a lot of time deep in the Brazilian rain forests.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Were there any naked girls there?

**Uma:** Well, yes, Mr. Phallus, there were. In fact, there were entire tribes of naked natives wandering about in these rain forests. The chiefs of these tribes got all the best babes. And they had many of them. There is only one problem. Levi-Strauss's studies of the natural innocence of these tribes untouched by civilization was supposed to be scientific. But according to Derrida, Levi Strauss is just as phallogocentric as you, because Levi- Strauss's anthropology indulges in a nostalgia for presence, for origins and for the self-presence of speech.



**Twain:** But wait a minute! Then you mean that even the science of anthropology—which is supposed to be free of phallogocentrism—is infected with the same logocentric varminths: presence, a hunger for pure origins, and the notion that speech is self-present—that one finds in metaphysics?

**Uma:** Yes. Levi-Strauss, in his passion for the innocence of naked natives, sets up a binary opposition between nature and culture. Speech, for Levi-Strauss is part of nature—innocent and pure—just like the naked Nambikwara tribe he is studying. Writing, on the other hand, is part of culture—and thus responsible for violence. But Derrida points out that in Levi-Strauss's own account, the Nambikwara already make use of inscription, making marks on their gourds. Furthermore they eagerly begin to use the anthropologist's pencils to illustrate their family tree when they are explaining to him their genealogy. Thus, in a sense, they already possess writing. The sense in which they already possess writing is in the sense of archi-écriture: demarcation, notation. They already demarcate their world and classify it with names, with genealogies and with social structure. Without this demarcation, the chief would be no different from

the others.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** And he would not get all the hot babes!

**Uma:** Exactly right! Because the chief can demarcate himself as higher than the other males, he gets all the girly action. This is in itself a form of violence that writing in the narrow sense is not responsible for. Furthermore, the Nambikwara fight wars. They demarcate their territory and themselves as different from their enemies.

So although they do not possess writing in the narrow sense, they do engage in archi-ecricture, in demarcation, and participate in the violence caused by it. But Levi-Strauss would never admit such a thing. He wanted to view the natives only as pure and noble.





**Twain:** It sounds as if Levi-Strauss believed in the idea of the noble savage!

**Uma:** It was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau who came up with the idea of “the noble savage.” And in *Of Grammatology* Derrida points out many similarities between the thinking of Levi-Strauss and that of Rousseau. Rousseau also thought that Nature was good and true and beautiful, and that culture was perverse. Therefore, he also felt that face-to-face speaking, as is done by the members of a tribe, is natural and good. Writing, on the other hand, is evil and perverse. Similarly, he feels that sex is natural and good whereas masturbation is evil. BUT, as Derrida points out, Rousseau is ambivalent. After all, he says that civilization is sometimes a necessary supplement to nature, that sometimes writing is a necessary supplement to speech, and that masturbation is sometimes a necessary supplement to sex.

Derrida then points out that the French term supplement can mean two things: (1) an addition to something that is complete-in-itself, or (2) a necessary supplement to something that is lacking in-and-of-itself. Derrida asks: If Nature and speech and sex are complete within themselves, then why do they need a supplement? Thus, Derrida finds in “supplement” another undecidable, another fence-straddler.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** You mean to say that the word “supplement” is like the word “abreast”?

**Uma:** Yes. And Derrida uses this fence-straddler to show us that Rousseau has already undermined the binary oppositions he has set up between nature and culture, speech and writing, sex and masturbation—because each of the first terms need a supplement.



**Mark Twain:** What are some of Derrida’s other famous works?

**Uma:** The title *Dissemination* sounds as though it might be related to both “semen” and to the Latin “seme” (meaning). Thus the title itself is an ejaculation of meanings—a dissemination.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** Well if *Dissemination* is an ejaculation, then its preface must be a kind of foreplay!

**Uma:** Indeed, the title of the first essay is “Hors Livre: OUIWORK, HORS D’OEUVRE, ESTRA TEXT, FOREPLAY, BOOKEND, FACING \* PREFACING.” The words “Hors Livre,” of course, play upon Derrida’s great dictum that ‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte.’”

**Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** Derrida’s great dictum? Only I have a great dictum!

**Uma:** Actually, a dictum is a famous saying, silly. And “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” translates as “There is nothing outside the text” or as “There is no Outside text.” This means that there is no pure presence outside of the sign. Everything, even the world we perceive, is also a text. The text is not different from the “outside world.” There is no outside text.



**Twain:** But isn’t this horse liver, or preface, or whatever you call it before the rest of the book?

**Uma:** Yes, that is part of its irony. Derrida is poking fun of Hegel’s aspiration to achieve Total Knowledge in his philosophy.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Well, what is wrong with knowing everything?

**Uma:** Because Hegel also loves to write prefaces. But if his philosophy WERE total—then why would it need a preface?



Following Derrida's preface or "Hors Livre," there are three essays in *Dissemination*. They are all concerned with presence, presentation, representation and illusion. The first of these essays is "Plato's Pharmacy." Here Derrida deconstructs Plato's bad-mouthing of writing. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato uses the term *pharmakon* (or poison) to describe the evils of writing. Writing for Plato is secondary (to speech), creates illusions and perversions, is dead knowledge and the tool of the ignorant Sophists. Yet, Derrida points out that *pharmakon* can also mean "cure." Derrida seizes upon the undecidable "pharmakon" to deconstruct Plato's attitude. He also points to Plato's ambivalent attitude about writing. For although Plato declares that writing is a perverse poison, he also states that it is the very inner voice of the soul itself. This is an important move for Derrida, because philosophy has always pretended that in philosophical language undecidables don't exist. In fact, philosophy, in order to remain philosophy rather than literature, **DEPENDS** upon maintaining this pretence. Otherwise, its language, which is supposed to be about truth, would degenerate into mere word-play. When Derrida, however finds that even the foundational texts of Western philosophy are not immune to the play of language—to the play of undecidables—it shakes not only the *Phaedrus* and all the rest of Plato but the whole foundation of Western philosophy!



The “Double Session,” the second essay in the book, is a reading of Mallarmé’s *Mimique*. The “Double Session” hinges on the play of another undecidable, fence-straddler term—hymen—signifying both marriage and virginity. But Derrida makes an important point here. Dissemination is NEITHER just polyseme, semantic richness, normultiple meanings. It is not just ambiguity. For instance, the poem:

How mournfully the wind of autumn pines  
Upon the mountainside as day declines.

plays upon the double meaning of the word “pines.” In this poem, the author intends that “pines” should express two meanings. Yet, this is mere polyseme—semantic richness—ambiguity. Furthermore, the poet planned for “pines” to be an ambiguous term. Dissemination, however, is about an indefinite number of meanings that the author does NOT intend. For instance: Someone might hear the last phrase in the haiku as “The mountain sighed as day delines.”

In this essay Derrida also contrasts Plato’s concept of art with that of the French poet Mallarmé. For Plato, art is mimesis—an imitation of something real. For instance, an Elvis impersonator mimes a REAL Elvis. Mallarmé’s poetry, however, does not mime a real world—it only inter-reflects itself—it mines itself.





For Mallarmé art is like Milli-Vanilli impersonators. After all, the group Milli-Vanilli was never imitating something real. There never was any original song that they lip-synched. The songs that Milli-Vanilli mouthed were made up of many tracks of different recordings.

Thus, the hero in Mallarmé's *Mimique* is the mime who mimes nothing but himself, who imitates nothing original. There is nothing that precedes his imitation. The last essay in *Dissemination* is itself entitled "dissemination" and takes the notion of beginningless imitation to an absurd extreme—like an Elvis impersonator impersonating an Elvis impersonator imitating Milli Vinilli impersonating themselves in the fragments of a broken mirror.

"Dissemination," in Derrida's own words, is "a tissue of quotations." Yet, the main "source" of these quotations is Philippe Sollers's book *Numbers*, which itself is largely a collection of quotations from Mao, Marx, Bourbaki, Pascal, Nicholas of Cusa, Wittgenstein and Dante; as well as a collection of erotic passages, Chinese ideograms and obscure diagrams. Thus, when "dissemination" quotes *Numbers* there is no original quotation.

**Twain:** Doesn't that make "dissemination" something like the mime in "The Double Session."

**Uma:** Yes, you could say that "dissemination" mimes the mime who mimes nothing. Though "dissemination" is supposedly a book review of *Numbers*, there is no original text present to be reviewed. There is only a presentation of quotes from other sources—and Derrida's text mimes Sollers's text. In this way "dissemination" scrambles beyond recognition the binary opposition of "original" text/review of "original" text. The two texts, "original" and "review" mirror each other like broken mirrors mirroring no-thing.



**Twain:** It seems as though Derrida is deconstructing the binary opposition between philosophy and literature—for he sees literature in philosophical texts such as Plato's *Phaedrus*, and yet he sees philosophy in novels such as Sollers's *Numbers*.

**Uma:** Yes, and in another important essay "White Mythology," which appears in Derrida's book *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida shows how philosophy has always tried to push literary language to the margins.

**Twain:** Margins?

**Uma:** Yes, philosophical language is supposedly free of rhetoric and metaphor. Thus philosophers have long dreamt of a pure language that escapes the frivolities of literary writing. Philosophers, trying to purge philosophical language of metaphor, push it to the margins. Derrida, however, sees this as one more attempt to repress writing in favor of a language of presence—a language that can present the Truth. The dream of such a clean, proper language—without metaphor—has been philosophy's big wet dream. Derrida calls this dream "White Mythology," and shows that all the concepts that philosophers have used

to push metaphor to the margins of philosophy are themselves metaphorical.



Derrida continues to blur the line between solemn truth-seeking Philosophy and playful, frivolous Literature in another important work—*Glas*.

**Twain:** In that horrible German language *glas* means knell, like the tolling or knelling of a bell!

**Uma:** That's correct. And for Derrida this knell marks the death of meaning! It seems as though Derrida's intent is to do away with the notion that a reader can discover an author's intent. In fact, Derrida says he is attempting to alienate "all readers who believe in literature or anything" (G 50). Each page in *Glas* has two columns, like two corners of a boxing or wrestling ring. *Glas* features Philosophy in the left hand column, and Literature in the right-hand column. Philosophy is represented by Hegel and his totalitarian quest for Absolute Knowledge. Derrida plays upon the sound of Hegel's name, turning it into aigle (Eagle)—an Eagle soaring ever upwards in its search for Absolute Knowledge. This "Eagle" ascends upon the winds of dialectic.

**Twain:** Dialectic?



**Uma:** Hegel believed that knowledge proceeds through a process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. For instance, if the idea of pure Being is the thesis, then Nothing is the anti-thesis. They are opposites that are brought together by the synthesis, which is beyond them both. For Hegel, the Mind is like a soaring Eagle that knows itself through this process of the dialectic.



**Twain:** But then, how could one possibly make an argument against Hegel's dialectical logic? Because any opposition to it would just be an anti-thesis, which would then yield to another synthesis, which transcends both thesis and antitheses.

**Uma:** That is one of the main problems that Hegel's dialectic logic poses to philosophers. It tends to be a cannibal—eating up any opposing views by turning them into anti-theses. So in one corner we have this Super-Eagle, the Cannibal Philosophy of Dialectical Logic that eats up opposition. In the other column (or corner) Derrida gives us the homosexual, perverted novelist, jailbird, thief, iconoclast, nihilist con-artist Jean Genet, who is totally unconcerned with Truth or Absolute Knowledge. Derrida uses Genet as a ploy to attack Hegel because he knows that Hegel cannot be attacked from the front—straight on. Rather Derrida lets Genet parody or mimic the dialectical mode of the Hegelian Uber-Eagle, spiraling ever upwards in the search for Pure Knowledge. This upward spiral is the circular, endless process of thesis, antithesis, synthesis—thesis, antithesis, synthesis—etc.





Whereas Derrida plays upon the sound of “Hegel” to make him an Eagle, he plays on the sound of Genet’s name to come up with genet, a kind of flower. And Genet’s flower power is his use of puns and metaphors that blossom in his prose as it mimics the Eagle’s upward spiral. “Genet’s sentences wind themselves around a direction, like ivy along a truncated column” (G 87). His metaphors and puns spiral upwards in a dizzying flight of meaning that does not come to rest in a synthesis—but ascends ever upwards into nothingness. Because Genet (and Glas) do not directly oppose Hegel’s dialectical logic—but mimic and parody it—they cannot be cannibalized by it.

In this interchange between the two columns of text—representing Philosophy and Literature—*Glas* unfolds a new terrain that is neither Literature and Philosophy, nor Literature nor Philosophy.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** Well, did Derrida write any books on me?

One essay looks at French psychoanalyst Lacon’s notion that the phallus is the place where desire and logos meet.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** Well, who needs psychoanalysis, anyway?

**Uma:** It is precisely this resistance to psychoanalysis that Derrida explores in this collection of essays. Resistance can take many forms. The ego of a woman,

for instance, might repress the memory of being sexually molested by her grandfather, or her ego may transfer the rage from that event onto the man who is analyzing her, or her ego may derive some benefit from her neurotic behavior associated with the event. Yet, her unconscious (id) may resist psychoanalysis by compelling her to compulsively repeat the molestation with a series of men. Finally, her super-ego or conscience may resist psychoanalysis by whispering in her ear that if she undergoes analysis she will have to admit to herself her “guilt,” to recognize and grovel in her own dark, dirty past.

Derrida points out that the id’s compulsion to repeat and repeat is really just a mask for the Death Drive—and that this is abysmal and meaningless. This suspicion—that everything in the psyche may not have meaning—haunts Freud and Derrida. How much interpretative authority does psychoanalysis possess, in fact, if the core of Freud’s method—the interpretation of dreams—is called into question? A dream, after all, is a dark twisting knot of lost memories, a labyrinth, like a navel, or a cave full of bats, that at its darkest core refuses to show the analyst anything but darkness.



In dream analysis, the analyst searches for an origin. But because the dream ultimately yields only darkness—is this desire for a meaningful origin really possible? And if the analyst cannot arrive at the origin of the dream—then analysis (somewhat like deconstruction) is beginningless and endless.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** But does this mean that the unconscious mind does not contain a code? For instance, if you dream of a cigar—it signifies, unconsciously, that you are really thinking about a phallus—about ME!



**Uma:** Actually, as Derrida points out—even Freud himself admitted that the symbols in dreams are very original and creative. If I dream of a cigar, it might represent a submarine or a submarine sandwich or a moxa stick, or a blimp. There really is no set code. Yet, Derrida points out that this poses quite a problem for the interpretation of dreams. Actually it makes interpretation almost impossible. However, Derrida also reminds us that Freud neglects his own insights into the impossibility of a code and interprets dreams constantly.

**Twain:** It seems, then, that the unconscious really is a dark, twisting, meaningless labyrinth with no bottom.

**Uma:** Yes, and that pretty well covers all of Derrida's classics.

**Twain:** Classics? In other words—books everybody wants to have read, and nobody wants to read.

**Uma:** Well, actually one of the reasons deconstruction lost popularity is that one of its major American proponents claimed that the classics—and all texts—are unreadable.

**Twain:** Lost popularity? Well—I can't imagine!

**Uma:** Two things happened. One, deconstruction began to suffer from its own internal political problems. And two, deconstruction escaped.



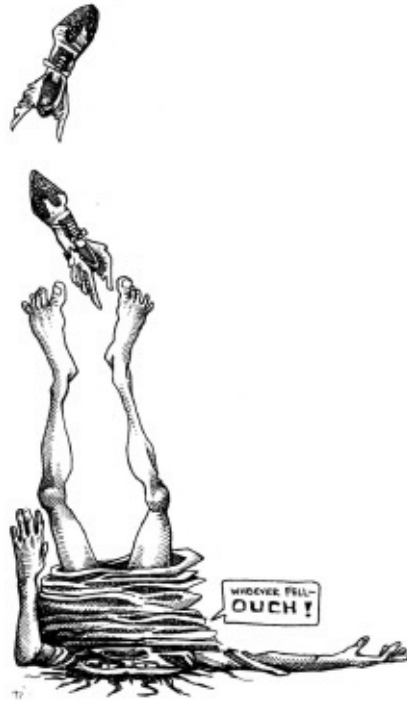
**Twain:** What were those political problems?

**Uma:** One of the main problems arrived in the form of a professor by the name of Paul de Man. Paul de Man became the leading pusher of “deconstruction” in America. He was born in 1919 in Antwerp, but spent most of his teaching career in North America. At the time of his death, in 1983, he was a highly gifted and respected professor at Yale. Like Derrida, de Man distrusted language’s ability to state •even simple truths. For de Man, it is language’s figural aspects that make it unreadable.

**Twain:** Unreadable?

**Uma:** For instance, the English romantic poet John Keats wrote an unfinished epic poem, *The Fall of Hyperion*. De Man makes a big deal out of the fact that the title, *The Fall of Hyperion*, can have more than one meaning.

It can mean:



- “Hyperion’s fall,” the story of the defeat of an older power by a newer power.
- “Hyperion falling,” a more general description of the actual process of falling. In fact, Keats does describe such a fall, but it is Apollo who is falling, not Hyperion.
- Before Keats began writing *The Fall of Hyperion*, he wrote an unfinished first draft entitled simply *Hyperion*. In this earlier version, Apollo does not fall. So, does the title *The Fall of Hyperion* really mean that it is Apollo who has fallen?
- The “Hyperion” in the title *The Fall of Hyperion*, might refer to the rough draft (entitled *Hyperion*)—rather than to the mythological figure called Hyperion. Thus the fall of Hyperion (the first draft) is the triumph of the second draft *The Fall of Hyperion*.
- But Keats did not complete either draft! So is this the story of why all texts, as texts, can always be said to be falling?
- Yet, this is not possible—because the fall of the first draft *Hyperion*—as told in the second—*The Fall of Hyperion*, is about the fall of the first draft, not the second draft.
- Or perhaps Hyperion can be Apollo, and Apollo can be Keats, and he can also be the readers, and his fall is our fall as well.



**Twain:** Well I'll be a holy hog in a hollowed out log! I believe what he is talking about is that language doesn't know what the heck it's talking about!

**Uma:** The reader gets caught up in the undecidability between the literal and figural meanings of the title. For de Man, this makes the text unreadable.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Well what does The Fall of Hyperion mean? It must mean either the fall of the Greek god, or the fall of the first draft?

**Uma:** Barbara Johnson, another famous deconstructor, has said that instead of a simple "either/or" structure, deconstruction attempts to elaborate a discourse that says neither "either/or" nor "both/and" nor even "neither/nor," while at the same time not abandoning these logics either. Or as Geoffrey Bennington, another disciple of Derrida puts it: Deconstruction exhausts the possibilities of logic, using a logic that is neither (either a or b) nor (a and b) nor (neither a nor b).

**Twain:** If language doesn't know what it is talking about, if all statements are undecidable—then what in tarnation happens when it talks about the Truth? How can you take a position and defend it if your gun—language—doesn't have any ammunition? And if what de Man and Johnson and Bennington say is true, then doesn't it apply also to political language, to law, and to philosophy? Aren't they

always falling, also? It seems they don't have any ground to stand on. If all texts become "unreadable" and undecidable then political power is impossible. The law of a country would have as much political power as a queen in quicksand. And how would one be able to read a text on deconstruction? And what would be a misreading of that text? It seems that deconstruction can only whine about its own failure to communicate meaning.



**Uma:** Many leftists have argued that, because of undecidability, deconstruction does not possess the ability to take a stand. And this presumed inability to take a stand is a major blow for a French intellectual following in the footsteps of Jean Paul Sartre, who in the postwar years had defined what an intellectual should be: An intellectual is supposed to be avant garde and engaged. He was supposed to flex not only his intellectual muscles, but also his political ones. For all post-war

French intellectuals, with Sartre at the forefront, had begun to succumb to the radiance of a mysterious new faith dawning in the east—Marxism. It illuminated their intellects so that little by little they yielded to its brightness, absorbing it like plants absorb sunlight. Thus enlightened by the new faith, they felt suddenly transformed. Their pre-conversion philosophical musings now appeared superficial and irrelevant. They smiled condescendingly at those still convinced by them.

Before the end of the war, Sartre had earned his reputation as the leading existentialist philosopher, writing a long book *Being and Nothingness*, contemplating the verb “to be,” and proclaiming man’s absolute freedom. Even if man was damned to suffer from what Sartre called “*la nausée*”—namely, disgust with himself as a physical being corrupted and rotted by time, he could still find his own freedom. “Man” he had said “is the future of man.” Sartre had not yet seen the light. But now suddenly, after the war, his own musings seemed embarrassingly childlike and naive. Suddenly he no longer indulged in those outmoded stupidities. For he now knew that history can be understood rationally, that history is determined by class relations, and that man’s responsibility as an individual is to further human freedom by helping progressive Marxist forces. Now he could proclaim that Marxism is the true science of history and that existentialism itself possesses no further basis for existence, as it has been swallowed by the monstrous brightness of the New Faith. Now he could praise General Fidel Castro’s reign of terror in Cuba. He could dismiss rumors of the Soviet concentration camps. After being an official guest of the Soviet Union in 1954, he would declare that the freedom of Soviet citizens to criticize their government is total. He never dreamed of mass murders, mass deportations, or of entire armies of intellectuals who were prisoners working in the vast expanses of Siberia and who fought like animals over a scrap of cabbage and then vanished without a trace.

Thus, Sartre, leading other engaged French intellectuals, felt a responsibility to assist the glorious progress of the working class. They took a stand. For many intellectuals with political leanings—especially Marxist ones—the kind of deconstruction that Paul de Man was doing was laughable.





However, in American universities during the late 1970s and the 80s, de Man's "undecidability" had become a hip new method of reading in the humanities. Even though it was full of weird-sounding buzz words and phrases, it was borrowed from by a variety of groups (feminists, gays, ethnic minorities) who perceived themselves to be marginalized victims of centralized cultural values. They used the methods and lingo of deconstruction to read texts and to arrive at undecidability.

**Twain:** But doesn't de Man's method of deconstruction fall short? To deconstruct something is not simply to arrive at undecidability, but to go beyond this stand off between binary opposites.

**Uma:** Yes. Though de Man was a subtle and gifted critic, his type of deconstruction became a commodity for mass consumption, with all deconstructive readings of texts ending in deadlocks of meaning—undecidability—as if the reader were in the grip of a boa constrictor. It was not only Paul de Man's way of reading texts, however, that caused deconstruction to experience political difficulties. Paul de Man was the leader of a group of professors at Yale known by their enemies as the Boa Deconstructors.

Many in the humanities were vehemently opposed to them and to deconstruction. Then, in 1987, a headline appeared in the New York Times:

## **YALE SCHOLAR'S ARTICLES FOUND IN NAZI PAPER**



The article declared that Paul de Man, the leading guru of American literary deconstruction, had—from 1940 to 1942—written anti-Semitic articles for a pro-Nazi publication during Germany’s occupation of Belgium. Of course deconstruction’s enemies seized upon this news with a vengeance. Yet the real stir was caused by Derrida’s response to this PR crisis. Derrida admitted that some of de Man’s phrases were unpardonable. After all, de Man wrote phrases suggesting a “solution to the Jewish problem,” stating that the Jews had “polluted” modern literature, supporting a “Jewish colony isolated from Europe,” and speaking of the “impeccable behavior of a highly civilized” German invading force. But then Derrida seized upon another phrase: At one point in the articles de Man had criticized “vulgar anti-Semitism.” Of course, Derrida suggests, de Man may have been implying that there is a non-vulgar type of anti-Semitism.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** Well, either de Man means that there is a congenial as well as a vulgar sort of anti-Semitism, or he means that all anti-Semitism is vulgar.

**Uma:** Derrida does not think so. Derrida finds de Man’s text undecidable.

**Twain:** Give me a break!



**Uma:** That's exactly what Derrida's critics said. They seized upon Derrida's comments as the example par excellence of critical and political irresponsibility. Many saw them as a shameless apology for de Man, and as a piece that, while claiming that deconstruction is anti-totalitarian, demonstrates its inability to criticize totalitarianism—or anything. Derrida's reading stripped the offending passage of any evident meaning, and even raised the possibility that de Man was being subtly pro-Semitic. Furthermore, he suggested that those criticizing de Man were reproducing the same "exterminating gesture" that the Nazis exercised when exterminating the Jews. Thus in Derrida's reading, de Man becomes the victim, rather than the Jews. Suddenly deconstruction had not only a PR problem, but was also seen as politically impotent.



**Twain:** Then what eventually happened to deconstruction?

**Uma:** Well, it escaped Jacques Derrida.

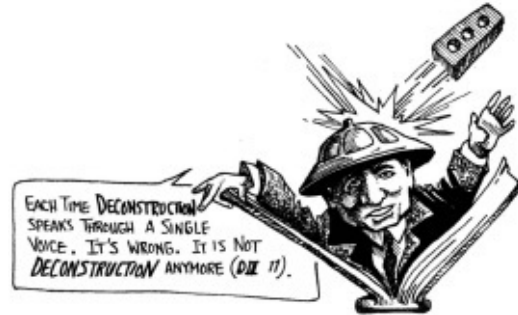
**Twain:** Escaped?

**Uma:** More precisely, its meaning escaped how Derrida uses the term. After all, Derrida shows how all terms are unstable. And this must apply to the term “deconstruction” also. After all, the term has entered into the mainstream of American jargon. For instance, when President Clinton was being impeached, Representative James Rogan asserted that “Ms. Lewinsky doesn’t bother attempting to match the President’s linguistic deconstructions of the English language.” Also in the late 1990s, the J. Crew catalog displayed the word “deconstruction” in bold type, juxtaposed with images of its clothing. And in 1997 Woody Allen released a film called *Deconstructing Harry*. Thus the term has come to mean anything and everything, which is just fine, because Derrida always said it could not be defined.

**Uma:** In the discipline of architecture, the term also took on new meanings. You see, dabbing paint on a canvas, composing a melody, or penning a poem is fairly easy. All of these can be done alone in an attic. However, constructing a building is not so solitary and easy a pursuit.

**Twain:** That’s true. To build a library, an art museum, an office building, a park or a vast public garden is difficult. First you need a lot of fat cats willing to dig into their wallets. Then you need a mayor and an urban planner and some city council members, and you need an army of lawyers. Only after you have gathered them all together and managed to herd them in the same direction do you need to find an architect.

**Uma:** Yes. And that is why architecture is comparatively conservative, and was the last of the arts to chase after that new girl on the block—deconstruction. It was for this reason that it was not until 1988—a full twenty years after Derrida’s first writings hit the scene—that New York’s Museum of Modern Art opened an exhibit entitled “Deconstructivist Architecture,” and that *Architectural Design* devoted three issues to the “new fad.”



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Who were the architects involved?

**Uma:** Bernard Tschumi, Peter Eisenman, Zaha Hadid, Ryoji Suzuki, Coop Himmelblau, and Frank Gehry, to name a just a handful-none of them able to agree on what deconstructive architecture means. But, that's OK, because, as Derrida asserts: "Each time Deconstruction speaks through a single voice, it's wrong, it is not 'Deconstruction' anymore" (D II 11).

**Uma:** That's right Mr. Phallus. Philosophy is like an architect: It has always attempted to locate a stable ground upon which to build. It calls this ground Being, Logos, Arche, etc.



**Heidegger:** Language is the house of Being. Man dwells in its home.

**Twain:** If philosophy and architecture are always trying to erect a grounded structure then what would deconstructive buildings look like?

**Uma:** Buildings built during an earthquake, that are so ugly that they just have to be built, buildings that bleed, whirl, breathe, light up, rip and tear, that are cavernous, fiery, smooth, hard, angular, brutal, round, delicate, colorful, obscene, voluptuous, dreary, alluring, repelling, wet, dry, and throbbing, buildings with mobile parts: dancing chimneys, flying roofs, burning, tilted and twisted walls...

**Twain:** Leaping lizards!

**Derrida:** Deconstruction does not attack existing structures from outside. It can only achieve something if it works inside the system.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** If it speaks through one voice it tends to be phallogocentric! After all, philosophy is the erection of statements that stand up, like a tower.

**Uma:** Deconstructive architecture deconstructs binary opposites such as:  
Functional/Non-Functional  
Architecture/Building  
Habitable/Uninhabitable



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Well, what would a park look like that deconstructs the binary opposition Functional/Non-Functional?

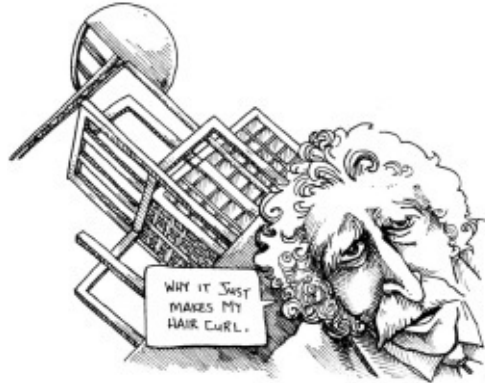
**Uma:** Parks usually have traditional functions. Their vast lawns offer spaces where dogs may run, where lovers may stroll or tarry in the dappled light under fragrant bowers, or where families may picnic. But the competition for the master plan of Le Parc de la Villette, in Paris, a grand project presided over by President Mitterand, may have been the first official example of deconstructive architecture. French-Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi won the competition in 1982, and the park was completed in the early 1990s. It was designed and built to prove that architecture can shun traditional rules of composition: function, harmony, hierarchy and order. Just as a word is made up of a signifier (the sound) and a signified (the meaning), traditionally buildings have a meaning. Buildings are meant to serve—to be functional, to be habitable. Le Parc, however, is based upon folly, nonsense—even madness. Because Le Parc avoids meaning, it is pure signifier, with no signified.

**Twain:** Look, paths run smack dab into the walls of buildings, and staircases lead nowhere! What does it mean?

**Uma:** It means nothing.

**Twain:** Look! There are tilted walls, undulant walkways, flying cantilevers, askew cocktail sticks, clashing flora and curvilinear alleys of trees!

**Uma:** And it is all laid out by superimposing three separate systems: (1) of points, (2) of lines and (3) of surfaces. The red buildings, or folies, set among gardens, are empty of pre-programmed uses.



They now house baths, restaurants, a health club as well as music and science theatres. A snaking children's slide curves down like a huge silver boa constrictor; a large reflective sphere houses an IMAX theater with a 1,000-square-meter hemispherical screen that unfurls around bug-eyed audiences. The Canal de l'Ourcy, which supplies Paris with drinking water, crosses the park, and floating in mid-air, the Argonaute, a decommissioned French attack submarine, serves as a magnet for kids. Bernard Tschumi: "I would say that La Villette is not about the way things should happen in the future, but the way things are now today. There are no utopias today" (D 25).



**Twain:** But how is this park deconstructive?

**Derrida:** "These folies destabilize meaning, the meaning of meaning ... They put in question, dislocate, destabilize, or deconstruct the edifice" (D 24).



**Twain:** Has Derrida ever collaborated with an architect to destabilize and dislocate architectural assumptions?

**Uma:** Yes. In 1983 Tschumi invited Derrida to work together with New York architect Peter Eisenman to design a garden for Le Pare.

**Twain:** What did it look like?

**Uma:** It was never built, which is appropriate because at the time Derrida entered into the project he had been writing about Plato's Timaeus, and especially about Plato's discussion of a kind of non-space.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Non-space?

**Uma:** You see, Plato taught that the objects that we see in the world are imperfect imitations of Ideal Forms.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** I think your body is an ideal form ...



**Uma:** Like, whatever. But, for instance, there are millions of triangles, but all these derive their forms from the Ideal Form of a triangle.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Well, where are all the imperfect copies made?

**Uma:** According to Plato, they are made in a kind of non-space that he called the chora.



And Peter Eisenman's task in his design for the garden was to represent architecturally this non-space, to give form to what is unrepresentable. And for this Derrida actually provided a drawing. The plan for the garden is entitled Choral Works. The word "Choral" suggests voices of the various architects whose ideas were incorporated into the plan. Furthermore, Choral = Chora + L. Thus, this non-space features many eroded L-shapes, which appear in many of Eisenman's architectural projects. Thus, the very title of the project is undecidable and unrepresentable. Does it mean Chora—(Piatto/Derrida) + L (Eisenman)—or does it mean "Chorai"—Derrida, Eisenman and the several other architects who influenced the outcome? Any semblance of certainty is eroded away by the turbulent topography of the site: positive and negative excavations, the very ground tilted at a rakish angle and made from steel. Thus, there is no solid ground for a viewer—or for a philosophy—to stand on. Perhaps Eisenman succeeded: After all, deconstruction is not a philosophy, but a questioning of philosophy, of its very possibility or ground.



**Derrida:** "What I understand under the name deconstruction, there is no end, no

beginning, and no after” (QE 65).

**Twain:** If deconstruction is different in different fields, then how is it different in different cultures?

**Derrida:** “Since it takes the singularity of every context into account, Deconstruction is different from one context to another” (D II 9).

**Coyote:** If there is neither a beginning nor an end of deconstruction, and if deconstruction is different from one context to the next—then deconstruction must also have taken place in other cultures—long before Jacques Derrida was even born!

**Uma:** Yes. To name just three: China, India and Japan. China’s great deconstructive mind belonged to an unconventional, anti-traditional Taoist named Chuang Tzu. In a manner similar to that of Jacques Derrida, he played with words, in order to undermine binary oppositions.

**Coyote:** Well, what else do Chuang Tzu and Derrida have in common?

**Uma:** Both are aware of the problems that language and signification create, and both use a playful, unconventional style of writing to undermine and subvert conventional meanings—to create works that blur the boundaries between philosophy and literature.

**Twain:** Well, how did Chuang Tzu clear away the spell that binary oppositions cast over the minds of men?



**Chuang Tzu:** “Where there is birth, there must be death; where there is death there must be birth. Where there is acceptability there must be unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be acceptability. Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore, the sage does



expression of a sound—it's name. In fact, the name for a holy Word is Brahman—the same as the word for the spiritual essence of the entire universe.

**Twain:** Thus India is a land of princely, sumptuous sounding names: The Nizam of Hyderabad; the Maharajah of Travancore; the Nabob of Jubbulpore, the Begum of Phopal; the Nawab or Mysore; the Ahkoond of Swat!



**Uma:** And the three major Hindu gods—Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva—each have other names, and plenty of them.

**Twain:** And this makes for a lot of confusion. The three have wives, and the wives have several names, and this increases the confusion. There are children, and the children each have many names, and thus the confusion goes on and on. The great god Vishnu has one hundred and eight special, holy names. In fact, I learned the whole of Vishnu's one hundred and eight names by heart, but they wouldn't stay; and I don't remember any of them now but "Henry."

**Uma:** Hinduism is not only logocentric. It is also phallogocentric and phallogocentric.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Millions of Hindus worship Shiva's phallus—or lingam—and it is in fact the commonest object in Benares. In fact, in Benares the lingums outnumber the inhabitants. Lingums are on view everywhere, garlanded with flowers, smeared with butter and drowned in waves of milk, honey, Ganges water and the holy chanting of Ommmmmm. In fact, according to Hindu myth, the holy city of Benares was originally nothing but an erect Shiva phallus! At first it was no larger than a stovepipe, and stood in the midst of a shoreless, humming ocean. Later this phallus spread out, till it was ten miles across. Then, it kept growing until it was as large as the whole globe. The phallus of Benares is thus almost as great as mine, which is the Center of the entire earth!



**Uma:** And the Center of the phallus that is Benares, vibrates the holy sound of Ommmmmmmm—the vibration at the very source of creation.

**Twain:** Holy cow! You can't get more phallogocentric than that! Why, at the time I visited Benares it was still an unspeakably sacred city, and as unsanitary as it was holy. It was the very headquarters of the Hindu faith, and one-eighth of the population was priests.

**Coyote:** One-eighth priests?

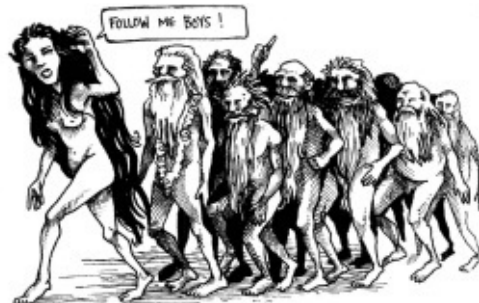


**Twain:** That's right, but Benares was not overstocked—because all of India is prey. India flocks there on pilgrimage and pours its savings into the pockets of these priests in a generous stream that never fails. A priest with a good stand on the shore of the Ganges is worth a lot of money. The holy proprietor sits under his grand spectacular umbrella, chants the holy words, and blesses the people all his life. He collects his endless stream of commissions, and grows fat and rich; and the stand passes from father to son, down and down through the ages, and remains a permanent and lucrative estate in the family.

Why, in one stand along the sands of the south bank of the Ganges I saw a priest with a huge wad of clay beside him and he was making it up into wee little gods no bigger than carpet tacks. He stuck a grain of rice into each—to represent Shive's phallus. Every day he fashioned 2,000 Shiva phalli and threw them into the holy Ganges, each with an appropriate chanting of the holy Word. These acts of reverence brought him the profound homage of the pious and also their coppers. And not only coppers. I once saw one feather-turbaned, diamond-buttoned raja approach to seek a blessing. Every three steps the raja took, a crier announced his coming while other servants blew conches and showered thousands of rose petals into the air. After receiving the blessings of the holy man, the raja gave him stacks of gold coins. Thus the holy man made a sure living here on earth, and was earning a high place in the hereafter!

**Uma:** There was a time in Indian history, however, when groups of yogis became skeptical of all this. From among all the phallogocentric seekers of truth and meaning along the great brown river—the ever-rolling and tranquil Ganges—from among the waves and waves of turbaned priests and Hari Babas, and

Ramjap Babas and Omkara Babas reciting unceasingly the eternal names of God, there emerged sects of naked, long-haired or semi-nude wandering ascetics. And as they walked along the sands of the holy Ganges they carried tridents or spears in their right hands and their limp penises would sway to and fro. They began to question everything Hindu. In fact, sometimes they would eat the flesh of dead men or would meditate atop a corpse. And instead of chanting Om, and instead of seeking for Brahman—the essence of everything—they began to question if anything has an essence—if Brahman even exists. They questioned everything—using riddles.



**Uma:** And from among this group of skeptics emerged a young prince, Siddhartha Gotama, who was to become known as the Buddha. The Hindus had believed that the soul or Atma was identical with Brahman or God, and that it was eternal. But Buddha taught that all things are impermanent, and that there is no soul.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** But what does all of that have to do with deconstruction?





**Uma:** Well, Buddha paved the way for Asia’s greatest Indian philosopher, who was to be called “The Second Buddha.” His name was Nagarjuna, and many modern scholars have found that his philosophy has much in common with Derrida’s “deconstruction.” We know little of his life, other than the fact that he grew up on the balmy, palm-fringed coast of southern India, and spent much of his life there.

Legend has it that he was a magician, and also a playboy. In fact one night, it is said, while the full moon was floating overhead, a night alive with clapping hands, throbbing drums and the hum of sitars, a night perfumed with the rich odors of wines and dark clouds of incense, Nagarjuna was lost somewhere between the tinkling anklets and sandalwood-scented breasts of his local raja’s harem. The tinkling of the little bells on their anklets and bracelets mingled with their sighs and laughter; the motions of their swimming hips; their floating veils; their slender, entwined, trembling limbs and their pleasure-flooded, wide swooning eyes. It was not until their passion was spent and there remained nothing but a sea of slumbering beauties—with Nagarjuna dreamily adrift somewhere in their midst—that the royal guards discovered them.

Nagarjuna felt so guilty about this incident that he embraced a new way of life—Buddhist monkhood. The suddenly woman-deprived youth then came up with an appropriate concept—Emptiness. He thus became Asia’s most influential philosopher.

He wrote about Emptiness in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika* (Authentic Verses on the Middle Way).

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus: What is Emptiness?**



**Uma:** Well anything that is Empty is devoid of self-essence. Or in Sanskrit what is called svabhava.

**Coyote:** Self essence?

**Uma:** You see this cup? It seems to exist all by itself, and not to be dependent on, or related to, anything else. But is this a drawing of a cup or of two faces? Or is it a drawing of both, or of neither? Perhaps it is just a two-dimensional series of lines!



**Coyote:** Perhaps it is all of these things, or none of them!

**Uma:** The important point is that we cannot see both the cup and the faces simultaneously. Each image appears to possess svabhava or self-essence. Each image appears to be a self-sufficient, self-existent, discrete image. But they don't possess self-essence! There is an intimate, subtle relationship between the faces and the cup. One cannot exist without the other. They depend on each other. According to Nagarjuna, we tend to think in terms of such dichotomies (or binary opposites). For instance, the Hindus thought the Universe is made up of this pair: (1) An eternal spiritual Self (Atman or Brahman) and (2) a Non-Self, made up of Matter.

This fundamental dichotomy lies at the basis of all Hindu experience. But the Buddhist will say that neither the Self nor the Non-Self is substantial.



A fundamentalist Christian or Muslim will also think in terms of such dichotomies. He will claim that only his religion is true, and that every other religion is myth or of the devil. As Derrida and Nagarjuna have shown, we tend to form these dichotomies (binary opposites) and to favor one member of the pair. Either Christian or Muslim.

But the cup and the faces are not separate. Each image is in a subtle and intimate relationship with its hidden partner. Though they cannot be seen at the same time, neither of them exists alone. Neither of them possesses svabhava or self-existence. In fact you could say that they are Empty of Self-existence. This does not mean that they don't exist, or that they don't appear. Emptiness just means that the illusion of their separateness is a mirage. Let's not forget: Nagarjuna was a magician who often used the metaphor of magic to illustrate his points.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Suppose, for instance, if a magician, by means of magic, transforms my harem into an elephant ...

**Uma:** Yes. Both the magician and his audience would see the same elephant! It looks to both of them just like an elephant. But only the audience believes it really is an elephant. Only the audience wants to go for an elephant ride. To the magician, the elephant is just an illusion! But to a man eating peanuts in the audience it makes sense to say “I want to feed it my nuts! I want to go for a ride!”

Ordinary people are like the magician’s audience. They assume that everything has self-existence. They become emotionally and intellectually attached to the “things” they perceive. Thus, most people see only the ordinary level of truth (samvritisatya).

Those who see the Emptiness of things are like the magician—he sees the same things, but from a different point of view. He knows that things are empty of a fixed, self-existent nature.

He simply perceives things accurately. Thus he sees the Ultimate level of truth (paramarthasatya).



And even the concept of these two levels of truth is Empty of self-existence! For if you cling to the concept of an Ultimate Truth, then IT becomes the lower, Conventional Truth!

**Coyote:** Awesome! Can you explain more about the two levels of truth?

**Uma:** Suppose you gaze into a pool of water and see your own image—but you think that it is the REAL (unreflected) Coyote!

**Coyote:** OK.

**Uma:** But then you suddenly realize that the reflection is not what it appears to be.

**Coyote:** OK.

**Uma:** This does not mean the reflection does not exist. The reflection now seems to be an illusion only because you had believed it was the real you. But now you know that the reflection in the pool does not have self-existence. After all, the reflection depends upon the pool, the eyes, mind and presence of the real Coyote.



But this doesn't mean that you simply abandon the reflection. It is still useful to you for admiring yourself, etc. The reflection is like the Lower Conventional Truth. And realizing it is only a reflection, devoid of self-existence, is like the Higher Truth. According to Nagarjuna, everything in the world is like the reflection in the mirror.



**Coyote:** But then, how do I reach the Higher Truth?

**Uma:** You need to avoid extreme dualisms—binary opposites. One way to do this is through the concept of dependent arising (pratityasamutpadah). An extreme dualism applied to the tea might be: Existence/Non-existence.

Nagarjuna would avoid this dualism by saying that this tea does not have self-existence, because it is a dependent arising.

**Coyote:** Arising?

**Uma:** Yes. It is here before your vision, it has “arisen.” However, the tea is dependent on the sun and rains that helped it grow, upon the pickers who picked it, upon the earth in which it grew, etc. In short it is dependent on many other dependent arisings.

When you understand that the tea is dependent upon them, you eliminate the extreme views that it is self-existent. And when you understand that the tea is an arising, you avoid the extreme position that it doesn’t exist at all.

**Coyote:** So by acknowledging that the tea is a dependent arising I avoid both extremes: that the tea possesses self-existence, and that it doesn’t exist at all.

**Uma:** Yes. Another tool Nagarjuna uses to deconstruct binary opposites is the tetralemma or Catuskoti.

**Twain:** Well, I’ve heard of Wild Bill Cody, but never Cactus Cody!

**Uma:** That’s Catuskoti. “Catus” and “tetra” mean “four.” And just as a dilemma is a situation involving a choice between two equally conclusive alternatives, a tertalemma or Catuskoti is a situation involving a choice between four equally conclusive alternatives. For instance, suppose you are experiencing fear. To apply Nagarjuna’s tetralemma to your emotion of fear, you must ask your fear four questions:



(1) Is this fear producing itself? (Does it have self-existence?) The answer is “no” because nothing can cause itself. Nothing has self-existence.

(2) Is this fear caused by some other self-existing thing? No, this is also impossible, because we have just said that nothing has self-existence. Therefore the fear cannot be caused by any-THING else.

(3) Is the fear caused by both? No, it cannot be. This is impossible, because how can both cause it if neither can?

(4) Is this fear caused neither by itself nor by anything else? No, because then it would be caused by nothing.

**Coyote:** Well then, if the fear cannot be caused by anything, if I cannot analytically FIND this fear; what happens to it?

**Uma:** Its loses its force. Actually, it disappears. The binary opposition of cause/effect has been deconstructed.

**Coyote:** What are the similarities and differences between Nagarjuna's thought and that of Derrida?

**Uma:** In fact many authors have written about the similarities and differences (see *Derrida for Beginners*, *Postmodernism for Beginners* and *Eastern Philosophy for Beginners*). One difference between Derrida's "deconstruction" and Madhyamika is that people who deconstruct usually deconstruct "things" such as books, laws and institutions. Buddhists, however use Emptiness to deal with their own emotional life, and to gain enlightenment.

**Coyote:** So is Emptiness a thing?

**Uma:** No. That would be like a shopkeeper who says, "I have nothing to sell you!" And then the customer replies, "Very well, then, just sell me some of that nothing." In fact, Madhyamika, like deconstruction, is a kind of non-position, a non-philosophy, for it asserts no-thing, it makes no claims. Some similarities between Madhyamika and deconstruction are that:

(1) Both shy away from making any statements about a determinate reality.

Thus Nagarjuna advances no dogma or argument of his own concerning reality. He only points out the contradictions in other philosophies. Derrida also does not propose theories, but only offers readings of other thinkers' philosophies, theories and fictions. Both aim to allow the contradictions and inconsistencies within a text to undermine the text.

(2) According to both, "things" do not have self-existence. They exist only in relation to other "things." This is an idea that Derrida borrowed from the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, who instead of looking at language historically, began to look at it in freeze frame.





What he saw is that language consists of a system of differences. The sound of 'bat' exists only in relationship to other similar signifiers ("rat," "cat," "sat," "cad," etc.) from which it differs slightly. If you take the word "cat" and rocket it out into intergalactic space, in relationship to nothing, it loses its meaning—its "cat-icity." Thus there are no real linguistic atoms or elements that can stand alone. Every part of a language depends upon all the other parts. This, of course, is very close to the Buddhist doctrine of "dependent co-arising" and that all things are empty of inherent existence. The piece of paper these words are printed on, for instance, seems to exist all by itself. But if one analyzes its existence intellectually, one finds that it depends upon the bookstore that sold it, upon the workers who built the trucks and drilled for the oil that got it to the store, upon the lumberjacks who felled the tree it was a part of, upon the author,

upon the other things in the forest to which the tree was in an ecological relationship, upon the rain that grew it, thus upon the earth, upon the sun, and whatever created the sun, upon the galaxy, etc. There is no end to the co-dependence of this piece of paper. It is inter-related to the entire universe, in reality. Thus it is empty of self-existence. Our perception that it is a separate sheet of paper that exists all by itself is just an illusion.

(3) Both hunt for binary oppositions and deconstruct their logic. For instance, Nagarjuna dismantles the binary opposition of cause/effect.

As we have seen above, fear cannot cause itself, nor can it be caused by any-“thing” else.



Derrida also deconstructs causality. After all, there cannot be a cause without an effect—and if the “effect” is what causes the “cause” to be a cause or origin, then the effect is actually the cause. Derrida also deconstructs the binary oppositions speech/writing, nature/culture, and sex/fantasy—among others.

(4) Both Derrida and Nagarjuna are very comfortable with Emptiness. According to Nagarjuna, Shunyata, or Emptiness is not merely nothing. Nor is it a thing. For Nagarjuna, “things” exist, but they are empty of inherent existence. This emptiness of inherent existence is shunyata. And even the notion that “things are empty of inherent existence,” is itself empty of inherent existence! This is called shunyata shunyata! Similarly, Derrida does not assert that nothing exists or that everything must be negated or destroyed. Rather Derrida likes to point out that no word or text has an ultimate or original meaning or stable meaning.



(5) Whereas Western philosophers have been content to exhaust themselves thinking about problems of either/or, both Nagarjuna and Derrida employ the same tetralemma, or four-pronged logic. This is Nagarjuna's famous catuskoti. The logic of the tetralemma is that a thing neither exists, nor does not exist, nor both, nor neither. Similarly, Derrida neither affirms nor denies the assertions of his opponents, but shows that they escape both assertion and denial.

(6) Both philosophers deconstruct the concept of a self-existent self. Nagarjuna, like the Buddha, does not believe in an Atman or Self. Similarly, Derrida challenges notions that the self has a knowable and undivided Center.

(7) Both talk about an ordinary and a higher truth. For Nagarjuna, there is a lower and a higher truth. The lower truth is conventional reality (like the elephant the audience sees), and the higher truth is the knowledge of the world through the realization of Emptiness (like the elephant the magician knows to be merely a magical illusion). According to deconstruction, to be caught up in the lower level of truth is to be caught up in the hierarchies caused by binary opposites. The higher truth, of which we can catch only a glimmer, is when we deconstruct the hierarchies created by binary opposites.

**Twain:** But how could Nagarjuna sit around talking about higher and lower truths when there is so much inequality in India?

**Uma:** What do you mean?



**Twain:** When I was visiting India I found out that within the time of men and women still living, eight hundred widows willingly, and, in fact, rejoicingly, burned themselves to death on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands in a single year! Eight hundred would have done it the year I was there if the British government would have let them! It is believed that a woman who throws away her life when her husband dies is instantly joined to him again, and is forever afterward happy with him in heaven; her family will build a little monument to her, or a temple, and will hold her in honor, and, indeed, worship her memory always; they will themselves be held in honor by the public; the woman's self-sacrifice has conferred a noble and lasting distinction upon her posterity.



And, besides, see what she has escaped: If she had elected to live, she would be a disgraced person; she could not remarry; her family would despise her and disown her; she would be a friendless outcast, and miserable all her days. It seemed to me that India has respect for every form of life-except human life. And if you look at the entire history of enlightened saints and gurus, including Buddha and Nagarjuna, not one of them even brought up the subject of this custom of widow burning. They were too busy thinking of higher and lower realities.

**Uma:** It is true that the custom, which is called sati, existed in India for hundreds of years, until it was outlawed by the British when they colonized the subcontinent. Actually, even after the British outlawed the practice, women would join their husbands on their funeral fires. But I must tell you something, Mark: According to Gayatri Spivak, a Bengali postcolonial thinker and Marxist-feminist (in her influential article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”), talk such as yours about Indian woman engaging in sati merely reproduces the two dominant narratives that have controlled most of the thinking about sati.

**Twain:** Two dominant narratives?

**Uma:** Yes, according to Spivak there were two dominant narratives. The first was that of the British. Just as you were astonished that eight hundred widows per year would engage in the practice, the British made a big deal out of sati (which they spelled “suttee”). They condemned the practice with a fervor.



**Twain:** Well, why shouldn't they?

**Uma:** According to Spivak, the British used sati as an example of Indian barbarism. Spivak says the British condemnation of the practice is an example of “white men saving brown women from brown men” (S 92). Furthermore, she claims that the British used this white-men-saving-brown-women-from-brown-men argument to justify their colonization of the subcontinent. In “saving” Indian women from this custom, they were able to justify their empire as having a modernizing, liberating and progressive influence. This, of course painted a picture of the Imperial British self-image as civilizationally superior to both the woman and her oppressors.

**Twain:** What about the second dominant narrative?

**Uma:** The second dominant narrative was that of the local nationalist patriarchy—the “brown men” themselves. They argued—just as you described—that the widows actually wanted to die, that they attained spiritual freedom through the act, and that would be admired for their courage.

**Coyote:** Well, how about the women, themselves? What did the satis say?



**Uma:** That's just the point! Spivak argues that the widows' own utterances were always ventriloquised, interpreted according to one of the two dominant narratives: Either they were victims of brown barbarians, or they were fulfilling their traditional religious duty. What the women actually said, says Spivak, was never heard. Thus the title of her essay: "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

**Coyote:** Subaltern?

**Uma:** According to the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who coined the term, subaltern groups lack class consciousness, are disorganized, and are excluded from the histories of dominant classes. Spivak argues that although women as a whole cannot be considered subalterns, women in general have been subject to silencing. Thus, women can talk, but cannot really speak because speaking requires the speaker to have a listener. If a woman's voice is never heard, if it never achieves representation—then it remains subaltern. If people want to help subalterns, they should not merely write about them, but actually obliterate the subaltern space they inhabit by allowing them to represent themselves.

**Twain:** What does all this have to do with deconstruction?



**Uma:** At Yale, Spivak studied deconstruction under Paul de Man. As we have seen, deconstruction aims to read narratives in such a way that it brings to light those aspects of a narrative that are silenced or pushed to the margins. In pointing out that the subaltern cannot speak, Spivak is engaging in a deconstructive move. However, even though she wrote the preface to the English translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, she claims that she does not consider herself a deconstructivist. Like many feminists, she feels that deconstruction's focus on rereading texts avoids the real nitty gritty of political engagement in the world. Yet, she proposes that Indian women and other marginalized groups can use deconstruction strategically to accomplish political goals and to bring the

marginalized into the sphere of representation.

**Twain:** Then why doesn't she consider herself a deconstructivist?

**Uma:** Because if she were a hard-core deconstructivist, then she would feel that she had no political legs to stand on. After all—what is an Indian woman? From a certain deconstructive standpoint, the term “Indian” for instance, is simply a construct of colonial discourse. Before the British came, there was really no such thing as India. There was a subcontinent made up of many language, religious and ethnic groups, but there was no India. To identify oneself as Indian is to be involved in a history where one's own identity was defined by an alien force—the British Empire. Similarly the term “woman” has been subjected to deconstruction. How can women fight for themselves in the real world, if instead they sit around arguing about whether they are really women or not? What if Gandhi, instead of fighting for Indian independence, had merely sat around contemplating his navel and wondering if the term “Indian” or the term “man” really pertain to him?



**Twain:** What would a culture or nation look like if it were based on deconstruction?

**Uma:** Actually, some thinkers claim that many elements of Japanese culture



spring from a kind of native form of deconstruction—because much of Japanese culture is based on the Buddhist experience of “Emptiness.”

In fact, Japan might be called Emptiness Inc, or as Roland Barthes has dubbed it in his book of the same name, *An Empire of Signs*. In this book, Barthes reads traditional Japanese culture in the same way that Derrida reads a text. What he finds is that, if Japan is an empire of signs, these signs are empty. Thus Barthes looks at Japanese food, clothing, rituals, games, sports, painting, at the structure of the city of Tokyo and at haiku poetry—among other things.



For Barthes, no Japanese dish has a Center. Yet, whereas Tokyo does possess a Center, this Center is empty.

Furthermore according to Barthes “haiku means nothing” (69); and “the collective body of all haiku is a network of jewels in which each jewel reflects all the others and so on, to infinity, without there ever being a center to grasp ...” (78).

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God’s Phallus:** What does he mean when he claims that a haiku means nothing and that the collective body of all haiku is a network of jewels without a Center?

**Uma:** Let me answer you by a reading of the following haiku, written by the author:

Slipping  
into her nightgown

silver moonlight.

Does the poem mean that the moonlight is slipping into her nightgown, or that the silver moonlight is her nightgown, or that she is slipping into her nightgown while bathed in silver moonlight? We can't say. Like a Noh actor changing from one mask to another, the poem plays different roles. But the poem doesn't act any of these roles at the same time. The poem only unveils one meaning at a time. No one meaning or reading of the haiku has a greater claim to reality than any other. Each reading is empty of self-existence, and means no-thing.



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Well then, what does Barthes mean when he says that the collective body of all haiku is a network of jewels without a Center?

**Uma:** Buddhists often use the metaphor of Indra's Net to describe Emptiness. Indra's Net is like an infinite net. At each interstice of the net rests a jewel. Each jewel inter-reflects every other jewel in the net so that no jewel is central. The entire body of haiku is like that, especially in the most-practiced literary genre in Medieval Japan—linked verse—known in Japanese as renga.

Although linked verse was an oral form that disappeared after the sixteenth century—haiku mailing lists on the Internet have revived the form. Renga was practiced at poem parties, not only by the samurai elite and at court, but also by more humble folk. But it was practiced also in rituals, by Buddhist monks. These were viewed as group meditation sessions, solemn occasions. A monk began preparing the day beforehand, cleansing himself, and abstaining from meat, fish and sexual behavior. The morning of the session the monk would elevate and purify his mind through meditation. Then he would chant and contemplate both Chinese and Japanese verse.



Under a full moon, or while viewing cherry blossoms—whether in a monastery, an elegant garden pavilion at the Imperial Palace or in a bamboo hut in the provinces—an evening’s entertainment often consisted of guests linking together seventeen- and fourteen-syllable poems. When taking in different seasons—snow and moon, blossoms and leaves, mountains and streams—hearts were moved, and words began to take shape. Someone would begin, for instance, with a poem extolling the beauty of the autumn moon or a verse composed to pacify the sadness of the falling cherry blossoms—and it was then someone else’s turn to compose a verse complete in its own right, but that related to the previous verse.

It was important that each renga session take place in a location where the poets would be inspired by the beauty of nature. One ancient session took place at a castle by the sea. Like most beautiful places in Japan, it has a long history of many poems devoted to its beauty, and one of these poems would then act as the “foundation poem” of the session. For this particular session, the foundation poem was:

The god of the sea  
with this sea plant,  
crowns his hair.

The “sea plant” crown is the castle itself.

Responding to this foundation poem, one poet writes the first poem of the session:

These breakers  
Are its crowning blossoms—  
The sea in summer.

Another poet might then respond with:

All day long—  
Watching the breakers  
Rise and fall  
Rise and fall.

Like waves, poem after poem would thus rise up from silence and fall into silence.



**Coyote:** Was each poem a complete poem in its own right? After all, each poem seems to possess svabhava—or self-existence?



**Uma:** Adding to this seeming self-existence of the poem was the unavoidable ego attachment to one's own poem. After all, it would have been only human for a poet to think that his poem was better or worse than the others. In fact, in some other eras of Japanese poetry a poet might die if his poetry received criticism from another poet. Part of the spiritual, meditational discipline in renga, then, was to see one's own poem not as a separate, self-sufficient thing, but as one small contribution to the whole.





Of course when a poet offered a verse that moved the other poets, the scribe would read it aloud four or five times, so that everyone could savor the heart of it in silence. It was considered the height of vulgarity if—during the period of silent contemplation—another poet should suddenly blurt out a response. Yet the very heart of each verse was its inter-reflected meanings with the other verses. Each verse, then, was a fine poem in itself—but the whole point of renga, if it has to have one, is that there is no central point: that each verse is a reinterpretation of the preceding verse, and a text to be reinterpreted in turn by the next verse. Each poem, then, subtly changes the meanings of all the rest. One's own poem, inter-reflected by all the others, takes on an ephemeral quality.

Shall we try it?



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** cold winter night-snuggling, we toast marshmallows

**Coyote:** some scorched trunks in a snow covered field

**Twain:** from one mountain to another watching smoke signals

**Derrida:** the last candle one light on the table two in her eyes



**Uma:** my first love in a gold urn — his spirit in the ashes

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** shivering hobo burning some trash in a pot to warm his hands

(This series of linked-verse, "Smoke Signals," is from Betty Kaplan and Marx Verhart's poem "Elements.")



**Uma:** You see, the silence between verses is as important as the verses.

**Coyote:** Each poem is based on the poem before, which in turn is based on the poem before, which in turn is based on the poem before. Each poem, it seems, is empty of inherent existence! Each verse is n(either) n(or) cause/effect!

**Uma:** So, renga is an entire body of haiku that has no center.

**Coyote:** But tell me, in what other ways is Japan deconstructive?

**Uma:** From the late 1970s until the mid-1990s Japan had the most vibrant economy in the world. This led to the publication in the United States of many books discussing Japan's miracle economy. In one such book, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, Thomas Friedman expresses amazement with the efficiency and attention to detail in Japan. He first notices it in a Lexus factory. His impression is strengthened while riding a 180-mile-per-hour bullet train back to his hotel. Then Friedman comes across an article about conflict in the Middle East. He symbolizes the contrast—between Japanese technical efficiency and the Middle-Eastern conflict—with the metaphor in his title. The Lexus, for Friedman, represents the Japanese ability to adapt to economic globalization. The olive tree, on the other hand, represents the Middle Eastern search for roots and for identity. Friedman writes that in today's world these two forces must be kept in balance.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** What is it, then, that has allowed Japan to adapt to globalization so well, while other nations are still fighting over who owns the olive tree? Why have the Japanese been so unconcerned with roots when others were fighting over them?



**Uma:** One answer is that Japan's pre-modern sense of its roots and its identity—springing from Zen Buddhism—is very much like the sense of identity written about by thinkers such as Jacques Derrida. Both ancient Buddhism and deconstruction share a belief in the “Emptiness” of things—including the emptiness of olive trees: or the very roots of one's identity. Both philosophies, in fact, do not like the notion of searching for, or of clinging to, an identity. This



leaves the followers of such philosophies free to adapt efficiently to technology and globalization while others are fighting tribal battles.

**Coyote:** How does Zen Buddhism accomplish this?

**Uma:** The Zen Buddhist idea of identity is based on the idea of “Emptiness” or “shunyata,” which may seem to Westerners like no basis at all, for Emptiness is impossible to cling to, unlike the solid ground under an olive tree. Emptiness makes its appearance not only in haiku, but also in many aspects of Japanese culture that were influenced by Zen: calligraphy, garden design, pottery, martial arts, the tea ceremony and painting.



These Zen-inspired arts physically demonstrate Emptiness.



Not only do many Western writers see similarities between Buddhism and deconstruction but some Japanese writers also agree. Asada Akira’s book *Kozo to chikara* (Structure and Power), which introduced Western-style deconstruction to Japan, sold almost eighty-thousand copies in just a few weeks. Sales were so brisk that Asada and his book came quickly to be known as the A A gensho (or Asada Akira phenomenon). In his book Akira speaks of a native, Japanese deconstruction—a deconstruction before the fact. And, like Derrida, he defends knowledge as play—spontaneous play such as found in the Zen arts of tea ceremony and archery. But this kind of play spills over into postmodern Japanese culture—including television ads. A book describing marketing Japan, Ima, chotaishu no jidai (Now Is the Meta-Mass Age), proclaims that, just as in

the West, the most cool and hip Japanese ads play with ruptured (*bunretsu*), counterfeit (*giji*), and displaced (*zure*) communication. Yet the Japanese think of this as very traditional. Itoi Shigesato created hip ads for Japanese department-store chains that made him into a cultural hero and influenced other ads. One such ad shows a car beside the expression “postmodern.” That’s it. Japanese cultural critics compared the Emptiness and snappy brevity of this ad to haiku.

**Coyote:** Then how does deconstruction work in a culture that is already an expression of decentered thinking?



**Uma:** This is an important question, because Akira is not the only Japanese thinker who speaks of a Japanese native deconstruction—of a deconstruction before the fact. The Japanese philosopher Kojin Karatani asks that if Japan has always served tea, fought sword battles, and designed cities—all without reference to a centric structure—then, how is any further deconstruction possible? Another Japanese thinker, Masao Miyoshi, adds, in a self-satisfied manner, that the term “postmodernism” fits the Japanese conditions remarkably well, as if the term were coined specifically for Japanese society.



Jacques Derrida himself came to Japan in the late 1980s to talk with intellectuals such as Akira and Karatani, who had boasted that Japan did not need Derrida's deconstruction because of Japan's native deconstruction, Derrida replied that there might be things in Japan that do need deconstructing. Perhaps Derrida was thinking about the sexist, racist and nationalistic ideas of many Japanese, all based on ideas that seem self-existent. After all, Japan is a country where until recently, if a woman were to divorce, she and her child would have a difficult time in society—unless she lived in Tokyo or some other large city. Japan is a country where women generally receive only forty percent the salary a man receives for the same work. If the woman is over thirty years of age, it will be difficult for her to find any meaningful work at all. Many Japanese women are deprived of a real education that prepares them for anything more than a meaningless job. Thus many are forced into marriage. Furthermore, in today's Japan one is cool or hip depending upon what one purchases and possesses. Thus many Japanese, especially the young, pass their time daydreaming about Western products. One of the most popular novels at the peak of Japan's economic bubble was *Nantonaku, kurisutaru* (Somehow, Crystal). It is a novel of disembodied adolescent voices and softly erotic daydreams sprinkled with the names of stores in shopping malls—trade names such as Christian Dior and Jaeger—which flicker in the reader's mind like an endless run of slick

commercials to guide the reader through the glossy, sparkling world of the mall. The book paints human relationships as simply buying and selling, and prices the value of human existence as a human's ability to purchase. Thus, identity, for the new generation of Japanese youth, has not so much to do with the Emptiness of Zen, but has become "empty" in another sense. If you hop a jet to Tokyo you will find teenage girls dressed in expensive Western designer clothes they are able to buy because they engage in what is called "sponsored dating." In other words, they sell their bodies to Japanese businessmen in order to buy designer labels. In no other part of the world will you find girls from affluent families who prostitute themselves merely for a Gucci handbag.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** How disgusting! After all, a woman's body is her text—her uniquely feminine text.

**Uma:** Why, Mr. Phallus. You have come a long way!

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Yes, I have learned that for literature to truly happen, the reader—the reader's response—is quite as vital as the text.

**Uma:** Vital?

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Yes, for without him, there would be no text at all. For texts are processes of signification that take on meaning only when the reader seizes upon facets of the text.

**Uma:** And what does THIS signify? It seems to be generating a pressure for meaning to appear.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** O ... Yes ... Very good! It signifies that the reader, myself, has seized upon a facet of your text that I find very meaningful!

**Uma:** But how does the reader know which facet to seize upon?

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** The reader brings to the text certain pre-understandings, a context of knowledge and expectations within which the text's various features are assessed ...

**Uma:** Do assess my features further ...



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** And as the reading act proceeds these expectations will themselves be modified—molded—to fit the form of the text they have teased forth ...

**Uma:** Yes! I am beginning to get your meaning!



**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** The reader will select and organize facets into consistent wholes—excluding some—and foregrounding others ... concretizing certain facets in certain ways ... He will then try to hold different facets within the text together ...

**Uma:** Uuuuh, uuummm, yes.

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Or shift from facet to facet in order to build up an integrated concretization ... For you see, the text is only a series of invitations for the reader to make implicit connections and to fill gaps

**Uma:** Gaps?

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Yes, gaps.

**Uma:** Oh yes! I love it when you make the implicit connection and fill the gap!

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** Yes, for the text is made up of gaps where the reader, myself, must supply missing connections and it is within the contours and constraints of these gaps that meanings appear ...



**Uma:** O ... O ... Yes! I can feel meanings...meanings beginning to appear within the contours- -and- -O ... O ... especially, especially within the constraints!

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** And the reader must fill in the gaps in a number of different ways ...

**Uma:** O ..... YES!

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** So that the more the text supplies, the more the reader must fill in ...

**Uma:** O ... Yes, Glorious Phallus ... fill my text in more ...

**The Glorious Glorious Bliss of God's Phallus:** And this process is always a dynamic one—a complex movement unfolded through time ...



And a good reading is not a straightforward linear movement—merely cumulative. As a reader reads he sheds assumptions—seizing upon connections and inferences, until the text, under the full force of his initial concretizations, and the full weight of his intelligence, opens up to a horizon of meaning that is .  
..... OOOOOooooooooo!



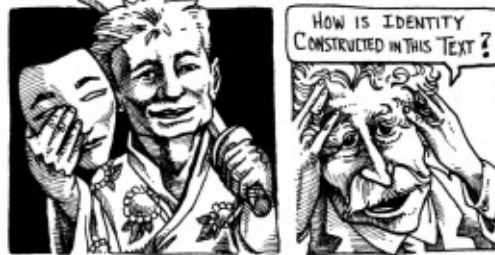
**Uma:** Why did you stop?!! I feel you have only succeeded in reading yourself!! And you have come to a realization of meaning too quickly, not reading the structures of my text so much as delighting in phallogocentric play and semantic slipping and sliding! And the connections you have made—filling in the gaps in the diverse, multiple and fluid folds of the text—have generated in it a pressure for meaning—but you have declined to deliver that meaning! The pressure, however, still exists!

You suffer from an affective fallacy! And the text wishes to evade your male monopoly of meaning, to abolish all repressive, phallogocentric readings, to

subvert fixed significations altogether and open out into a joyous freeplay of meaning, meanings as diverse and fluid as the multiple folds and pulsations of my own text. For if it is true that the text cannot have a meaning without a reader, then why should I not read myself!









Jacques Derrida passed away during the night of October 8, 2004. He died of cancer of the pancreas, in a Parisian hospital where he had been for about three weeks.

According to a friend who attended his funeral, on October 12, the following, parting words of Jacques Derrida were read by his son, Pierre, in front of his father's tomb. My friend asks to be forgiven if his transcription is faulty, as he transmits them only from memory.

“Mes amis, je vous remercie d'être venus. Je vous remercie pour la chance de votre amitié. Ne pleurez pas : souriez comme je vous aurai souri.

Je vous bénis.

Je vous aime.

Je vous souris,  
où que je sois.”

*-JP*

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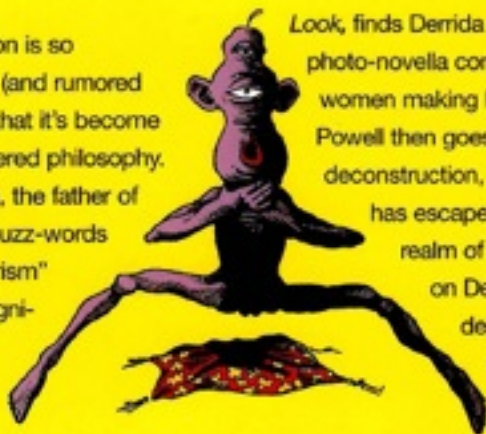
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