# REVISITING THE DERRIDA AFFAIR WITH BARRY SMITH

BARRY SMITH, INTERVIEWED BY JEFFREY SIMS

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## PREFARATORY REMARKS BY JEFFREY SIMS

In 1982, Priit J. Vesilind asked the Mayor of East Berlin, Erhard Krack, a question of political and ethical importance:

'What would happen if the Wall were taken down?'...

'What you are asking,' he replied with agitation, 'is a philosophical question. Let us get back to reality.'[1]

Ten years later, in 1992, conspicuous intellectual differences exposed Cambridge University to the scrutiny of the academic world, as well as to the free press. Conscientous objection from Professor Barry Smith and 18 others ensured a period of debate in the English press pertaining to issues of academic freedom, and academic responsibility. My own philosophical interests led me to investigate the letter which Smith submitted to *The Times* (London) letters page, 9 May, 1992, along with eighteen other signatures from renowned philosophers, each objecting to the honorary degree which Cambridge was about to award Jacques Derrida.

On the more obvious front, Smith's letter to *The Times* is congruent with the efforts of four senior dons who announced a 'non-placet' vote when the proposed degree was originally announced in March, 1992. The declarations came from David Hugh Mellor, Ian Jack, Raymond Ian Page, and Henry H. Erskine-Hill. As will

become clearer, though, when the senior members of Cambridge had gathered in March to discuss their honorary degrees for that year, Barry Smith had a gathering of his own to attend in Budapest. Here was an international conference, sponsored by the Hegeler Institute, held at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Many of the conference papers were later collected and edited by Smith in a book for the Monist Library of Philosophy, titled, *Philosophy And Political Change In Eastern Europe*.[2] We will note that the interests which had originally spawned the organization of this conference, and of this book, also became Barry Smith's chief motivation for entering into the 'affair' which was just then developing at Cambridge.

While Smith's letter has been esteemed for its sober defence of philosophy, it has also been viewed as rather notorious by Derrida and postmodern sympathizers. More recently, John D. Caputo refers to Smith's letter on at least two ocassions. First, in his book, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, and then more thoroughly in, *Deconstruction In A Nutshell,* both published in 1997.[3] Aspects of the latter work will be depicted in the closing remarks below. Caputo and others have shown that although the events in question happened in 1992, there has been ongoing interest in Barry Smith's letter to *The Times*. Smith's letter has been referred to on a number of different occasions (annually) since its publication in *The Times* in 1992, but it ocurred to me that few of us had heard from Smith himself as to why the letter was drafted. This presentation may provide for further insight into issues which influenced our intellectual interests at the beginning of the decade, and must continue to do so where the various boundaries within philosophy and phenomenology are at issue.

Without pre-empting the details of Barry Smith's forthright letter, I will save further discussion for my concluding remarks. After having contacted Smith at the State University of New York at Buffalo, we agreed to meet and discuss the matter in more detail. What follows are my inquiries, and his account, of his letter to *The Times* letters page, 9 May, 1992.

December 15th, 1997

***How are we to understand the background to the letter which, you, Barry Smith, published in* The London Times *letters page,[4] May 9th, 1992, objecting to Cambridge University, England awarding Jacques Derrida an honorary degree?***

I will tell you something about my background – perhaps that will help you to understand the letter. I read mathematics and philosophy as an undergraduate in Oxford, where my philosophical studies were of a more or less straightforwardly British analytical sort, focusing on the philosophy of mathematics and logic. The professor that I was most taken with at Oxford was Michael Dummett. Although I didn't agree with everything he said, he was the most impressive figure there because he was the most passionate of all the intelligent Oxford philosophers – he didn't treat philosophy as a game. In part because of Dummett's influence I became interested in Continental philosophy: I associated Frege with Germany. I read a lot of French philosophy originally, and then some German philosophy, and I gradually gravitated towards Austria and Eastern Europe.

***When you suggest that Dummett did not 'treat philosophy as a game' could you be more specific? Who, or, what kinds of philosophizing, are you thinking of? I somehow doubt that you feel this way towards Wittgenstein, for example.***

Some, at least, of the philosophy dons at Oxford gave the impression – castigated by Ernest Gellner in his *Words And Things* – that philosophy is a time-filling activity of a sort suitable for gentlemen. Wittgenstein, of course, falls well clear of this group, but the same cannot be said of some of his followers.

***What exactly were you reading in terms of French thought?***

Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Camus – nothing out of the ordinary for that period. But I rapidly became more and more interested in Central and Eastern European philosophy, and more specifically in Austrian philosophy. Over the years I became friendly with

quite a number of philosophers in Eastern Europe. I collaborated with a number of people in Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic (as it is now called), and I travelled a lot there, as well as in Austria and Germany. I later obtained a job at the University of Manchester. Actually, I inherited the position of my former supervisor, Wolfe Mays. Manchester was at that stage practically speaking the only university in England where phenomenology was studied. Wolfe is still alive, and he is still the editor of the *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*. Now, of course, there are many more English philosophers interested in Continental thought, but at that stage there was just him and a very few others.

*How long did you remain in Manchester, then?*

I worked in Manchester for ten years, but again, I spent quite a bit of time travelling in Europe and I had a number of regular visitors from Europe while I was working in England.

In that period – the seventies and early eighties – there were many young philosophers in Eastern Europe who were truly excited about philosophical ideas, and who were just then learning for the first time about some of the best things which philosophy has to offer. In Prague or Warsaw or Ljubljana there was a new atmosphere of philosophical enthusiasm. You could really *argue* philosophically *and* about philosophy. My book, *Austrian Philosophy*,[5] grew out of my work in this period. It is a study of the leading figures in the philosophy in central and Eastern Europe over the last hundred years. It begins with Brentano and includes also some discussion of the Vienna Circle. But its main focus is philosophy in Prague and Cracow, Graz and Lemberg. Many of my other publications, too, have been devoted to the rich contributions of Eastern European philosophy, among which I include not only the work of Polish philosophers such as Ingarden and Leniewski, but also that of Husserl, Carnap, Mach, and phenomenologists such as Patocka.

***In light of the fact that you are intimately connected with the phenomenological movement in this way, as well as the co-editor of the*** Cambridge Companion to Husserl ***(1995), it should not surprise us that you might object, not only to Derrida's honorary degree, but to his reading of Husserl as well.***

Yes. Certainly some of the many criticisms of Derrida's work are not based on a scholarly understanding of the relevant literature to which Derrida is reacting. But I have endeavored to be a serious critic of Derrida. I have taken the trouble to read his work – though in this respect I bow to the *superior wisdom* of scholars such as Kevin Mulligan and J.Claude Evans. I think that Claude Evans' book, *Strategies of Deconstruction*, on Derrida's reading of Husserl, is a brilliant exposé of Derrida's shoddy way with texts.[6] Mulligan's essay, 'How Not to Read: Derrida on Husserl,' drives the point home even further and it is a strange fact that the Derrida industry has still not replied to Mulligan and Evans.

***You just mentioned your supervisor Wolfe Mays. As I recall, he published a review of Derrida's*** La Voix et le phénomène.[7] ***He praised Derrida for 'this lucid little book' and commented on its 'clarity.' Yet you charge Derrida with a lack of clarity and rigour and this, it seems, is the hallmark of your letter to*** The Times. ***Was there much discrepency between yourself and Mays when it came to the assessment of French (or Continental) thinking?***

You must bear in mind that Mays came to Continental philosophy at a time when it was still almost unknown in the English-speaking world. Like Marvin Farber in the United States, he adopted a welcoming stance towards French and German thought in general. Over time, however, philosophers could choose what is of value in the work of different philosophers, irrespective of their national origin. And this also means they can reject what is bad or harmful. There is, incidentally, a counterpart to the earlier welcoming stance to all that is Continental in the similar welcoming stance to all that is analytic on the part of some German philosophers.

***And you have lectured on, for example, Heidegger, have you not?***

I have taught courses on Continental philosophy, on Contemporary European Thought, and these courses have included large sections on Heidegger. I think Heidegger is an important thinker, for all his faults. But it was Roman Ingarden who was my first real discovery among the Continental philosophers.[8] I persuaded my tutor in Oxford to let me work for a whole term on Ingarden. Ingarden is, after Tarski, the most prominent Polish

philosopher of the twentieth century. He wrote a series of important works on aesthetics and ontology which are well respected by leading phenomenologists, though most of his major philosophical works on ontology or metaphysics are, unfortunately, still not translated into English. This is one of the reasons why people are more aware of Heidegger than they are of Ingarden.

***I wonder to what degree, and in what way, you connect Heidegger's heavy thought with Derrida's 'play'? What sort of distinctions will you allow, or make, between Heidegger and Derrida?***

Well, Heidegger is, first of all, the more original thinker. There is, leaving aside a lot of meaningless banter, and even with the best of intentions, very little in Derrida that you cannot find already in Heidegger or Nietzsche. There is a wonderful book, entitled *French Philosophy of the Sixties*, written by two French philosophers, Alain Renault and Luc Ferry (1990) which is a thorough treatment of contemporary French philosophical obscurities. One of its aims is to show how much of the latter originates in Nietzsche. Derrida seeks to deconstruct familiar binary opposites, such as that between *serious* and *playful* (recall Nietzsche! *Joyful Science*). Nietzsche, we can say, had interesting and original things to say about this opposition, and he said them in full Germanic seriousness. Heidegger's disparaging of what he calls 'everydayness' and of modern technology is, I believe, pernicious, but there is at least a discernible value-system underlying it. In the case of Derrida, one knows that even if one makes the effort to penetrate to the putative core of his verbose denunciations of everything phallo logo centric, one will find nothing there. It may be fun for clever people to deconstruct the opposition between honesty and dishonesty, between originality and plagiarism, between sanity and insanity, between good literature and trash, and between truth and castration. But it is less fun to see the effects of such intellectual shananigans in the wider society.

***Does not Heidegger still have a good deal of respect for the problematic 'interpretation' of science, and the role that science plays in philosophizing? I am thinking of, for example, his Marburg lectures, ca. 1928 and other works to do with issues of logic and the human sciences.***

The phenomenological movement *before* Heidegger was still firmly part of scientific or seriously, argued philosophy. It was based on reason and argument, and a philosophical concern with issues of logic. This scientific phase of phenomenology is illustrated in the work of Husserl and Ingarden, Reinach, Pfänder, Daubert and Geiger. But it was brought to an end by Heidegger. Today, of course, there are a number of analytic philosophers who are working on Husserl and other Continental figures, and who are bringing to life once more a scientific attitude to the problems of phenomenology. Analytic philosophy, I believe, has the right method, though it was especially in its earlier phases often associated with reductionism and nominalism. The best contemporary analytic philosophers take the method, which is clarity of thought and respect for logic and science, and apply it to metaphysical and epistemological issues independently of these earlier reductionistic associations.

***Yet some might also argue that analytic philosophy treats science as a theoretical game or puzzle – far removed from human or existential realities. Roman Ingarden was perhaps the first to argue that the verification principle of the logical positivists was itself unverifiable, and therefore meaningless by its own conditions. How much can we expect from science and logic to guide our moral and aesthetic sensibilities?***

My approach to these matters, which is in the spirit of the early realist phenomenologists, is as follows. Every subject matter, be it that of numbers, or values, or mental experiences, admits of a rigorous descriptive treatment on its own terms (admits of an ontology, if you grant me this term). An ontology of human actions or of works of art is not designed to guide our moral or aesthetic sensibilities. Human actions and moral sensibilities are of course connected, as also are works of art and aesthetic sensibilities. And the ways they are connected are themselves susceptible to ontological investigation. But the results of such investigations are not designed to guide our sensibilities.

***Perhaps now is a good time to examine just how the 'Cambridge Affair' figures in the philosophical world you have been speaking of?***

I was very much oriented around European concerns when I wrote the letter. I was associated with Buffalo at that time, but not on a full-time basis. After the letter was published I began to think about moving full-time to the United States. But if you will notice, the address on the letter is Liechtenstein, which was at that time my home.

When the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, everything changed. Eastern European philosophers were able to travel much more easily, and they were able to read whatever they wanted. All sorts of new publishing ventures were set up with lots of hastily assembled plans to translate hitherto unavailable works of Western philosophy into Russian, Polish, or Czech. It was, as you can imagine, a very exciting time. But there was unfortunately one phenomenon which made itself strongly felt in all of these countries, including Russia, in the period in question. This was the assumption that the Communist world view, with all of its evils – recall the Heideggerian theory of the equivalence of Communist, National Socialist and American technocratic civilizations – represents in some sense the culmination of the scientific worldview of Western rationalistic philosophy. Thus it was held that if you reject Communism, then you have to reject truth and reason also, because Communism is all of this and more. The end of Communism signifies also the end of Western reason which must be replaced by one or another wholly different form of thought – in fact with one or another form of *nihilism*. As a result, one of the first phenomena to spread like wildfire through Eastern European intellectual circles when the Berlin Wall came down was Derrida. Derrida's work was translated into all of the Eastern European languages almost overnight. He was awarded prizes, invited to lecture – he was a star – people adopted and aped his views unquestioningly. The Prague philosopher, Bélohradsk defended a nihilist view very similar to that of Derrida on the grounds I have just described, a view very effectively summarized in Jan Paulik's essay in the volume *Philosophy and Political Change in Eastern Europe*.

***Namely, the view that the fall of Communism also represents the fall of Western philosophy, truth and reason?***

Yes. And during this time I would remonstrate with my friends in Eastern Europe insisting that they, or their compatriots,

were making a mistake, and that to reject Communism does not mean to reject the entire edifice of Western reason. They themselves had impressive native philosophical cultures of their own, independent of the tradition of Hegel, Marx, Lenin and Lukács. Carnap spent much of his early career in Prague; Twardowski, Leniewski, Tarski constituted an impressive tradition in Lemberg and Warsaw; Christian von Ehrenfels, the inventor of Gestalt Psychology, was a leading philosopher in Prague for many decades, and so on. So I tried to convince them that they should look to their own traditions, if only on grounds of sheer curiosity. I would then add, in support of all of this, that some of the best philosophy that is being done in the world at that time was being done in England – and that in England and in English-Language philosophy, Derrida was not taken *seriously* at all. England, I thought, still enjoyed a healthy philosophical environment, one that had not been swayed at all by the verbosity of Derrideanism. Thus I was quite taken aback when I saw a small announceent in *The Times* that Cambridge University had offered Derrida an honorary degree. I became incensed by this. I had friends in Cambridge who held views similar to mine, and I was working to some degree in tandem with some of the people in Cambridge on the *non placet* side, though I was clearly concerned not to do anything that might have undermined their own efforts. So I drafted the letter and set about assembling the signatures – quite a difficult business given that the vote was to take place within a matter of days. But again, I was at that time passionately concerned for the state of philosophy in Eastern Europe, and I think that I had good reason for this concern. In a piece entitled, 'The New European Philosophy,' which appears as a short epilogue to the volume, *Philosophy and Political Change in Eastern Europe,* I discuss the role of philosophy in the reform movements of the late eighties in different Eastern European countries. My piece addresses the question: 'what should Eastern European philosophers do, now that they are at last free to choose a tradition from a much wider range of options? Should they remain loyal to native traditions? Should they join one or other of the larger traditions such as, for example, that of France, or Germany, or America?' My answer, very roughly, is that Eastern and Central Europe has a set of rich philosophi-

cal traditions of its own, a tradition that, with the inevitable waning of the influence of Francophone philosophy of the sort peddled by M. Derrida, is predestined to join ancient philosophy and the philosophy of British empiricism as an important precursor of contemporary analytic philosophy.

*13 of the 18 signatures which you gathered came from European scholars. How many people, roughly, did you ask to sign the letter, and were American signatures harder to come by?*

I should say that I tried to make contact with some 30 people. Searle was an obvious candidate given his published criticism of Derrida's incoherence, but I couldn't get a response from him in time. Roderick Chisholm was another person that I especially wanted to have on the list but he refused. His argument was that America should not serve as the world's police force, and that was, in fact, the main reason why people declined to sign the letter: they did not want to interfere. I have a number of friends in Paris who I know denounce Derrida as much as I do, and I was hoping to get more French signatures. But we have to keep in mind that some of them are neighbors of Derrida; they see him regularly in the building where they work. One leading French thinker, René Thom, signed. Incidently, John Caputo's recent attacks on the letter in his book *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, are based on the suggestion that the signatories of the letter – which included not only Armstrong but also Quine – were attempting to simulate a fake eminence.

*What about Jacques Bouveresse? He is a significant French philosopher working on the likes of Wittgenstein and post-analytic thinking. Was he asked to sign the letter?*

There is no love lost between Bouveresse and Derrida. (The former, incidently, is currently giving lectures on the topic of Austrian philosophy in the Collège de France.) Suffice it to say that there were short-term reasons why prominent French analytic philosophers were not then in a position to sign the letter, for reasons having to do with the work of a committee on the teaching of philosophy in schools on which both Derrida and Bouveresse held prominent positions.

*Derrida also suggested that your letter was motivated, in part, by an earlier attempt made by Ruth Barcan Marcus, who twenty years before had written a letter to the French government protesting his appointment to the* International College of Philosophy. *To what extent, if any, are these two affairs related?*

There have been a number of situations where Derrida has been under attack by Anglo-American philosophers. The affair involving Barcan Marcus is only one such case. She was, I believe, asked by the French authorities to write a report on plans laid out by the International College of Philosophy in Paris. She said the plans were a bad idea and gave reasons for her view. These reasons were taken by Derrida to be a personal attack on himself. This is a characteristic all too commonly encountered among French thinkers of a certain sort. If you criticize their arguments, or their projects, or their strategies, or their theses, they take this to be an attack on their person. The same phenomenon is illustrated in the recent reactions of Julia Kristeva to criticisms of the misuse of science in her work by Bricmont and Sokal.[9] This feature is not so often encountered in English or American philosophy. But certainly Barcan Marcus did not help me in any way. I didn't have any contact with her until after I had completed writing the letter, though she is included as one of the signatories of the letter and I admire her earlier intervention.

***Perhaps the personal attacks you speak of are felt more readily in philosophies which are existentially motivated as opposed to those which are scientifically and mathematically oriented? I do not suggest that these orientations are mutually exclusive, but that they do help to dig the trench between, for example, Anglo-American and Continental philosophy.***

This may well be true, and I think it is clear where my sympathies lie. I do however see some validity in the thesis that analytic philosophers have paid too little attention to certain sorts of problems more prominently dealt with by their existentialist counterparts. Now with respect to Derrida, I don't think that you can even begin to formulate a defence of Derrida by saying that he is trying to save metaphysics from the rigorous nature of analytic philosophy. That just does not fit, and it does not fit for this

reason most of all: just as analytic philosophy has witnessed a renaissance in recent years of work in political philosophy, society, ethics, theories of justice, and these areas of human inquiry, so in recent years has analytic philosophy experienced a revival of metaphysical theorizing. Analytic metaphysics is probably the most vibrant branch of analytic philosophy that there is today.

***In any case, it seems odd that a symbol of the cold war – the Berlin Wall – could be identified so haphazardly with Western rationality. How do you account for the exaggerated association of Communism with Western rationality?***

Remember, the view which Bélohradsk in Prague was defending, a view very much in the air at the time the Wall collapsed, to the effect that Communism is part of, is indeed the culmination of, the Western scientific world view. Philosophy as a whole is hereby filtered through the Marxist canon: the history of Western reason, and the Western scientific enlightenment has as its central axis a line, beginning with Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, of which Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Lukács, etc. represent the continuation, with the French (but never the Scottish) Enlightenment (*les Lumières*) ocassionally being thrown in for good measure. From this perspective it is, of course, very easy to confuse Western reason, on the one hand, with the Communist philosophical tradition on the other. If, now, Communism is repudiated in the streets, then it is easy to move on to the thesis that Western reason is also repudiated – that you should *give up Western reason*. Now, the young philosophers of Eastern Europe are not going to become adherents of the Peruvian Shining Path, so Derrida, and other forms of irrationalism begin to seem very appealing. Consequently, the letter which I submitted to *The Times* pulled a number of people out of the woodwork and caused them to write down their own views about the subject; some of them made important points that I would have liked to have made. For instance, that if you eliminate truth and reason – if you eliminate argument – then naked power is going to be the only thing left over as the means by which decisions can be made in society.

*The vote was held on May 16th, and your letter appeared in* The Times *on Saturday, 9 May, 1992. Were time and space constraints imposed upon you, and what constraints did you perhaps feel in general?*

The newspaper was very careful not to print anything that could become the basis of a law suit, so I was on the phone for long periods with *The Times'* lawyer going through the final draft, word for word. The original version was much stronger, but I think the end result is still quite effective. If the letter seems a bit over-careful, that is the reason. The intent of the letter was to criticise the content and method of Derrida's work and the fact that we used the press to do this, rather than a scientific journal, does not seem to me to be very relevant given that the reason we were doing this had to do with a certain sort of public event where the press was properly involved. The press was, in any case, recording the event. Of all the writings about this 'affair' it seems that this letter brought forth the most responses. But of course the affair itself was the major stimulus to all the media interest, and the letter was responsible for only one small tributary in a much greater river of print. The letter was reprinted in many newspapers with translations into several European languages. The text spread as far as Sydney, Australia, where David Armstrong, one of my signatories, as well as being an analytic philosopher of world renown, is something of a local hero.

*The letter was also reprinted in a slim, and animated book, called,* Derrida For Beginners.[10] *Derrida, of course, finds the letter uncareful. He has alluded to the idea that you and others were meddling in the internal affairs of Cambridge University. What affiliations have you had, or do you have, with Cambridge, and how do you respond to this accusation?*

This suggestion was made also by some of the people I approached who did not want to sign the letter. The danger was that the letter might make people vote *for* Derrida, just because they were irritated by it. I did some careful thinking about this problem before making a final decision to proceed. To see why I did agree to go ahead, we need to go back to the first part of your question. I studied in Oxford, but I have a number of friends in Cambridge. I am also (pompous and old-fashioned though this might sound)

someone who believes that there are times when you need to go into battle for what is right. Why is Derrida's influence important? This influence has confined itself, after all, almost exclusively to departments of English Literature, of Comparative Literature, of Film Studies, and the like. It is not something that is taken seriously in the wider world, though it is worth bearing in mind that students in those departments, the followers of deconstructionist 'theory', become the English teachers of the future. We can presume that they will have little interest in encouraging schoolchildren under their care to acquire a love of literature or a respect for the rules of grammar. People won't die, of course; but there is something like a spiritual death, as when a psychopath throws acid at a Rembrandt painting. It not for nothing that Derrida has been accused of terrorist obscurantism.

*What would be your views, then, on the commensurability (or not) between literature and philosophy?*

If you read Roman Ingarden's *The Literary Work of Art*, you have a fair summary of my view on this matter. I think he is exactly right, and this work was one of the most important influences in my own philosophical development. The literary work, Ingarden shows, is an object of rigorous philosophical investigation in its own right, as are literary genres, the relations between work, author, readers, borderline cases of the literary work, the linguistic meanings conveyed by literary works, the aesthetic qualities of literary works, and the metaphysical qualities characteristic, for example, of tragic or comic works.

*In a similar vein, what differences do you see between what is now so often called 'theory' and what is called 'philosophy'?*

Well, if you go to very many universities in North America today, including my own university, you'll find many departments devoted to 'Comparative Literature.' You will also find 'Critical Theory Institutes' and 'Humanities Centers' which contain shadows of other more traditional departments within the university. They treat works of philosophy – or it might also be works of jurisprudence, history, politics, or theological and religious works, or nowadays even medical works – not as works of philosophy,

law, theology, religion, or medicine, but as *texts*... as *works of literature.* And this has become quite an 'industry.' There are probably more philosophical texts read in Comparative Literature departments in the United States than in most philosophy departments. But as far as philosophy is concerned, these shadow practitioners often have little notion of what philosophy is, or of what a philosophical argument or thesis is, and they have no training in the history of philosophy. Rather they have their own methods, many of which stem from a cancerous form of Derridian thought which they apply to 'texts.' It's like somebody taking an interest in sailing boats without ever knowing that there is such a thing as water. They have sailing boats, and they polish them, and they raise and lower the mast, and so on. But there is no understanding of what the sailing boats are for and as a consequence of this they never venture near water.

***Water, then, is the extra-linguistic referent which indicates a world beyond the text?***

Yes, although even to put it that way is still to imply that there are two worlds: the world of the text over here and the world of reality over there. If that is what is meant then that is also a flawed view of the matter.

***Is this dualistic view not also prevalent in much of analytic philosophy, and does it not stem, in part, from the linguistic turn?***

Yes, the same flawed view is present there also. The linguistic turn was a bad mistake and even the more recent cognitive turn was a bad mistake. As Husserl himself said, we need to go back *to the things themselves*, including we ourselves as part of the world of the things and thingly structures. In other words, what we need is an ecological turn which is neither linguistic nor cognitive. We need to see human beings as embrangled with other physical and biological objects in a single world.

***Derrida called your involvement an 'infringement of Academic Freedom,' never before witnessed. In another passage he referred to it as a 'loss of self-control.' Although Derrida is often prone to such exaggerations, is there* any *truth to the idea that aspects of academic freedom are being compromised by your letter?***

With respect to the issue of academic freedom, I believe that we need to think more carefully about the responsibilities which go hand in hand with the rights that academic freedom brings. These responsibilities are listed by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) as including: the careful use of the scientific method and reasoned argument in the search for truth.[11] I believe that there is a shirking of these responsibilities in the writings of those such as Derrida, who deny the basis of truth, reason and the scientific method, upon which Western institutions of higher learning are founded. Derrida and his followers claim a right to academic freedom, but they deny the very possibility of academic responsibility.

***Did you do anything else, beyond the letter itself, to dissuade Cambridge voters from giving Derrida his degree? For example, radio or lectures?***

I was approached by the BBC for a short interview, but that was a day or so after the vote. The only thing I did during the campaign was write the letter and collect the signatories. I didn't make any phone calls to try and persuade people to change their vote. Some of my English friends did this – people who had close contacts with Cambridge – but at that time I was far away in the middle of Europe, though I did follow the media response as best I could. I toyed with the idea of writing a second letter, along the lines of: 'Cambridge University is to be congratulated for a wise decision. It has *determined* that M. Derrida is worth 2/3rds of an honorary degree.' After the affair was over I gave several different lectures which comprised a series of arguments against Derrida. One of these was titled 'Jacques Derrida: Writing to Death.' I also gave a series of public lectures in Buffalo entitled 'Continental Drift: The Decline of European Philosophy from Brentano to Derrida.'

***Because you are the editor of*** The Monist, ***your letter appears to represent the intent of this publication. How would you describe the basic intent of*** The Monist, ***and what are the polemical limits of this journal?***

*The Monist* does not defend any specific line or tradition. It describes itself as an 'International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry,' and the emphasis is on the word 'general.' It differs from most other journals insofar as each issue is devoted to some special topic, and each issue has a special advisory editor who helps me put the issue together. I have a very wide focus. For example, we have published issues on highly technical, mathematical topics, on death, on Analytical Thomism, and most recently, on the topic: 'Continental Philosophy: For & Against.'

To the degree that *The Monist* has become more polemical under my editorship, it has done so through issues which take both sides of an argument. In 1994 I published a polemical issue on 'Feminist Epistemology: For and Against.' One half of the issue consists of papers arguing (roughly) that women's contribution to science has been neglected in part because of 'bad' philosophy of science – because of an inadequate epistemology – and that 'good' epistemology would enable women to reveal their true scientific greatness. The other half consists of papers by those who see science and the philosophy of science in terms which are quite independent of gender, and of gender issues. I believe the issue, for all its polemical character, gives a reasonable presentation of both sides of the problem.

***It might be interesting to note who, or what kinds of people, Barry Smith might consider for an honorary degree in philosophy, and how you feel about the concept of an honorary degree in general?***

I believe the only rule one needs is rather simple. If honorary degrees are to be awarded, then only in those circumstances where the faculty in the relevant discipline are themselves overwhelmingly convinced that the candidate deserves an honour of this sort.

***Your letter was written in 1992, and it is now 1997. What do you perceive to be the state of affairs in Eastern European circles today and have you been able to perceive any immediate effects from your letter and lectures over the past five years?***

Eastern European philosophy is gradually becoming merged into the various strands of European philosophy, including the analytic strand, but also including much else. There are still few Eastern European philosophers who are taking the trouble to study their own native traditions of exact philosophy; but this is not, I think, a consequence of Derrida. It has to do in part with a lack of local resources, which leads the best young philosophers in these countries to seek careers elsewhere. In Eastern Germany it has to do with the way in which West German philosophers have overwhemingly been appointed to newly vacant positions.

*As you saw it at that time, what was to be gained from this endeavor, and, given that the degree was awarded, has anything been lost ?*

What was to be gained? We laid down a marker, a signal, which we know gave hope to some, and made others recognize that not everyone was going to buy into the very questionable procedures behind Derrida's honorary degree. Future administrators will be wary before engaging in similar tactics (in this case, that of packing the honorary degrees with non-philosophers and failing to submit Derrida's nomination to the philosophers at an early stage). Many minds have been corroded by Derridean acid. Many of these minds enjoy tenured positions in English Literature departments in universities throughout the English-speaking world. There will, as a result, be a sort of hangover to be dealt with for many years to come. Already however one is beginning to see signs of the usual phenomenon when a sectarian movement gains power – the movement splits into warring sub-factions. I don't think that English Literature departments are very happy places at the moment. For a time it was still just funny to talk about phallologocentrism in Plato's hymen, but not all of this is funny today and the humanities generally are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit students into their courses. Was anything lost? Not much actually. *The Times*' Letters Page is geared precisely towards issues such as this. It is a noble and venerable institution with which I am proud to have been associated.

In *Deconstruction In A Nutshell,* John Caputo is ready to celebrate the idea that many of those found on Smith's list of signatories may not have even read Derrida adequately.[12] This might be a reasonable concern, although it may be difficult for Caputo to know just how much of Derrida these philosophers have actually read. Clearly, as Barry Smith points out, some have read more of Derrida (J. Claude Evans, John Searle, and Kevin Mulligan) while others admit to having read less. The issue at hand has much to do with the trajectory of phenomenology instigated by Husserl and taken up through Heidegger and his French legacy, as well as the phenomenological realists of which Smith is an integral part. Thinkers such as Calvin Schrag[13] and Bruce Wilshire have also attempted to show that Derrida's reading of Husserl may not add much insight to the widespread conversation spawned by the Husserlian tradition. As Wilshire writes of Derrida's school, 'Much 'deconstructionist' thinking in English and literature departments in the U.S. has proven to be little more than a fad, for caught up in a jargon it has lost touch with the very tradition which lent it sense and direction: the recuperation of vital possibilities of philosophical growth and coherence in the positions of past Continental thought.'[14] The 'sense and direction' which Wilshire makes reference to is really the key element in this debate and is without question one reason why Smith felt compelled to get involved.

Caputo expresses moral indignation at 'the very idea!' that Smith could intervene in affairs which have little to do with him, or Liechtenstein (where Smith was a Professor of Philosophy at the International Academy of Philosophy from 1989-93).[15] Caputo writes, 'To begin with, we may ask, who had appointed the signatories protectors of Cambridge University?...Are the dons not adult enough to be able to make up their own minds?'[16] Much of this seems rhetorical, however, for it is far from clear that intellectual confusion exhibits a lack of adulthood. During the events of the Cambridge affair in 1992, Michael W. Miller reported, 'A Marxist social historian came by for tea and told us that his phone had been ringing all week with bewildered chemists and physicists seeking advice on how to vote that Saturday.'[17] So I suppose the answer is that, indeed, many

of the dons were confused, not because they lacked 'adult' intellectual maturity, as Caputo suggests, but because the issue of Derrida and philosophy is less than self-evident to many. Here the dons sought the expertise of others already involved in the debate.

From the perspective of Continental philosophy, missing in the entire debate between post-analytic realism and deconstructionism are the contributions of Hans-Georg Gadamer whose own post-Heideggerian work has been suppressed by Derridean deconstruction. Any attempt at philosophical bridge building is thwarted so long as we let Caputo convince us that deconstruction, in its exploration into the 'meanings and use of words' makes for a better analytic philosophy.[18] The Gadamerian question of language, its universalizing character, its capacity to make meaningful reference to the world is all overshadowed and downplayed by Derridean semiotics. One might imagine that where Continental philosophers hope to engage actively in the practical questions of science and language, Gadamer's work makes better sense than does deconstruction. Seldom does Derrida engage in the intersubjective realms of philosophy which lie between his own deconstruction and any other philosophical tradition. This indifference was evident at the Goethe Institute in Paris in 1981 when those interested in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics attempted to *dialogue* with deconstructionism. Here, some of us may recall Derrida's 'manifestly bored and condescending response to Gadamer's attempt to understand, criticize, and enter into dialogue with deconstruction.'[19] The aim of this conference was to seat deconstruction at the same table with those interested in Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. It seemed reasonable enough, since both schools stem from similar sources, namely Husserl and Heidegger. However, the following comment from Derrida which came at the outset of the preceedings sounded more like 'closing remarks' on any form of dialogue. They did not sound like remarks from a philosopher who is sincerely interested in the views of his colleagues; even those who share a familiar background:

> During the lecture and ensuing discussion yesterday evening, I began to ask myself if anything was taking place here other than improbable debates, counter-questioning, and inquiries into unfindable objects of thought – to recall some of the formulations we heard. I am still asking myself this question.[20]

Derrida's reaction to Barry Smith's letter was even more interesting, but no less rhetorical. It is reminiscent of his 1987 response to the exposure of Paul de Man's anti-semitic war-time journalism published between 1939-43.[21] Derrida tells us that de Man, under considerable politico-philosophical pressures, as well as the influence of his uncle Henri de Man, was a victim of media temptation. 'No doubt [writes Derrida] flattered to see himself entrusted with the literary and artistic column of a major newspaper, even if he owed this fortune (or misfortune) to his uncle Henri de Man, a young man of 22 did not resist temptation.'[22] This *temptation* also resonates in Derrida's fundamental reaction to Smith's letter to *The Times*, except that in this case the alleged '*temptation of the media*' is made to seem even more serious than the ultimate 'undecidability' of the de Man affair. When speaking of Smith and the others, Derrida takes on an accusative tone which at the same time, appears to lay out the rules and regulations for the academic use of the media:

> What certain academics should be warned against is the *temptation of the media*. What I mean by this is not the normal desire to address a wider public, because there can be in that desire an authentically democratic and legitimate political concern. On the contrary, I call *temptation of the media* the compulsion to misuse the priviledge of public declaration in a social space that extends far beyond the circuits of normal discussion. Such misuse constitutes a *breach of confidence*, an abuse of authority – in a word, an *abuse of power*. The temptation of the media actually encourages academics to use the media as an easy and immediate way of obtaining a certain power of seduction, sometimes indeed just power alone. It enourages them to appear in the media simply for the sake of appearing, or to use their professional authority for purposes which have as little to do with the norms of intellectual research as they have with political responsibility. This temptation of the media encourages these intellectuals to renounce the academic discipline normally required 'inside' the university, and to try instead to exert pressure through the press and through public opinion, in order to acquire an influence or a semblance of authority that has no relation to their own work.[23]

Much of this is simply distorted and rhetorical, for it is very difficult for some of us to imagine just what, in fact, the 'circuits of normal discussion' means to a postmodern thinker after all that Derrida has told us about radical de-centering in the past thirty years. It is difficult to understand why Smith's letter to *The Times* represents an emphatic *breach of confidence,* an *abuse of authority,* or an *abuse of power,* or why this bears 'no relation to [the signatories'] work.' Derrida writes emphatically about the 'norms of intellectual research' as if postmodernism has somehow demarcated the playful imagination of textual extravagances from the sort of imagination that diligently seeks the disclosure of new knowledge and further philosophical understandings.

We must also keep in mind that Smith's letter is not a manifesto presented to the English government, nor is it Smith and others wanting to 'appear in the media simply for the sake of appearing.' This seems no more than a convenient accusation with little evidence to substantiate this claim. Quite contrary, the letter represents a philosophical position within the context of related events, printed in a Saturday newspaper. As Barry Smith carefully points out, the circuits of normal discussion were already in place owing to D. H. Mellor and others in Cambridge when he entered into the debate and Smith reminds us, '*The Times*' Letters Page is geared precisely towards issues such as this.'

Here, Derrida loses sight of one important difference between French and English philosophical cultures. Institutions like *The Times'* Letters Page are very much English counterparts to the French idea of the *philosophe engagé.* Ved Mehta once described the Letters page as a street where thinkers are able to stay in touch with the politico-philosophical developments in England. It is a street where the 'circuits of normal discussion' are deprived of their usual stability and one should not expect to find mere salutations here. How a deconstructionist could not appreciate the freedom that this avenue provides is perhaps slightly ironic. Ved Mehta once described the turbulence which *The Times'* Letters page endures:

> I've spent some happy years in Oxford, and to keep in touch with England I read her newspapers. I am most at home with the *Guardian,* but I also like to look at the correspondence

> columns of *The Times*, where, in an exception to *The Times* tradition of anonymity, the writers are identified by name and speak directly to the reader. I relish a contest of words, and *The Times* page of letters becomes for me a street where I can stroll each morning and see the people of England – lords and commoners – shake hands, spit at each other, and set off verbal barrages. I began taking this engaging daily walk during my undergraduate years at Balliol College, Oxford, and I've kept up the habit, whether I have found myself in Paris, Damascus, New Delhi, or New York. One autumn day in 1959, as I was taking my intellectual promenade...[24]

Enter the dispute over Ernest Gellner's, *Words & Things*, a controversial book which Gilbert Ryle refused to review for the English journal, *Mind*, and which attacked the idea of linguistic therapy, or the dissolution of philosophical problems. And like Gellner's critique of the Ordinary Language school in Oxford, deconstructionism now wants to assume the vacant position left by the 'Night Watchman' who will protect us from all abuses of language, including, I suppose, Smith's letter to *The Times*. It is not too difficult to think of deconstructionism while reading the following remark made by Gellner:

> Linguistic Philosophy is conceived not merely as a therapy or euthanasia, but also as prophylaxis, and as a prophylaxis against a necessarily ever-present danger. The disease it wards off is inherent in language: all language users will ever be tempted to misinterpret the various uses of their language in terms of each other... This is the Night Watchman theory of philosophy: it has no positive contribution of its own to make, but must ever be on guard against possible abuses that would interfere with, confuse, genuine knowledge.[25]

Political and philosophical concerns in Eastern Europe, then, are what prompted Smith to write his letter to *The Times*, as well as a concern for the traditional problems of phenomenology. The association of Western reason and Communism, for example, is to most of us, a questionable one, but one that finds support in the postmodern assumption that where oppressive politics are found, so too will Western rationality (logocentrism) be found beneath it all. Seldom does Derrida critically analyze

('deconstruct') his own rhetorical use of words such as *totalitarian*, *mastery*, or *envelopment*. That a totalitarian regime operates with a unifying structure, and feigns *authenticity,* no one doubts, but that philosophy's comprehensive scope and critical regiment are thus equatable to oppressive rationalizations is quite another assertion. It could be reasonably argued that the history of philosophy, with all of its structure, has been more liberating than oppressive, so long as we do not ignore the interplay between structure and creativity. This distinction seems never to be borne out by deconstructors, now so concerned to become the 'Night Watch' of our philosophical language. Kantian studies, from pragmatic, Continental, and analytic quarters would suggest that we can have (select and argue) our philosophical differences without bowing to the extreme therapy, or totalizing agenda, of deconstructionism. There must still be more left to philosophy than 'improbable debates, counter-questioning, and inquiries into unfindable objects of thought.' Consequently, while Derrida is only mildly interested in the greater scope of philosophy, the 2/3rds vote which Smith speaks of becomes a charitable gesture indeed. Apart from Derrida's uncharitable reading of philosophy, he has benefited from one of philosophy's finest qualities: an empathetic Principle of Charity extended to him at Cambridge, England, in 1992.

## Appendix A

From *The Times* (London) Letters page, May 9, 1992.

**Derrida degree a question of honor**

From Professor Barry Smith and Others

Sir, The University of Cambridge is to ballot on May 16 on whether M. Jacques Derrida should be allowed to go forward to receive an honorary degree. As philosophers and others who have taken a scholarly and professional interest in M. Derrida's remarkable career over the years, we believe that the following might throw some needed light on the public debate that has arisen over the issue.

M. Derrida describes himself as a philosopher, and his

writings do indeed bear some of the marks of the writings in that discipline. Their influence, however, has been to a striking degree, almost entirely in the fields outside philosophy – in the departments of film studies, for example, or French and English literature.

In the eyes of philosophers, and certainly among those working in leading departments of philosophy throughout the world, M. Derrida's work does not meet accepted standards of clarity and rigour.

We submit that, if the works of a physicist (say) were similariliy taken to be of merit primarily by those working in other disciplines, that would in itself be sufficient grounds for casting doubt upon the idea that the physicist in question was a suitable candidate for an honorary degree.

M. Derrida's career had its roots in the heady days of the 1960's and his writings continue to reveal their origins in that period. Many of them seem to consist in no small part of elaborate jokes and the puns 'logical phallusies' and the like, and M. Derrida seems to have come closer to making a career out of what we regard as translating into the academic sphere tricks and gimmicks similar to those of the Dadaists or of the concrete poets.

Certainly he has shown considerable originality in this respect. But again, we submit, such originality does not lend credence to the idea that he is a suitable candidate for an honorary degree. Many French philosophers see in M. Derrida only cause for silent embarassment, his antics having contributed significantly to the widespread impression that contemporary French philosophy is little more than an object of ridicule.

M. Derrida's voluminous writings in our view stretch the normal forms of academic scholarship beyond recognition. Above all – as every reader can eaily establish for himself (and for this purpose any page will do) – his works employ a written style that defies comprehension. Many have been willing to give M. Derrida the benefit of the doubt, insisting that language of such depth and difficulty of interpretation must hide deep and subtle thoughts indeed.

When the effort is made to penetrate it, however, it becomes clear, to us at least, that, where coherent assertions are being made at all, these are either false or trivial.

Academic status based on what seems to us to be little more

than semi-intelligible attacks upon the values of reason, truth, and scholarship is not, we submit, sufficient grounds for the awarding of an honorary degree in a distinguished university.

Yours sincerely,
Barry Smith
(Editor, *The Monist*).

SIGNATORIES: Hans Albert (University of Mannheim), David Armstrong (Sydney), Ruth Barcan Marcus (Yale), Keith Campbell (Sydney), Richard Glauser (Neuchatel), Rudolph Haller (Graz), Massimo Mugnai (Florence), Kevin Mulligan (Geneva), Lorenzo Peña (Madrid), Willard Van Orman Quine (Harvard), Wolfgang Röd (Innsbruck), Edmund Ruggaldier (Innsbruck), Karl Schuhmann (Utrecht), Daniel Schulthess (Neuchatel), Peter Simons (Salzburg), René Thom (Burs-sur-Yvette), Dallas Willard (Los Angeles), Jan Wolenski (Crackow).

*Internationale Akademie für Philosophie, Obergrass 75, 9494, Schaan, Liechtenstein,*
*May 6, 1992*

## NOTES

1 Priit J. Vesiland, 'Two Berlins: A Generation Apart,' in *National Geographic*, vol. 161, no. 1, January 1982, p.4.

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4 See Appendix A.

5 B. Smith, *Austrian Philosophy: The Legacy of Franz Brentano*. Chicago: Open Court, 1994.

6 J. Claude Evans, *Strategies of Deconstruction: Derrida And The Myth Of The Voice*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991.

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*Royal Institute of Philosophy*. 49: 77-79, 1969.

8 Roman Ingarden studied under Edmund Husserl in Freiburg. His work in aesthetics sees art as a unified experience of various phenomenal strata. His principal work, *The Literary Work of Art*, has been translated into English by Ruth Ann Crowley and Kenneth R. Olson. Evanston: Northwestern, 1973.

9 Bricmont and Sokal, *Impostures Intellectuels*. Paris: 1997

10 *Derrida For Beginners*. Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblin. Cambridge: Icon Books, 1996, pp.8,9.

11 A revised 'Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure,' can be found in *Academe: Bulletin Of The American Association Of University Professors*, May-June 1990, p. 37.

12 J. Caputo, *Deconstruction In A Nutshell,* New York: Fordham, 1997, p.40.

13 See, C. Schrag, *Philosophical Papers*. Albany: SUNY, 1994, p. 245.

14 B.Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation*. Albany: SUNY, 1990, p. 157.

15 It is strange that Caputo should object to Smith signing the letter from Liechtenstein when it is clear enough (a) *The Times* itself imposes this form on any letter with several signatories, and (b) that this is where Smith was working at the time of the Cambridge affair.

16 J. Caputo, *Deconstruction In A Nutshell*, p. 38.

17 In, *The Wall Street Journal*, June 11, 1992.

18 J. Caputo, *Deconstruction In A Nutshell,* p. 41.

19 J.Claude Evans, *Strategies of Deconstuction: Derrida And The Myth Of The Voice*. Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1991, p. xviii.

20 J. Derrida, 'Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer,' in *Dialogue & Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer, eds. Albany: SUNY, 1989, p. 52.

21 In two volumes, the first dealing with a collection of Paul de Man's wartime journalism (1939-43), and the second with scholarly responses to this journalism. See, *Wartime*

*Journalism, 1939-43 by Paul de Man*, Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan eds., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988, and *Responses: On Paul de Man's Wartime Journalism*, W. Hamacher, N. Hertz, and T. Keenan, eds. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.

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23 Reprinted in E. Weber's, *Points...Interviews, 1974-1994*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1995, p. 401-02.

24 V. Mehta, *The Fly and the Fly-Bottle: Encounter With British Intellectuals*. Baltimore: Penguin, 1961, p. 11.

25 Ernest Gellner, *Words & Things: A Critical Account Of Linguistic Philosophy And A Study In Ideology*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1963, p. 20. See also, E. Gellner's other works directed against the idea of cognitive therapy, in, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*, New York: Routledge, 1992, and *The Psychoanalytic Movement: The Cunning of Unreason*. London: Fontana, 1993.