Preface

I will not work very hard to compose the thing, it is a rough draft of confused tracks which I will leave in their hands. Certain ones will put it into their mouths, to identify the taste, sometimes to spit it out with a grimace, or to gnaw at it, or to swallow it in order to conceive, even, I mean, a child.” So says Jacques Derrida in “Envois,” the dramatic narrative prefacing *La carte postale* (191). His description applies, retroactively, to the generation of my book, in that I am one of those who swallowed. As a graduate student, writing a dissertation on Rousseau and several modernist authors, I unsuspectingly purchased a copy of *De la grammatologie*, thinking I would find out something about Rousseau. The book was just lying there in a pile of other books, waiting, looking as harmless, as attractive, as a puppy in a pet store window (as Georges Poulet once put it). The effect of reading it, however, was more like Baudelaire’s *flacon*, except that I was overwhelmed by a sense of the future rather than of the past. Soon I was more interested in Derrida than in Rousseau.

My interest in grammatology as a pedagogy emerged out of my experience teaching courses in literary criticism, or rather, out of the relation of this course to my other courses, a juxtaposition that made me aware of the disparity between the contemporary understanding of reading, writing, and epistemology and the institutional framework in which this understanding is communicated (pedagogy, curriculum, evaluation). I resolved to try to reduce this gap between theory and practice, but not before I had figured out what might take the place of conventional pedagogy. This
book is an installment on that initial proposal (a partial and inadequate report), undertaken to inform myself first of all of what steps to take, of how to achieve a postmodernized pedagogy. As such, it might be read as an outline for a possible course of action, although one might also prefer to ignore the general argument, the attempt at application, and read it as a comparative study of Derrida, Lacan, Beuys, and Eisenstein.

Let me try to state very briefly what I myself learned from the project. The bias of the research lies in my selection of Derrida as the tutor figure. I believe that his texts constitute a vanguard of academic writing in the humanities, bringing together the most vital aspects of philosophy, literary criticism, and experimental (creative) writing. I also decided not to review the deconstructionist movement, not only because several excellent books already do this, but also because I wanted to discover an alternative to deconstruction—another, perhaps more comprehensive, program that might be available in Derrida's texts. The pleasure in this project was precisely not knowing what a close study of the entire oeuvre would reveal, especially one that focused on the more recent texts not yet assimilated by deconstructionism.

My intention, in replacing "deconstruction" with "grammatology" as the principal name for Derrida's program, is not to impose a binary opposition on Derrida's thinking, but to reread his oeuvre from a perspective that turns attention away from an exclusive concern with deconstruction ("I use this word [deconstruction]," Derrida says in "The Time of a Thesis" [Alan Montefiore, ed., Philosophy in France Today [Cambridge, 1983]], "for the sake of rapid convenience, though it is a word I have never liked and one whose fortune has disagreeably surprised me"—44). Grammatology (I have no illusions about the status of this term, either) is a more inclusive notion, embracing both deconstruction and "writing" (understood not only in the special sense of textualist écriteure, but also in the sense of a compositional practice). Deconstruction and Writing are complementary operations, the relationship of which is suggested in this statement at the beginning of "Plato's Pharmacy": "Since we have already said everything, the reader must bear with us if we continue on awhile. If we extend ourselves by force of play. If we then write a bit." Writing is privileged in my study, then, in order to explore the relatively neglected "affirmative" (Derrida's term) dimension of grammatology, the practical extension of deconstruction into decomposition.

The difference between Writing and deconstruction may be seen most clearly in the different ways Derrida treats philosophical works (which he deconstructs) and literary or artistic texts (which he mimes). The methodologies in the two instances bear little resemblance to each other: the philosophical work is treated as an object of study, which is analytically articulated by locating and describing the gap or discontinuity separating
what the work "says" (its conclusions and propositions) from what it "shows" or "dis-plays" (its examples, data, the materials with which it, in turn, is working). Literary or plastic texts (a "new new novel" by Sollers, or drawings by Adami, for example) are not analyzed but are adopted as models or tutors to be imitated, as generative forms for the production of another text. Jonathan Culler, in On Deconstruction (Ithaca, 1982), makes a similar point: "Derrida's own discussions of literary works draw attention to important problems, but they are not deconstructions as we have been using the term, and a deconstructive literary criticism will be primarily influenced by his readings of philosophical works" (212). Because Derrida's readings of art texts are not deconstructions, Culler ignores them in his book, whereas my study foregrounds them. Derrida's experimental texts are just now becoming available in English translation. The intervention of texts such as Glas, La carte postale, and La vérité en peinture in the current debate surrounding deconstruction should substantially reorient the entire problematic. Applied Grammatology is an introduction to this second Derridean influence.

I should add that while Derrida has always seen the difference between literary and philosophical styles as representing alternative theories of language—ever since his first book, in which he opposed Husserl to Joyce and declared his preference for the latter—his decision to Write in a fully experimental style himself came after 1968. In "The Time of a Thesis," delivered on the occasion of his much-delayed thesis defense in June 1980, Derrida, recounting his development for the academic jury, divided his career into three periods, based on his shifting attitude toward the thesis. The important point for me is that he submitted to the jury only his "philosophical" works, none of his experimental texts, thus acknowledging this division in his oeuvre.

Part I is devoted to reporting the results of a close reading of Derrida's corpus. I learned that Writing, as Derrida practices it, is something other than deconstruction, the latter being a mode of analysis, while the former is a mode of composition. The interest of what I report lies not so much in the inventory of elements, which are apparent to anyone who reads something by Derrida, and which Derrida himself identifies as a "pictoideo-phonographic" (or sometimes -phonogrammic) style. He utilizes, that is, three levels of communication—images, puns, and discourse. But what I have come to understand (and attempt to describe in what follows) is the extent to which Derrida systematically explores the nondiscursive levels—images and puns, or models and homophones—as an alternative mode of composition and thought applicable to academic work, or rather, play. His detractors accuse him of superficial wordplay, and sometimes even the deconstructors consider the images and puns as nonfunctional subversion of academic conventions. What I had not expected, what in fact astonished
me, is the fully developed homonymic program at work in Derrida's style, a program as different from traditional academic discourse and assumptions as it is productive in its own terms of knowledge and insight. I say I was astonished because it is one thing to engage in wordplay, but another thing to sustain it and extend it into an epistemology, into a procedure that is not just a tour de force but that is functional, replicable. This Writing, however, is not a method of analysis or criticism but of invention (and here Writing departs from deconstruction). Writing is the *inventio* of a new rhetoric, with "invention"—or even "creativity"—being the "mana" word of the new pedagogy associated with Writing.

The other major innovation of Writing is its reliance on images. Again, Derrida's contribution is not simply the use of images, but his sustained expansion of images into models. Thus he gives considerable attention in his texts (much to the frustration of normal readers trained to look for arguments, concepts, evidence, and theses—all of which are included, but seemingly obscured by ornament) to the description of quotidian objects—an umbrella, a matchbox, an unlaced shoe, a post card—whose functioning he interrogates as modeling the most complex or abstract levels of thought. In the process he reveals a simplicity, an economy, underlying the so-called esotericism of intellectual discourse which, if properly tapped, could eliminate the gap separating the general public from specialists in cultural studies.

The two elements—homophones and models—supplement one another in that the vocabulary associated with the model is scrutinized, as well as its operation as an object, for double inscriptions joining the sensible with the intelligible realm. The world of Western thought is investigated at the levels of both words and things, giving fresh insight into the ancient problem of motivation in language. The resultant achievement could be described as non-Euclidean—the humanities equivalent of non-Euclidean geometry—in that it builds, in defiance of the axioms of dialectics, a coherent, productive procedure out of the elements of writing considered traditionally to be mere ornament, not suitable for fostering true knowledge. The ultimate deconstruction of the logocentric suppression of writing is not to analyze the inconsistency of the offending theories, but to construct a fully operational mode of thought on the basis of the excluded elements (in the way that the non-Euclideans built consistent geometries that defied and contradicted the accepted axioms).

The new compositional attitude, however, exceeds what we have come to identify as deconstruction and reflects a larger program that might be derived from Derrida's texts, a program I label "grammatology." Grammatology as composition (Writing) is not confined to books and articles, but is addressed more comprehensively to the needs of multichanneled performance—in the classroom and in video and film as well. In this respect,
Writing as Derrida practices it could be called Scripting, since a recent text such as *La carte postale*, although published as a book, has the status of a script. It is to the program of grammatology what a screenplay is to a film—a set of descriptions and directions which for its full effect must be "enacted." It is research undertaken in a dramatic rather than in a conceptual form. The title itself, manifesting Derrida's paragrammatic style, indicates that the essay format of the printed book is just a transitional or STOP-GAP measure. *Carte*, as Derrida notes, is an anagram of *écart*, or "gap." And *postale*, in a series with *post*, as a member of the semantic family related through the S-T phonex (according to Mallarmé's *English Words*), is a relative of "style," but more importantly here, of "stop." *La carte postale* (*The Post Card*) is a "stop-gap" production, a holding action, an antibook awaiting relief by a Writing beyond the book. Or, to put it another way, it is a work of theoretical grammatology which contains the script for an *applied* grammatology. The applied phase of grammatology, which I introduce here, is meant to be the pedagogical equivalent of this scripting beyond the book, adequate to an era of interdisciplines, intermedia, electronic apparatus.

Part II summarizes Derrida's explicit statements about pedagogy and also describes the pedagogical implications of his full *oeuvre*. To indicate the feasibility of the Writing strategy, I offer three examples of teachers who have used similar techniques—Jacques Lacan, exemplifying a homophonie lecture style; Joseph Beuys, exemplifying the demonstration of models; and Sergei Eisenstein, exemplifying filmic writing—with the understanding that the application of grammatology to the present classroom will be a translation, an approximation or adaptation of these exemplary procedures. Grammatology, in any case, requires the introduction of the subject into the scene of teaching—the inscription of one's own signature on the curriculum (each one is read by what he/she writes "on"), leading to the decentering of disciplinary identities. The relevant motto here is: "We must begin wherever we are and the thought of the trace which cannot take the scent into account, has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are:* in a text where we already believe ourselves to be" (*Of Grammatology*, 162).

I should emphasize the preliminary nature of my book—which has some of the tone of Saussure's suggestion that there ought to be something like "semiology." I argue that there ought to be something like "applied grammatology." Given that the task of theoretical grammatology (the closure of Western metaphysics) is infinite, there can be no thought of sequence or order in the three phases. For that matter, historical grammatology—the scientific exposition of the history of writing—is not yet completed, and applied grammatology, as I show in the examples of Lacan, Beuys, and
Eisenstein, is already under way (had Saussure looked around he would have noted, possibly, that semiology already existed).

I offer here an outline for an alternative to the current aporia stalling literary criticism. But to choose applied grammatology over deconstruction is to shift paradigms, a move that, as Thomas Kuhn pointed out, does not solve the old problems but exchanges them for an entirely new set of problems. These new problems offer, however, an extremely interesting and challenging future for teaching scholars in the humanities, making this a particularly happy time to be a pedagogue. Nor would it have been possible for me to glimpse this threshold without the work of the Yale School critics and other explorers of and commentators on deconstructionism. My "beyond" (deconstruction) is really an "elsewhere" or "other than," since I cannot pretend to surpass the work of my predecessors.

The debts I have accumulated along the way are extensive, and in spite of Derrida's suggestion that it is sometimes better to default on one's creditors (and auditors), I would like to include a few acknowledgments. I thank the University of Florida for its generous support of my research, including in addition to a sabbatical in 1980–81 (when I started the actual composition of this manuscript) a semester of release time, spring 1982 (the Division of Sponsored Research), and funding for a research trip (spring 1980) enabling me to consult with Jacques Derrida in Paris and Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf, both of whom provided me with valuable advice and documentation. A summer grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (1979) enabled me to initiate my research on Beuys, a considerable detour from the domains of discourse with which I was familiar.

I thank the students and colleagues with whom I have had an opportunity to discuss these ideas, among whom I must single out Alistair Duckworth, Robert B. Ray, Hayden White, and J. Hillis Miller. Thanks also to Ronald Feldman and to John P. Leavey, Jr.

Chapter 5 includes a revised version of a piece that appeared in *Diacritics*; parts of chapters 2 and 4 appear in Mark Krupnick, ed., *Displacement*, Indiana University Press. My thanks for permission to reprint.