How to explain the cachet of deconstruction, the way it has infiltrated public discourse? At the crudest level of its appeal, the word announces the writer's knowingness: *I'm hip to what's hip. I know what's happening in the world of big ideas.* A Los Angeles-based screenwriter named Mark Horowitz, trying to explain the current French enthusiasm for movies starring Mickey Rourke, places the deconstruction craze in the perspective of "a constant war between the U.S. and France." In Horowitz's words, "We sent them Jerry Lewis, so they retaliated by sending us deconstruction and Jacques Derrida. . . . Deconstruction conforms to an American preconception of the cerebral French in the same way that Jerry Lewis in *The Nutty Professor* represents a Frenchman's impression of an American type.

David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul De Man*

I have been thinking about memes: units of "cultural transmission," of "imitation," as their discoverer, sociobiologist Richard Dawkins defines them. I have, in fact, been thinking of them--with them?--for some time now. Dawkins' own meme concerning memes--the "meme meme," as Daniel Dennett calls it--has thus become mine, though I am only just now becoming conscious of its hold on my imagination, though I have reimagined its meaning to suit the host.

With the advent of human culture, Dawkins argues, a new kind of replicator, what he calls "memes"--from the Greek root for imitation ('mimesis" but altered to resonate with "gene" and suggest as well "memory") was introduced into the processes of biological evolution. Since the "primeval soup" in which life began, genes have "propagated themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperm or eggs," but now, in the new "soup" which mankind itself stirs--what Karl Popper has designated as "World 3"--an extra-genetic factor is at work inspiring evolutionary change, which in the hands of culture is incredibly more rapid than the chancy, hit or miss, utterly unscientific methods which that fledgling scientist Nature undertakes. Dawkins gives examples: "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or building arches." And he suggests how we should understand their dissemination:

memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. If a scientist hears, or
reads about, a good idea, he passes it onto his colleagues and students. He mentions it in his articles and lectures. If the idea catches on, it can be said to propagate itself, spreading from brain to brain.

(I think here of Lewis Thomas' characterization--in "On Societies as Organisms"--of scientists scurrying about at a professional conference, exchanging information, as an assemblage of social insects, like ants or termites!)

Dawkins even suggests that we should think of memes as "living creatures, not just metaphorically but technically." When a meme finds a fertile mental "culture" in a particular brain and starts to grow there (as Dawkins' idea of memes has evidently done in mine), it is "as if," Dawkins proposes, the originator of the memes in question has "parasitized" it--"the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell."

Admonishing us not to take such a concept as "just a way of talking," Dawkins insists that proliferation of a given meme (his example is belief in life after death) can be understood as its "actual," physical realization, "millions of times over, as a structure in the nervous systems of individual men the world over." (Jacques Monod calls this the "infectivity" of an idea.)

As a test of the explanatory power of the meme meme, let's take a look at the original French disease, Cartesianism. How are we to understand the particular set of memes known as Cartesianism? In his Autobiography, R. G. Collingwood provides for us a starting point with his description of the underlying principles of the so-called scientific revolution:

Soon after the beginning of that century [the 17th], a number of intelligent people in Western Europe began to see in a settled and steady manner what a few here and there had seen by fits and starts for the last hundred years or more; namely that the problems which ever since the time of early Greek philosophy had gone by the collective name of "physics" were capable of being restated in a shape in which, with the double weapon of experiment and mathematics, one could now solve them. What was called Nature, they saw, had henceforth no secrets from man; only riddles which he had learned the trick of answering. Or, more accurately, Nature was no longer a Sphinx asking man riddles; it was man that did the asking, and Nature, now, that he put to the torture until she gave him the answer to his questions.

Bacon, of course, had counselled us to put nature "on the rack" in order to force her to talk --to reveal her secrets, and Descartes insisted that we could, if only we put our minds to it, become "masters and possessors of nature." These memes triumphed, and was it not because they promoted species pride, encouraging us to stand aloof, above, all things--to think of all living things, of the Earth itself, as beneath us?
As Monod speculates in *Chance and Necessity*, the "performance value of an idea depends upon the change it brings to the behavior of the person or the group that adopts it. The human group upon which a given idea confers greater cohesiveness, greater ambition, and greater self-confidence thereby receives from it an added power to expand which will insure the promotion of the idea itself." Thus, Monod concludes, an idea's "capacity to 'take,' the extent to which it can be 'put over,'" is not primarily a matter of truth and objectivity. Ideas take because of their "infectivity" and this infectivity, Monod suggests, "depends upon-pre-exisiting structures in the mind, among them ideas already implanted by culture, but also undoubtedly upon certain innate structures which we are hard put to identify." One thing is certain, however: "the ideas having the highest invading potential are those that explain man by assigning him his place in an immanent destiny, in whose bosom his anxiety dissolves." Cartesianism was obviously highly infective.

Even in America, the influence of Cartesian memes was discernable, as De Tocqueville observed, noting the powerful, *sub rosa* influence of his countryman on "democracy in America":

I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States. . . . in most of the operations of mind, each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding.

America is therefore one of the countries where the precepts of Descartes are least studied, and are best applied. Nor is this surprising. The Americans do not read the work of Descartes, because their social conditions deter them from speculative studies; but they follow his maxims, because this same social condition naturally disposes their minds to adopt them. In the midst of the continual movement which agitates a democratic community, the tie which unites one generation to another is relaxed or broken; every man there readily loses all traces of the ideas of his forefathers, or takes no care about them. . . . Americans are constantly brought back to their own reason as the obvious and proximate source of truth. It is not only confidence in his fellow man which is destroyed, but the disposition for trusting the authority of any man whatsoever. Every one shuts himself up in his own breast, and affects from that point to judge the world.

Thus, even in this largely anti-intellectual land, Descartes' memes have adapted to the indigenous "soil" and prospered. We are infected.


But Cartesianism is not the only French Disease the West has caught. Another plague,
When I left the University of Florida in 1979, a brand-new PhD about to discover the realities of the job market (I had five one year jobs in the subsequent years!), the English Department was undistinguished. The chair had just been deposed in a vote of no-confidence (he would, of course, later become, in Academe's inversion of the Peter Principle, a Dean at Western Kentucky University), a recent Ph.D. had written a dissertation (on the British playwright Joe Orton) only seventy pages in length which used no sources other than the author's infatuated impressions--an "original contribution to knowledge" which ended with a sentence which began "and now I pull up my pants"--indicating the scene of its writing (a scandal I wrote about in a 1980 article in College English entitled "Dissertations as Fictions"). Only a few faculty had national reputations; few were publishing. The smell of burn-out and cynicism permeated the atmosphere of higher learning in the study of literature. The topics had all been covered. There seemed to be no need (especially since there were no jobs) in doing yet another dissertation on Faulkner, or Yeats, or Piers Plowman. We needed a new thrill. The mines had been stripped of their ores. The fields were no longer fertile.

The following year the Algerian-born French philosopher and critic Jacques Derrida was in residence in the English Department for a semester. The timing was propitious. Deconstruction was in-the-air, and his influence was much felt. Not only the department's young turks but some of its senior faculty as well fell under the way of the arch-boadeconstructor. I began to notice a sizable number of U of F English faculty mining the rich new deconstructive veins and publishing regularly in good journals. I vividly recall that one essay by a then assistant professor began with the words "As Jacques Derrida said to me. . . ." A fellow new PhD, who back in the days when we ate Leonardo's pizza together and drove very, very old Chevys was, like me, your basic "new critic," practicing a distinctly American form of literary interpretation, born and disseminated from right here in Middle Tennessee, became, almost overnight, a deconstructionist/post-structuralist, and with great success. I report with no envy whatsoever that the three books and seventy plus articles on film he has produced in the last fifteen years are totally opportunistic and formulaic reworking of deconstructive themes. Most, by the way, begin with paired epigraphs which distill my subject today to its essence: a quote from Al Jolson is coupled with a passage (about the impossibility of communication) from Jacques Lacan, the French Freud; a one-liner from Michel Foucault about the death of the author is juxtaposed to a pronouncement from Fatty Arbuckle; Busby Berkeley on the nature of audience meets--in epigraph land--Jacques Derrida on logocentrism.

Viewed from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, the epidemic spread in the 1980s of the French disease and of German measles is understandable enough. Unemployable English PhDs suddenly had something to write about. Piers Plowman could now be deconstructed. Dissertations on a Renaissance poet could now concern themselves with "the means through which the poet's voice hypostatizes the infrastructural gap over which subjecthood replicates the precarious scaffolding that preserves it as such " [an actual quotation from an actual dissertation abstract; author intentionally not identified].
Established scholars could discover second careers, reborn as deconstructionists. J. Hillis Miller is perhaps the most famous example. A noted literary scholar at Johns Hopkins, where he taught a master's student named John McDaniel and was responsible for bringing the famous Geneva school critic Georges Poulet to the attention of American audiences, author of *The Disappearance of God* and *Poets of Reality*, in the seventies Miller moved to Yale and became perhaps the key member of the Yale mafia, again serving as the vehicle for the incursion of French methodologies into American thought. Under Poulet's influence, however, Geneva-school-Miller had at least believed in the search for "presence," in the meticulous examination of the whole production of a writer's "cogito," its "interior distance," seeking its "point of departure." He believed a "poetry of reality" was at least possible. Under the influence of Derrida, Deconstructionist-Miller became the champion of the denial of meaning, presence, and authorship. Histories of criticism will speak of an early and late, a pre- and post-deconstructionist Hillis Miller. Deconstructionist-Miller, I note in passing, parlayed his fame into an escape from New Haven into a new California sensibility at Cal-Irvine, transplanting Eurothought into La-La Land, and Derrida, too, has become a virtual American--a constantly visiting professor at U.S. institutions.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that Post-structuralist thought has been without its detractors It has been described by Denis Donoghue as a sad attempt to develop an Academic own avant-garde; by M. H. Abrahms as utterly, pretentiously disingenuous (if the deconstructionist claim that all utterances are, ultimately, meaningless is accepted, Abrahms observed in a debate with Derrida, then the assertion of meaninglessness must itself be meaningless as well); by Edward Said as the "rough beast" of critical theory "slouching toward Bethlehem to be born again"; and by David Lehman, in a book that may well stand as the deathknell of the movement, in its meditation on the surprising homologies between Nazism and deconstruction as they meet in the thought of Paul DeMan, as "critical terrorism."

The rise to prominence of Eurothought among American intellectuals nevertheless remains perplexing. Didn't we have this matter all settled? Hadn't Emerson declared our independence a century and a half ago? Had he not proclaimed that "we will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds"? What would the great transcendentalist make of '80s aspirations after Beamers and deconstructors, Mercs and Lacanians?

**Obviously we have been experiencing** another, perhaps related, infection. Is the epidemic to be feared?

According to post-modernist critical theory the Western mind has been --in Derrida's phrase--"logocentric." Routinely, naively we assume that the sounds uttered by a speaker, the words authored by a writer, make manifest precise meanings present within. We take it for granted that the "signifier" of a speaker's language is "but a temporary representation through which one moves to get at the signified, which is what
In literate societies, we have created the whole institution of authorship—largely forgetting, however, that the author is a recent invention. Only five centuries ago, Michel Foucault asks us to remember in his essay "What is An Author?", texts now thought of as literary were "accepted, put into circulation, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author; their anonymity caused no difficulties since their ancientness, whether real or imagined, was regarded as sufficient guarantee of their status." As a corrective, deconstructionism would eliminate entirely the fiction of a speaking or writing subject. For Derrida, "the author deliquesces into writing-as-such and the reader into reading-as-such, and what writing-as-such effects and reading-as-such engages is not a work of literature but a text, writing, 'écriture'" (Abrams 567). And even though Harold Bloom has taken pains to distinguish his multi-volume analysis of the "anxiety of influence" from the anti-humanism of a Derrida, his thesis that no poet speaks entirely in his or her own voice but rather struggles, always in the end unsuccessfully, to escape the more powerful voice of ancestral poets, obviously contributes to our failing faith in the power of the author and transforms inspiration into a merely inter-textual matter.

But it is not just authorship that is about to be erased. "A whole tradition of discourse about man has taken the self as a conscious subject," writes Jonathan Culler in *Structuralistic Poetics*, a tradition he traces back to the Cartesian emphasis on the thinking self. But this tradition is now at an end, terminated by the rise of structuralist and deconstructionist methodologies:

once the conscious subject is deprived of its role as source of meaning--once meaning is explained in terms of conventional systems which may escape the grasp of the conscious subject--the self can no longer be identified with consciousness. It is "dissolved" as its functions are taken up by a variety of impersonal systems that operate through it. The human sciences, which began by making man an object of knowledge, find, as their work advances, that "man" disappears under structural analysis. "The goal of the human sciences," writes Levi-Strauss, "is not to constitute man but to dissolve him" (*La Pensee sauvage*, p. 326). Michel Foucault argues in *Les Mots et les choses* that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a simple fold in our knowledge, and that he will disappear as soon as that knowledge has found a new form. (28)

Humans, in effect, would then no longer be seen as conscious beings. The floating signifier would be back in the world, the possession of what Foucault vatically calls "The Same," and that it momentarily visits man, would not make it his.15 It is easy to see, is it not, how Abrams can conclude that there is now a "suicidal" streak in critical theory? (567).

"Meaning is fascist," a Cornell doctoral candidate loudly, proudly proclaimed to David Lehman, driven to such absurdity by the PC demands of his deconstructionist ideology.
What would his response be to Owen Barfield's wise reminder in *The Rediscovery of Meaning* that

> Whatever melodious cadences or cunningly emphasized absurdities the message may be wrapped in, I believe there is a limit to the number of times a man can profitably inform his neighbor, or be informed by him, that the inexpressible cannot be expressed. (124)

We may now be approaching this limit. After all, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* has even declared deconstruction to now be passe. But what rough beast will follow in its wake? That we do not as yet know.

**Perhaps, in retrospect, it would be helpful** to think of the memes generating contemporary discourse on both sides of the Atlantic as Northern rather than European. Within the human soul there lies an imaginal geography, as James Hillman shows in *Re-Visioning Psychology*. But its basic directional opposition, as customarily understood, is charted incorrectly--is, in fact, as misleading as the Mercator projection. The human mind does not divide, as the received wisdom teaches, between East and West, or between Europe and America. The real imaginal dichotomy, is rather North/South: a polarity of "light and shadow, conscious and unconscious, a vertical division between what is above and what is below, a reflection in imaginal geography of our cultural history."

Historically, culturally, and economically dominant--a dominance the Mercator illusion was designed to substantiate--Northern consciousness, aspires to total objectivity/rationality. The Southern, long historically "subjected" to Northern hegemony, embraces subjectivity/imagination.

"Venturing South," Hillman explains, "is a journey for explorers. It is the direction down into depth, different from the Eastern trip, and from the Western rush of golden boys and girls to pacific harmonies, and from the Northern ascents to cool objective observation. Going South means leaving our psychological territory at the risk of archetypal disorientation."

While the Northern soul seeks to "align . . . with religion and its morality, using psychology to support collective canons," the Southern instead "attempts to see through official religion and its morality so as to subvert collective canons through psychologizing" (260).

The Northern soul, in other words, is "monotheistic" in Hillman's terms; the Southern "polytheistic." (According to Hillman, the pre-Roman soul in the Western world was "polytheistic," that is, able to embrace multiple perspectives and multiple personality, able to believe in the "little people of the psyche" [Jung and the truth of the imagination. But the monotheistic soul, born out of a fusion of "Roman ego" and Christianity, instead seeks (in the words of a patristic father) to "take prisoner every thought for Christ": seeks, that is, to eliminate the many voices of the psyche and bring them into line behind
a single conception of the self. Freud's advocacy of the formula "Where Id is, there let Ego be," Hillman notes, is a modern version of the same monotheistic tendency. Northern consciousness, it should be clear, is thus essentially monotheistic; the Southern soul polytheistic.)

In *Inter Views*, Hillman announces his own allegiance to Southern consciousness generally and singles out for special praise a particular facet of it which he deems "The Italian Imagination": a "fantasy that the Italian mind, heart, or anima responds to a more aesthetic kind of thinking." Committed to such a "fantasy" himself, Hillman goes on to say,

I don't care so much if I make mistakes, like being sentimental or cloudy or decorative or overcomplicated and baroque. . . . They are anyway better than German, Northern mistakes, or that French foolishness about clarity and their semantic obsessions. I always loved Vico for his hatred of Descartes and the French mind. America has the "French disease"--structuralism, Lacanism, Derrida and when they don't have that they get the German measles: Heidegger, Hesse, to say nothing of German depth psychology. . . .

Now the Eurothought I have spoken of today would appear, at first--even at second, glance--to be "southern" as Hillman describes it. After all, its stated agenda is--is it not?--to "see through official religion and its morality," to overturn "collective canons."

But the memes of structuralism/post-structuralism are, I would suggest, faux-Southern. They inspire and sanction a new monotheism, a new literalism. Their appeal is to tyrants, pedants, the doctrinaire. It is not, a thousand times not, imagination which they foster. They would take captive every thought for the new method, the new tyranny, an autocracy, a despotism of the meaningless. They declare "where literature, art, and culture were, there let ego of the critic be."

The European infection of Western thought might be read as proof of the centrality of tyranny, pedantry, and the doctrinaire in the Academy today. Proof that the psychologically acute characterization of deconstructionists by an anonymous professor (quoted by David Lehman) is substantially correct:

arrogant, smug, snotty, meretricious, . . . horrible writers, . . . appallingly ingrown and cliquish at the same time that they talk about expansiveness and new frontiers of discourse, . . . like all perpetual adolescents contemptuous of the past and convinced that by great good fortune the truth happened to be discovered just as they were hitting puberty, a daisy-chain of brown-nosers declaring their high-flown independence from the normal irksome constraints of community and continuity. . . .