Legacy and Pedagogy, or How to Read Derrida


So long and hard did I search that these words on the work of Jacques Derrida represent less the results of my search than simply a few reflections on the path my search took. For what I discovered in the end was not some new theme, concept, or principle in the work of Derrida but, simply, a way of conducting the search, a means of feeling my way, of taking the lay of the land, of marking out the boundaries of the terrain of thought by following not the differences already present on the terrain or hidden beneath it but the movement of these differences along its surface (76).

The above epigraph, drawn from the opening paragraph of chapter 5, I believe, captures the impetus for and the itinerary of Michael Naas’s exemplary reflections on the texts of Derrida in *Taking on the Tradition: Jacques Derrida and the Legacies of Deconstruction*. This truly original and insightful second book by Naas, following *Turning: From Persuasion to Philosophy*, is exemplary not only because of the caliber of the writing and the subtlety of the interpretations but also because it demonstrates the ways in which the “logic of exemplarity” function in Derrida’s engagements with both the philosophical and literary traditions. In fact, each of the book’s chapters, nearly all of which were written for and presented on particular occasions (from the annual meeting of SPEP and the Collegium Phaenomenologicum to a conference at the Collège international de philosophie in Paris and a foreign study program in Athens), not only examines this logic and its structures but, perhaps more importantly, exemplifies how the logic of exemplarity always operates within particular readings and specific contexts.

Taking seriously Derrida’s writings on “performativity,” from “Signature Event Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, and *Limited Inc* to more recent texts that treat themes such as the promise, perjury, and forgiveness, Naas astutely analyzes the performative nature of Derrida’s writings, that is to say, the way in which the language and rhetoric, the style and tone of these texts reflect and affect the arguments and claims being made. A skillful and precise translator of numerous books and
articles penned by Derrida, including *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (1992), *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (1993), *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1999), *The Work of Mourning* (2001), *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (2005), Naas navigates his way around the texts of Derrida with great care and attention. It is evident that the task of translation has informed the author’s own approach to taking up and taking on the great works of the tradition. Thus, it is no surprise that throughout the book, Naas turns his reader’s attention away from the traditional terrain of philosophy—that of arguments or concepts—and toward what philosophy deems and rejects as its “other,” toward that which it depicts as mere ornament or a dangerous supplement.

This approach, on the author’s part, ought not be read as a naïve reversal of the classical philosophical hierarchy that would give form precedence over content and celebrate style over substance. Rather, Naas’s nuanced readings, which often examine how this very hierarchy came to be established and how its supposed validity comes to be reaffirmed time and again by and as the tradition, precisely take on the priority philosophy has accorded itself. What becomes clear when reading this book and what links each chapter to the others, without ever reducing the singularity of each reading, is the insistence that every negotiation with a tradition requires us to respond not simply to the *what* but to the *how* of every argument. What *Taking on the Tradition* demonstrates is that the force of Derrida’s negotiation with the Western philosophical tradition derives not only from his rethinking of classical concepts and themes but also from his reworking of “traditional ways of making arguments and claims, of claiming authority, producing evidence, and gaining conviction” (xix). Therefore, it is not the terrain of philosophy that Naas is turning the reader away from; rather, it is with and through Derrida that he is exploring another way of mapping and traversing this terrain, that is, another way of reading philosophy or reading philosophically.

Thus, in carefully staging or re-staging scenes of donation and reception in which “the tradition” is bequeathed or inherited, Naas’s nine chapters, as well as the book’s conclusion, simultaneously show and say what the stakes are in Derrida’s interventions into the writings of his predecessors (from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes and Montaigne), as well as those of his contemporaries (including Foucault, Levinas, and Vernant). In *Taking on the Tradition*, it is the author’s contention that we ought to reexamine these “moments of reception” inscribed