Introduction to Derrida (for April 15, 1999)

Stanford University is greatly honored to have its guest one of the most influential philosophers of the present day. Professor Derrida’s books are studied in every university in the world, and have been translated into dozens of the world’s languages.

I and many other philosophers of my generation had our sense of intellectual possibility enlarged by reading his early writings: the writings which made “deconstruction” a familiar term. Since those writings, however, he has gone on to produce extraordinarily rich and varied books, many of which have altered our earlier conception of his motives and intentions, and have expanded our imagination still further.

In each new book Derrida sails stranger and stranger seas of thought, yet he never loses the grace, delicacy, and wit which enchanted us early on. We who read and teach him are never quite sure we still understand him, but we very much want to. For no other philosopher of our time is a better example of the virtues which we like to associate with our discipline. No one else succeeds so well in doing what what Socrates wanted done: breaking the crust of convention, rebutting assumptions never before questioned, raising issues never before discussed..

It is characteristic of philosophers to come in pairs: first there is an original mind who stakes out new territory and thereby changes the paradigm of what counts as philosophical inquiry. Plato, Kant, Bertrand Russell and Martin Heidegger are examples of such path-taking, breath-taking, work. Then, in the next generation, there comes that original philosopher’s best reader: a reader who understands completely what the first philosopher wanted, but doubts that anything like it can be had, at least not without a sharp change in direction.

Aristotle’s was Plato’s best reader, Hegel Kant’s, Wittgenstein Russell’s, and Demida Heidegger’s. The best thing that can happen to a philosopher is to have a radically revisionary reader of this sort. For future generations will then keep the first philosopher’s name alive. They will do so by construing all interesting philosophical debates as taking place between God-intoxicated descendants of Plato and sensible descendants of Aristotle, or as between Kantian structuralists and Hegelian historicists.

Heidegger gave us a breathtakingly original way of thinking of the course of Western philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche. He did it by viewing this sequence as a decline rather than an ascent, as the working out of the consequences of a doomed project. Western metaphysics, he told us, has exhausted its possibilities. We now live in an age in which, as Nietzsche said, “the wasteland grows”. We doomed ourselves to pragmatism,
technological gigantism and triviality when we put our foot on the path which Plato laid out.

Heidegger’s tone, as Derrida has written (I quote) “calls forth either the most serious or the most amused reflections.” “That is”, Derrida charmingly continues, “what I like about Heidegger...It is always horribly dangerous and wildly funny, certainly grave and a bit comical.” That was how Plato read Aristotle, and how Hegel read Kant, and how Kierkegaard read Hegel.