Editorial

Interpreting Interpretations: Thinking (De)constructively about Gestalt

S U S A N L. F I S C H E R, P H . D

Il y a plus affaire à interpreter les interpretations, qu’à interpreter les choses: et plus de livres sur les livres, que sur autre subject:
Nous ne faisons que nous entregloser.

It is more work to interpret the interpretations than to interpret the things, and there are more books upon books than upon any other subject:
we do nothing but write glosses upon one another.

– Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592), “De l’experience”

In “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse1 of the Human Sciences,” originally delivered as a lecture in 1966 at the Johns Hopkins University Interna-

1“Discourse” here refers to the field in and through which texts are produced. If “intertextuality” offers a clarification of what kinds of relationships are involved between texts, discourse is a concept wider than “text” but narrower than the language system, which pre-exists actual examples of language practice and the individual utterance. This fundamental distinction between langue (language-as-system) and parole (speech) was formulated by the father of modern linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), whose Course in General Linguistics was published posthumously in 1916.

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tional Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man,” Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) declares that an important “event” – a rupture and a redoubling – has occurred in the concept of structure (1967, 1978, p. 278). Structure is a notion as old as Western science and philosophy; its roots run so deeply into ordinary language that it is easy to overlook its metaphorical character. Structure, or “the structurality of structure,” has always been neutralized or reduced: it has been given a center, point of presence, fixed origin in language and thought. If the center orients and organizes the coherence of the system, it also allows for the play [le jeu] (in the sense of both movement and game) of its elements. The center, however, “also closes off the play which it also opens up and makes possible” (p. 279); it holds play within limits and does not permit substitution, permutation, or transformation. It is that which “is by definition unique” in a structure, “a full presence which is beyond play” (p. 279). To reflect on the structure of structure, to question the language of centrality and presence is to produce the “rupture” or “disruption” to which Derrida alluded to initially. His original aim in undertaking this scrutiny of the language and concept of structure is not to effect a form of textual vandalism, to do violence to the medium of thought and signification, but to extend “the domain and play of signification infinitely” (p. 280).

Derrida opts for the word deconstruction (p. 282) to explain the move of thinkers such as Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger and their intellectual successors to theorize rupture that is always already [toujours déjà] occurring in discourse. This move is not a rejection of the notion of a structure having a center (which is “unthinkable,” p. 279), but a development in the theory of structure that “supplements” what was thought before. Succinctly if simply put, “Deconstruction is the name given simultaneously to the stress created by . . . gaps in texts (between what they want to say and what they do say) and the detection of such gaps. A deconstructive reading attends to the deconstructive processes always occurring in texts and already there waiting to be read (Payne, 1993, 121). As one American “deconstructor” asserts, “Deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text, but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself. Its apparently solid ground is no rock but thin air” (Miller, 1976, p. 341). In the parlance of Derrida (1967, 1978), “Language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (p. 284).

Why this potentially obfuscating foray into a theory that by now has lost much of its intellectual currency (despite its profound effect on many fields of knowledge in higher institutions of learning and its impact on the growth

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2 Derrida uses a sequence of near synonyms – rupture, disruption, destruction, and deconstruction – to reflect the manifestations of “decentering,” its central presence, in all concepts of structurality.

3 Derrida (1967, 1978) says elsewhere: “We can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (pp. 280-281).
of interdisciplinary scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s)? Why this arguably unwarranted sortie into a kind of reading that not only resists definitive meaning, but actively seeks out gaps or impasses of thought or language – starting with a sense that parts of a text significantly fail to offer up a clear and easily understood unity, and coming to question coherence, meaning, and language in general? Why this seemingly gratuitous deflection toward a reading strategy that follows both the meanings and the suspensions and displacements of meaning in a text, and that advocates “the careful teasing out of warring forces of signification within the text” (Johnson, 1980, p. 5)?

The foregoing focus on a (de)constructive way of thinking, on playing interpretively with interpretations – as the epigraph from Montaigne, also referred to by Derrida, implies – is in large measure informed by the re-publication, in this issue of Gestalt Review, of Erving and Miriam Polster’s (1999) Prologue to their work, From the Radical Center: The Heart of Gestalt Therapy. Figural for me here is an implicit desire to “decenter” the received notion of a “center” by refusing to see it as “a resignation to the influence of warring extremes” (Polster, 1999, p. 21). The ultimate search for theoretical unity notwithstanding, the Polsters seek to expand the theoretical diversity of Gestalt therapy by their preoccupation with point/counterpoint relationships, dimensionalism, and personal style and repertoire; and by their selection of ten dimensions of Gestalt therapy, each of which embraces a pair of opposing perspectives. The struggles for synthesis which these dimensions introduce, and the integrations of opposing principles which they represent – crucial to the identity of Gestalt therapy in its quest for holism and interconnectedness – may also work always already to “take account of conceptual areas the principles don’t cover or the contradictions they throw off” (Polster, 1999, p. 39). Deconstruction, however paradoxically, arguably offers a way of paying attention – in typical Gestalt fashion – to what a text (or, in this case, a theoretical principle) is doing – how it means and not just what it means.

Lynne Jacobs’s Commentary on the Prologue points to the “elision of levels of abstraction” into which she believes E. Polster’s clinical theories and some epistemological implications get collapsed and obscured. Such “slippages” (Jacobs’s word), or struggles with ambiguity and obscurity (e.g., E. Polter’s use of the term “self”), when conceived of deconstructively, cease to be obstacles to theorizing; they become instead the experience of theorizing.

In his Commentary Gary Yontef queries, among other things, the Polsters’ deployment of a conceptual language that “creates its own theoretical problem” (e.g., the use of “reflex”; the definition of “process/content”); for him, they have presented a “person-oriented vision of Gestalt therapy” without “creating a theoretical vocabulary that is person-oriented and consistent with
process perspectives.” This imperative concern with the meaning of words may be profitably seen in the context of Derrida’s suggestion that all language is constituted by différance, a word he coined as a play on two French lexical items signifying “to differ” and to “defer.” The neologism différance is meant
to suggest how meaning is at once “differential” and “deferred”, the product of a restless play within language that cannot be fixed or pinned down for the purposes of conceptual definition. . . . This picture is complicated, in Derrida’s view, by the fact that meaning is nowhere punctually present in language, that it is always subject to a kind of semantic slippage (or deferral) which prevents the sign from ever (so to speak) coinciding with itself in a moment of perfect, remainderless grasp. (Norris, 1987, p. 15, second emphasis mine)

Peter Philipson’s Commentary, like those of Jacobs and Yontef, grapples with the claim to unequivocal domination of one meaning over another. While also supporting the Polsters’ “radical” departures from the original theory, he critiques especially their notions of the “radical center” and “point/counterpoint” and questions whether certain of the dualities identified among their “ten dimensions of gestalt therapy” (e.g., content and process; past and present) are meaningfully dialectical polarities. In querying – “Where is the center?” – Philipson further problematizes the concept by seeing it “as a position in its own right, rather than a point of meeting of polarities.”

In his Response to the Commentaries, Polster ventures into the specific differences in perspectives upon which each writer has focused, bears out Montaigne’s point about the job of “interpreting interpretations,” the ways we perennially “write glosses upon one another” in the slippery search for meaning.

Bruce Kenofer’s article, “Developing the Organismic Need,” attempts to tease out not only differences that the paradigm of homeostasis (Perls’s biological model) obscures between separable processes of homeostatic and equilibrative regulation in the organism, but also differences between physiological and psychological needs. After dismantling the old paradigm and critiquing its limitations, Kenofer moves – (de)constructively – toward an alternative formulation in terms of the developmental nature of psychological needs, opting for Robert Kegan as a model of what Gestalt developmental theory should look like.

4 Derrida changes the e in the French word difference to an a in his neologism; the change can be seen in writing but cannot be heard in spoken French. The point is for différance not to function as a concept or a word whose meaning could be grasped in the present, but as a set of marks that intentionally disturbs the classical rendition of language and representation.
Daan Van Baalen’s article on “Gestalt Therapy and Bipolar Disorder,” after presenting a review of relevant literature, demonstrates and discusses the ways in which Gestalt therapy interventions can provide an alternative to hospitalization or polypharmacy. The case study shows how a client suffering from a manic-depressive disorder experiments with, and attempts to gain control over, rupturing forces which, in de(con)structive fashion, suspend and displace rational thought and meaning in her life.

In the section on “Writing and Writers’ Conferences,” Edwin Nevis and Joseph Melnick provide a brief history of the Gestalt Press, now in its 25th year, and contextualize the development of the writers’ conferences. Charles Bowman and Seán Gaffney reflect on the writing process as experienced through those conferences.

By way of closure (in the ambiguous sense that every ending may become a new beginning), we engage in interpretive play with Derrida’s critique of Saussure’s attitude to the relative priority of spoken as opposed to written language, a dualism he (Derrida) believes has dominated Western philosophy since Plato. He argues against the treatment of writing “as a merely derivative or secondary form of linguistic notation, always dependent on the primary reality of speech and the sense of a speaker’s ‘presence’ behind his [sic] words” (Norris, 1982, p. 26). If, for Derrida, writing as a concept is no longer thought to be “derivative, auxiliary, exterior, insubstantial” in the face of its “apparent capacity for infinite signification (Payne, 1993, pp. 118-119), so it is also for us at Gestalt Review: we invite our readers to supplement the immediate presence of speech and the speaker in the therapeutic, coaching, or organizational setting with l’écriture through submissions to the journal. If, in writing, the logos or word is absent from the moment or site of origin (the here and now in the clinical or work space), it will be processed nonetheless in accordance with our policy of openness to collaborative exchange in Gestalt theory and practice and our resistance to conceptual closure and finite, ultimate meaning.

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5 Derrida attacks Saussure’s adherence to phonocentrism (the idea that sounds and speech are inherently superior, or “more natural,” to the written language; the priority of self-present speech), and relates it to logocentrism (the belief that the first and last things are the Logos, the Word, spoken by an ideal, present God; the orientation toward an order of meaning – thought, truth, logic; the desire for a center or original guarantee of all meanings).
REFERENCES


