Abstract

Jacques Derrida is perhaps the foremost philosopher of the humanities and of its place in the university. Over the long period of his career he has been concerned with the fate, status, place and contribution of the humanities. Through his deconstructive readings and writings he has done much not only to reinvent the western tradition by attending closely to those texts which constitute it but also he has redefined its procedures and protocols. This paper first introduces the notion of postmodern nursing, its relation to the culture wars and some of the main characteristics of so-called poststructuralism, considered as a response to the scientific pretensions of structuralism. Secondly, it provides some background to Derrida, who Althusser believed to be the most important French philosopher of the 20th century. Thirdly, it explores a recent essay where Derrida outlines seven programmatic theses or what he calls ‘seven professions of faith’ for the new humanities. Finally, and very tentatively, it suggests what such a view might contribute to the nursing humanities.

Keywords: postmodern, nursing, Derrida, culture wars, new humanities.

Introduction

I have set myself a limited task in this paper. I am not going to provide an analysis of Derrida’s philosophy or try to indicate the ways in which his thought broaches the question of health or its relations to culture and, specifically, to nursing practice and the nursing profession. This would be a massive ambition that is best left to scholars who have the appropriate credentials in nursing studies and philosophy. I do wish, however, in a limited way, to focus upon a minor text of Derrida’s (2001), one that he delivered in 2000 in New Zealand, where he programmatically lays out seven propositions concerning the tasks for the new humanities, and, finally, I want to suggest some
ways in which Derrida’s programmatic sketch for the new humanities might be taken up by the nursing humanities. I take up these matters in the second part of the paper. I want to begin by briefly providing a context and background, to which I have given the heading ‘Postmodern nursing and the culture wars’.

Postmodern nursing and the culture wars

In casting around for a beginning in my searches recently I came across a journalistic piece called ‘Postmodern nursing’ by Sarah Glazer (2000), a freelance journalist specializing in healthcare and social policy studies. Among other things, Glazer writes that between 1997 and 1999, 94 articles have appeared in nursing journals making reference to postmodernism, as she says, ‘typically approvingly’. More importantly, she frames the debate about postmodern nursing in terms of what has become known, especially in the United States of America (USA), as the culture wars. She introduces her subject matter by charting the reception of the notion of ‘therapeutic touch’, by reference to Dolores Krieger and Martha Rogers, both professors of nursing at New York University, who champion the so-called ‘energetic’ therapies. Glazer then poses the question ‘How have techniques steeped in mysticism gained such a foothold in the nursing profession?’. Her answer to this question, I think, is interesting for she points to a fundamental division in nursing, two warring factions that mimic the ‘culture wars’. On the one side she points to the ‘caring plus science’ path of nursing, which she describes as follows:

Nurse advocates have argued that ‘caring’, rather than curing, is a highly beneficial characteristic of nursing that is often missing from the cold, increasingly technological world of modern Western medicine. In fact, they have argued, the effect of a ‘caring’ nurse on a patient is so powerful that it can often be an essential part of the ultimate cure. Depending on who is talking about it, the concept of ‘caring’ in nursing can range from a nurse holding a patient’s hand by the bedside to giving an expert massage to administering the right kind of pain medicine. It has also involved research into such issues as how a patient’s sense of self or level of optimism will affect recovery from surgery. Nurses in this school of thought have employed traditional scientific methods and experimental designs to try to determine what kind of caring is most effective in helping patients.

On the other side, under the heading ‘Against science’, she identifies ‘postmodern nurse-theorists’:

. . . in another ideological camp, nurses with advanced degrees have essentially become postmodern nurse-theorists, who cite an impressive-sounding array of philosophers to support their abandonment of Western science. In article after article in current issues of nursing journals, these nurses advocate discarding standard scientific methods and introducing an entirely new paradigm, often dubbed ‘qualitative research’. Advocates argue that the qualitative approach, which generally relies entirely on patients’ or nurses’ comments – known as ‘the narrative’ in postmodern lingo – is better attuned to hearing patients’ needs and arriving at effective caring than ‘quantitative’ investigation.

For these nurses, words like ‘reality’, ‘objective’, ‘ evidence-based practice’, ‘quantitative research’ and even ‘measurement’ have become code words for all that is evil, patriarchal and insensitive about modern science and modern medicine. In their place, they have substituted the fashionable phrases of feminism, postmodernism, and hermeneutics: ‘constructed reality’, ‘social construction’, ‘lived experience’, and – to a baffling extent – such terms as ‘phenomenology’ and ‘epistemology’.

Glazer (2000) goes on to assert that nurses of the postmodern cast began by citing Thomas Kuhn, from whose work they presented oversimplified versions of an ‘antiscience’ stance. She adds: ‘From Kuhn, nurses have moved on to citing such postmodern critics of science as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault as well as the philosophers who influenced them – Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl’. In presenting this tendency towards ‘philosophical radicalism’ Glazer, herself repeating all the standard arguments of one side in the ‘culture wars’, raises the spectre of relativism and nihilism. She quotes Jean Watson, a former president of the National League of Nursing and professor of nursing at the University of Colorado, as someone who openly embraces relativism, thus:
The art and science of nursing with its concern with caring—healing and health as a field of study, research, and practice within its own paradigm is realizing that in this postmodern time, science, knowledge, and even images of nursing, health, environment, person become one among many truth games. (cited in Glazer, http://www.thepublicinterest.com/archives/2000summer/article1.html)

In her final comment, Glazer (2000) concludes with the assertion:

In setting science against humanism, nurse-theorists seem to have forgotten that there is still an important biological component in nursing. The postmodern critiques focusing on power relationships, gender, and class may help us to understand nursing in its social aspects. But nursing is also rooted in biological reality. Unless it goes totally postmodern, that dimension of nursing will remain crucial. (http://www.thepublicinterest.com/archives/2000summer/article1.html)

I have begun in this way because I think Glazer’s account, however biased or even-handed, raises our awareness of the political and professional stakes in this debate. It not only indicates that postmodernism—dare I utter this Pavlovian stimulus word?—and the ‘culture wars’ debate. Let me foreground these comments with a brief comment on the recent Sokal affair that has precipitated and crystallised aspects of this very heated debate.

First, permit me some observations on Glazer who I think buys into the same simple-minded polarization that has come to characterize the bitterness of the ‘culture wars’ debate. Let me foreground these comments with a brief comment on the recent Sokal affair that has precipitated and crystallised aspects of this very heated debate. *Intellectual Impostures* (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999) grew out of the now-famous hoax perpetrated by Alan Sokal, a professor of physics at New York University, who published a parody article in the American cultural studies journal *Social Text* in 1996. The original article ‘Transgressing the boundaries: toward a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity’ (included as an appendix in the book) sported a range of authentic but nonsensical quotations about physics and mathematics by prominent French and American ‘postmodern’ intellectuals. In a discussion of quantum mechanics and general relativity, the original paper argued that quantum gravity is an archetypal postmodernist science. Further, it purported to argue for a *liberatory* science based upon postmodern criteria: ‘nonlinearity and discontinuity’, the deconstruction of ‘the Cartesian metaphysical distinctions between humankind and Nature, observer and observed, Subject and Object’, and ‘the overthrow of the static ontological categories and hierarchies of modernist science’ (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999, p. 221).

Sokal’s original article caused a huge furore in the western academy. It was such a successful parody that it hoodwinked the editors of *Social Text* and embarrassed many of the cultural left. *Intellectual Impostures* is the attempt to capitalize on this notoriety: in part, the explanation, the confession and the extension of the argument for the satire. The book is designed to pursue two targets: to show how famous French intellectuals have ‘abused scientific concepts and terminology’ (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999, p. ix) and to critique ‘epistemic relativism’, as Sokal and Bricmont express it, ‘the idea that modern science is nothing more than a “myth”, a “narration” or a “social construction” ’ (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999, p. x). The link between the two, as they suggest, is not philosophical; it is purely contingent. Both the original article and the subsequent revelation by Sokal of the hoax became a *cause célèbre*. The scandal hit the front pages of the world’s major newspapers, including the *New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, the *Observer*, *Le Monde* and several others. Many critics thought that the book had exposed the pseudo-science and pretentiousness of postmodernism and French theory, revealing that many of the French intellectuals did not really know what they were saying.

What purpose did the spoof serve? The mere fact it was published, as the authors themselves explain, proves very little: ‘at most it reveals something about the intellectual standards of one trendy journal’ (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999, p. 3). What effects, unintended or otherwise, did it create? It created tremendous bitterness and controversy between some
scientists, who hold what we might broadly call ‘realist’ views of science and cultural theorists, who studying science both historically and ethnographically, have begun to question the cultural authority of science. It exacerbated the so-called ‘science wars’. It also tended to split the academic left into two camps: the traditional Marxist ‘realist’ left and the cultural left, who argue against naïve realism (that is, realism as a doctrine that is straightforward, obvious and self-evident). And it helped to generate a new level of antipathy and confusion against ‘postmodernism’. While there are repeated assertions by Sokal and Bricmont that their real quarry is not postmodernism in any broad sense, nor the merits of French post-structuralism, nor the social sciences and humanities in general, but simply the repeated abuse of scientific concepts by ‘postmodernists’, it is the case that others – academics, journalists, and the public – have taken the book as a more general attack. Despite their protestations, one cannot help but surmise that Sokal and Bricmont are happy that their limited critique, has been taken more widely (see also Markley, 1999).

It is important to recognize that Sokal & Bricmont (1999, p. 5) ‘are not attacking philosophy, the humanities or the social sciences in general’. Rather, they state ‘the goal . . . is to make a limited but original contribution to the critique of the admittedly nebulous Zeitgeist that we have called “postmodernism”’ (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999, pp. 3–4) by drawing attention to the ‘repeated abuse of concepts . . . from mathematics and physics’ (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999, p. 4). Even if true, it is the case that the misuse of a concept or its importation from the natural sciences into the social sciences (without explanation or justification), logically speaking, does not necessarily imply that the argument involved is necessarily false. Sokal & Bricmont’s (1999, p. 50) real philosophical quarry is what they call ‘epistemic relativism’. They write: ‘This relativist Zeitgeist originates partly from contemporary works in the philosophy of science, such as Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions and Paul Feyerabend’s Against Method, and partly from extrapolations of these philosophers’ work by their successors’. They go on to define ‘relativism’ as ‘any philosophy that claims that the truth or falsity of a statement is relative to an individual or to a social group’ (Sokal & Bricmont, 1999, p. 50), and distinguish among the different forms of relativism: cognitive or epistemic relativism, which deals with the assertion of fact; moral or ethical relativism, which deals with value judgements; and aesthetic relativism, which deals with artistic judgements. While they do not argue for these distinctions, they restrict themselves to only the first form.

There are a number of problems with Sokal and Bricmont’s account. First, they tend to ignore the fact that ‘epistemic relativism’ has been a counter-philosophy or counter-discourse in philosophy since the time of Plato. Protagoras’ ‘measure hypothesis’ (‘man is the measure of all things; of things that are, that they are; of things that are not, that they are not’) has received extended consideration by philosophers since Plato’s time. Plato himself proposes that Protagoras’ argument is self-refuting or contradictory in the dialogue called the Theaetetus. Secondly, in a brief survey of less than 20 pages they review 20th century epistemology, they focus on some aspects of Popper, Quine, Kuhn and Feyerabend, dismissing Popper’s falsificationism, Quine’s attack on the ‘empiricist dogma’, the Duhem-Quine’s thesis of under-determination, Kuhn’s incommensurability of paradigms, and Feyerabend’s anarchist epistemology of ‘anything goes’. (They entirely neglect contemporary theories of truth and ‘readings’ of Tarski’s semantic theory of truth by such notable thinkers as Donald Davidson and Hilary Putnam.)

It is not clear that the rigid distinction between observational and theoretical terms held by the logical empiricists such as Carnap and Hempel, can be logically maintained. Hanson and Feyerabend, among the first to question this distinction, show that all observations are theory-laden. Radical theory-ladenness implies that theory choice is relative to extra-evidential grounds and, when coupled with the undetermination of a theory by its observational evidence, the argument in some versions seems to imperil the very idea of scientific rationality. Sokal & Bricmont (1999, pp. 62–64) do not examine this problem in its traditional terms, not do they discuss Hanson or Feyerabend’s criticisms. Their strategy is to attempt to provide a ‘moderate’ reading of the arguments and a ‘radical’ reading. The moderate
reading, they assert, is true but trivial; the radical reading, is false. The philosophical work they perform on these ‘texts’ is shoddy, perfunctory, incomplete and completed without regard to the extended literature. It is full of misrepresentations and banal arguments. It is with woeful ignorance of structuralist and post-structuralist practices of readings that they talk of ‘readings’ of texts in the philosophy of science, at all. Thirdly, the main motivation for Sokal’s original attack is political, as he admits in ‘Transgressing the boundaries: an afterword’ (included as Appendix C in Sokal & Bricmont, 1999, p. 249):

My main concern isn’t to defend science from the barbarian hordes of lit crit (we’ll survive just fine, thank you). Rather my concern is political: to combat a currently fashionable postmodernist/poststructuralist/social-constructivist discourse – and more generally a penchant for subjectivism – which is, I believe, inimical to the values and the future of the Left.

A little earlier in the essay he confesses:

I’m an unabashed Old leftist who never quite understood how deconstruction was supposed to help the working class. And I’m a stodgy old scientist who believes, naively, that there exists an external world, that there exist objective truths about the world, and that my job is to discover some of them.

Given these personal statements of his beliefs, we can begin to get a clearer view of his own motivations. He believes certain statements and produces argument, ex post facto, to support them; a contradiction on his own terms of how a scientist ought to proceed! Sokal and Bricmont seem to want a theoretical justification of science and they still see that it is philosophy’s job to provide theoretical foundations. We might argue with Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam and Richard Rorty that the notion of ‘objective truth’ is simply the best idea that we have to explain what is going on at the moment. (This position also might be seen as a form of cognitive or epistemic relativism.) Rorty, for instance, contends that the idea that reality has an intrinsic nature and the idea that truth is correspondence with reality, are both inherently flawed concepts. He suggests that these ideas actually hinder inquiry, for ‘reality’ is a matter of how we conceptualize things and ‘truth’ is not something that we can or should hold a theory about. Rather than aiming at truth we should try to solve problems in a Deweyan manner. Philosophy, on Rorty’s account, then, advances by increasing its imaginative-ness rather than its rigour.

Often, critics who contribute to the culture wars debate, especially those who want to defend western science, as can seen from my brief discussion above, tend to do so from a position that ignores any systematic engagement of the texts of the philosophers to whom they attribute ‘relativist’, ‘nihilist’ or ‘anti-science’ positions. These assertions are made without much awareness of the philosophical tradition or any attempt to understand, say, the importance of the works of Nietzsche or Heidegger in the development of contemporary French thought. They are asserted without even a sideways glance at the works of philosophers of science and biology, like Canguilhem and Bachelard, who strongly influenced Foucault and colleagues.¹

It is a mistake to characterize the work of Derrida or Foucault, as ‘antiscience’ or ‘antiEnlightenment’. This is simply based on the ignorance of the ways in which someone like Derrida has focused on the philosophical canon. As he says in his recent interview with Maurizio Ferraris:

My principal interests have tended towards the great canon of philosophy – Plato, Kant, Hegel, Husserl; but, at the same time, towards the so-called ‘minor’ loci of their texts,¹

¹ As is well acknowledged in nursing studies, particularly in the work of John Drummond, the later Foucault focused on the ‘care of self’ as a major thematic where questions of truth, power and subjectivity intersect. I would have thought therefore that Glazer’s characterization of ‘caring plus science’ (if we talk of the social sciences and maybe, even biology; see, in particular, Foucault’s notion of biopower) lends itself to a Foucaultian analysis. I was interested to read in his essay ‘Technologies of the self’ (Foucault et al., 1998, p. 31) the following excerpt: ‘The care of the self isn’t another kind of pedagogy [after Plato]; it has to become permanent medical care. Permanent medical care is one of the central features of the care of the self. One must become the doctor of oneself’. We should add, perhaps: ‘one must become the nurse of others’?
neglected problematics, or footnotes – things that can irritate the system and at the same time account for the subterranean region in which the system constitutes itself by repressing what makes it possible, which is not systematic. (Derrida & Ferraris, 2001, pp. 4–5)

Derrida’s interests are principally philosophical rather than scientific, and Foucault’s interests are principally philosophical and historical (and I do not want to treat them as though they belong to the same team, a comment that applies generally to a false homogenization of a variety of thinkers dubbed as ‘poststructuralists’). This is not to say that their work does not impinge on science, but it does so in complex and subtle ways both directly through an engagement with the history of reason – with historical forms of rationality and its material embeddedness in discourse and practice – and indirectly, at the transdisciplinary intersection with ethics, aesthetics and politics. Finally, neither thinker would want to uphold a distinction between science and the humanities; indeed, their respective projects are premised on problematizing such a simple-minded economy of the disciplines.

Let me end this introduction by posting some features of poststructuralism, which I have summarized from a previously published paper (Peters, 1999). What my idiosyncratic construction of this partial list demonstrates, I think, is some of the critical points at which ‘poststructuralism’ impinges upon ‘scientism’, especially as it became invested in structuralism, and also the importance of Derrida’s thought in relation to some of these features.

Poststructuralism can be interpreted as a specifically philosophical response to the alleged scientific status of structuralism – to its status as a metaparadigm for the social sciences – and as a movement which, under the inspiration of Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and colleagues, sought to decentre the ‘structures’, systematicity and scientific status of structuralism, to critique its underlying metaphysics and to extend it in a number of different directions, while at the same time preserving central elements of structuralism’s critique of the humanist subject. Its main theoretical tendencies and innovations can be summarized in terms of its affinities and differences with structuralism.

**Affinities**

1. The critique of humanist philosophy and the rational, autonomous, self-transparent, subject of humanism thought. A shared suspicion of phenomenology’s and existentialism’s privileging of human consciousness as autonomous, directly accessible, and as the sole basis of historical interpretation, understanding and action.
2. A general theoretical understanding of language and culture in terms of linguistic and symbolic systems. The interrelations of constituent elements are regarded as more important than the elements considered in isolation from one another. Both structuralism and poststructuralism take up the Saussurean belief – and innovative methodologies based upon its insights – that linguistic signs constitute a formal system that gain their value relationally from other signs rather than referentially through describing or denoting states of affairs in the world.
3. A general belief in unconscious processes and in hidden structures or socio-historical forces that, to a large extent, constrain and govern our behaviour. Much of the innovation of structuralism and poststructuralism is directly indebted to Freud’s study of the unconscious and his clinical investigations that undermined the prevalent philosophical view of the pure rationality and self-transparency of the subject, substituting a greater complexity that called into question traditional distinctions of reason/unreason (madness).
4. A shared intellectual inheritance and tradition based upon Saussure, Jacobson, the Russian formalists, Freud and Marx, among other thinkers. This shared intellectual history is like a complex skein that has many strands. We might call one aspect of it European Formalism, beginning in prerevolutionary Russia, in Geneva, and in Jena, with simultaneous and overlapping developments in linguistics, poetics, art, science and literature.

**Differences**

1. The reintroduction of history. Where structuralism sought to efface history through synchronic analyses of structures, poststructuralism brings about a...
renewed interest in a critical history through a re-emphasis on diachronic analyses, on the mutation, transformation and discontinuity of structures, on serialization, repetition, ‘archaeology’ and, perhaps most importantly, what Foucault, following Nietzsche, calls genealogy.

2 The challenge to scientism in the human sciences, an antifoundationalism in epistemology, and a new emphasis upon perspectivism in interpretation. Poststructuralism challenges the rationalism and naïve realism that structuralism continues from positivism, with its promethium faith in scientific method, in progress, and in the capacity of the structuralist approach to discern and identify universal structures of all cultures and the human mind.

3 The rediscovery of Nietzsche and Heidegger’s interpretation of Nietzsche as the ‘last metaphysician’. Nietzsche’s work provides a new way to theorize and conceive of the discursive operation of power and desire in the constitution and self-overcoming of human subjects. Derrida sees the most important philosophical task is to break free from the ‘logocentrism’ of Western philosophy – the self-presence, immediacy and univocity – that clouds our view and manifests its nihilistic impulses in Western culture. And yet ‘breaking free’ does not mean overcoming metaphysics. Deconstruction substitutes a critical practice focused upon texts for the ineffable or the inexpressible. It does so, not by trying to escape the metaphysical character of language but by exposing and undermining it.

4 A critical philosophy of technology. Much of the history of poststructuralism can be written as a series of innovative theoretical developments of or about Heidegger’s notion of technology. Heidegger’s philosophy of technology is related to his critique of the history of western metaphysics and disclosure of being and he sees his own work as preparation for a new beginning that will enable one to rescue oneself from nihilism and allow the resolute individual to achieve authenticity.

5 A deepening of democracy and a political critique of Enlightenment values. Poststructuralism criticizes the ways that modern liberal democracies construct political identity on the basis of a series of binary oppositions (e.g. we/them, citizen/non-citizen, responsible/irresponsible, legitimate/illegitimate), which has the effect of excluding or ‘othering’ some groups of people. The deconstruction of political hierarchies of value comprising binary oppositions and philosophies of difference, are seen as highly significant for current debates on multiculturalism and feminism.

6 Governmentality and political reason. Foucault’s later work based on the notion of ‘governmentality’ has initiated a substantial body of contemporary work in political philosophy that deals directly with political reason. Both Foucault and Derrida, returning to Kant’s cosmopolitical writings, have addressed themselves of the prospect for global governance and Derrida has talked about both deepening democracy and – entertaining developments of new technologies – a ‘democracy to come’.

7 Philosophies of difference. If there is one element that distinguishes poststructuralism it is the notion of difference that various thinkers use, develop and apply in different ways. Derrida’s notion of difference can be traced back to at least two sources: Saussure’s insight that linguistic systems are constituted through difference, and Heidegger’s notion of difference. As such, *différance* is seen as plotting the linguistic limits of the subject. Poststructuralist notions of difference, pointing to an antiessentialism, have been subsequently developed in relation to gender and ethnicity.

8 Suspicion of metanarratives. Lyotard’s famous definition of the ‘postmodern condition’ characterizes a feature of poststructuralism that we can call the suspicion of transcendental arguments and viewpoints, combined with the rejection of canonical descriptions and final vocabularies.

9 The diagnosis of ‘power/knowledge’ and the exposure of technologies of domination based upon Foucault’s analytics of power. For Foucault, power is productive; it is dispersed throughout the social system, and it is intimately related to knowledge. It is productive rather than repressive and also creates new knowledge (which may also liberate).

10 The politics of the global knowledge/information society/economy. Poststructuralism provides intellectual resources to philosophers for unpicking the ruling assumptions currently used to construct the dominant neoliberal paradigm of globalization as a
global economy/society allegedly based upon a conception of knowledge and ‘free trade’.

Let me turn directly to Derrida and his recent text on the humanities.

Derrida and the tasks for the new humanities

Jacques Derrida, is perhaps, the foremost philosopher of the humanities and of its place in the university. Over the long period of his career he has been concerned with the fate, status, place and contribution of the humanities. Through his deconstructive readings and writings he has done much not only to reinvent the western tradition by attending closely to those texts which constitute it but also he has redefined its procedures and protocols, questioning and commenting upon the relationship between commentary and interpretation, the practice of quotation, the delimitation of a work and its singularity, its signature, and its context – the whole form of life of literary culture, together with textual practices and conventions that shape it. From his very early work he has occupied a marginal in-between space – simultaneously, textual, literary, philosophical and political – a space that permitted him a freedom to question, to speculate and to draw new limits to humanitas. In a way that few before him with, perhaps, the exception of Heidegger, Derrida has demonstrated his power to re-conceptualize and to re-imagine the humanities.

How does one represent Derrida and his writing? The linguistic notion of representation is central to Derrida’s work and to his critique of western metaphysics. He is suspicious of the view that language represents the world, at least in any straightforward sense. But ‘representation’ is also important to him as a political principle indicating the ethical and political stakes in presenting an argument or representing a people, a text, an image, or (one’s relation to) another thinker, the so-called ‘politics of representation’. Not least, the word ‘representation’ captures his concerns for the genres of autobiography and confession, of philosophy as a certain kind of writing, of the ‘personal voice’, and of the signature. Derrida is also careful of journalists and tends to refuse most invitations for interviews, especially by the popular press. Paradoxically, Points…Interviews 1974–94 (Stanford University Press 1995), a collection, consisting of 23 interviews given over the course of the last two decades, provides a good introduction to Derrida (see especially his ‘The work of intellectuals and the press’).

At 70 years Jacques Derrida, a Frenchman of Jewish extraction who was born and grew up in Algeria, is undoubtedly one of the world’s most distinguished contemporary philosophers. As the Stanford University website (http://prelectur.stanford.edu/lecturers/derrida/) indicates, his work has been the subject in whole or part of some 400 books and ‘In the areas of philosophy and literary criticism alone, Derrida has been cited more than 14 000 times in journal articles over the past 17 years’. This proves that his work is well cited though not necessarily universally acclaimed or appreciated. His work has been fiercely attacked by both conservatives and members of the radical left. The former deny he is a philosopher and the latter dismiss his work as frivolous and apolitical.

Perhaps, more than any philosopher before him, and from his earliest beginnings, Derrida has called attention to the form of ‘philosophical discourse’ – its ‘modes of composition, its rhetoric, its metaphors, its language, its fictions’, as he says – not in order to assimilate philosophy to literature but rather to recognize the complex links between the two and to investigate the ways in which the institutional authority of academic philosophy, and the autonomy it claims, rests upon a ‘disavowal with relation to its own language.’ (His doctoral thesis investigated ‘The ideality of the literary object.’) The question of philosophical styles, he maintains, is itself, a philosophical question.

Towards the end of a recent essay ‘The future of the profession or the unconditional university (thanks to the “humanities”, what could take place tomorrow)’, Derrida (2001) outlines seven programmatic theses or what he calls ‘seven professions of faith’ for the new humanities. Six of these theses, on the whole, are ‘reminders’ or ‘recapitulations’, while the seventh attempts to take a step beyond the others ‘toward the
Derrida and the New Humanities

Derrida (2001, p. 241) suggests ‘The Humanities of tomorrow, in all their departments, will have to study their history, the history of the concepts that, by constructing them, instituted the disciplines and were coextensive with them’ (see also Peters, 2000). He provides the following list of his seven programmatic propositions:

1. These new Humanities would treat the history of man, the idea, the figure, and the notion of ‘what is proper to man’... The most urgent guiding thread here would be the problematization... of these powerful juridical performatives that have given shape to the modern history of this humanity of man... on the one hand, the Declarations of the Rights of Man – and of woman... and on the other hand, the concept of ‘crime against humanity’, which since the end of the Second World war has modified the geopolitical field of international law...

2. These new Humanities would treat, in the same style, the history of democracy and the idea of sovereignty. The deconstruction of this concept of sovereignty would touch not only on international law, the limits of the nation-state, and of its supposed sovereignty, but also on the use made of them in juridico-political discourses concerning the relations between what is called man and woman.

3. These new Humanities would treat, in the same style, the history of ‘professing’, of the ‘profession’, and of the professoriat, a history articulated with that of the premises or presuppositions... of work and of the worldwide-ised confession, there where it goes beyond the sovereignty of the head of State, of the nation-state, or even the ‘people’ in a democracy. An immense problem: how to dissociate democracy from citizenship, from the nation-state, and from the theological idea of sovereignty, even the sovereignty of the people?

4. These new Humanities would treat, in the same style, the history of literature. Not only is commonly called history of literatures or literature themselves, with the great question of its canons... but the history of the concept of literature, of the modern institution named literature, of its links with fiction and the performative force of the ‘as if’, of its concept of oeuvre, author, signature, national language, of its link with the right to say or not to say everything that founds both democracy and the idea of the unconditional sovereignty claimed by the university and within it by what is called... the Humanities.

5. These new Humanities would treat, in the same style, the history of profession, the profession of faith, professionalization, and the professoriat. The guiding thread could be, today, what is happening when the profession of faith, the profession of faith of the professor, gives rise to singular oeuvres, to other strategies of the ‘as if’ that are events and that affect the very limits of the academic field or of the Humanities. We are indeed witnessing the end of a certain figure of the professor and of his or her supposed authority, but I believe, as should now be obvious, in a certain necessity of the professoriat.

6. These new Humanities would thus finally treat, in the same style, but in the course of a formidable reversal, both critical and deconstructive, the history of the ‘as if’ and especially the history of this precious distinction between performative acts and constative acts that seems to have been indispensable for us until now.

7. To the seventh point, which is not the seventh day, I finally arrive now. Or rather, I let perhaps arrive at the end, now, the very thing that, by arriving, by taking place, revolutionizes, overturns, and puts to rout the very authority that is attached, in the university, in the Humanities: (i) to knowledge (or at least to its constantive language); (ii) to the profession or to the profession of faith (or least to its model of performative language); (iii) to the mise en œuvre, the putting to work, at least to the performative putting to work of the ‘as if’. (Derrida, 2001, pp. 241–244)

The promise of the nursing humanities

Without dwelling too much on the meaning of these statements, pursuing a pragmatic strategy, I want to suggest how they might be seen to motivate the nursing humanities. I shall discuss these applications through the power of the question. Derrida’s programmatic statements can be seen as a series of problem-sets that outline areas for the nursing humanities in the philosophy and history of political economy of health.
First, let me focus on items 1, 2 and 3 above. These programmatic statements of Derrida focus on the history of humanity, in particular citizenship rights and the concept of ‘crimes against humanity’ in relation to concepts of sovereignty, the State and democracy. I want to maintain that these have a direct application to nursing humanities in the United Kingdom today, to Westminster, to the present arguments surrounding the government of health, not only in relation to Third Way politics and the privatization of the National Health Service, but also, as Derrida says, ‘the geopolitical field of international law’. I have in mind here the recent media and government focus on asylum-seekers and the increased flow of refugees across international and state borders, a problem that interfaces issues of globalization and sovereignty.

In the second term, Tony Blair’s government, under the Private Finance Initiative, has determined to build 40 new hospitals with private sector involvement. The TUC recently have viewed this policy with extreme suspicion and as an issue of principle criticises ‘creeping privatization’ of the National Health System. The TUC and nursing unions have employed moral and political arguments concerning the protection of the public sphere, linking these arguments to citizen rights and to the question of democracy itself. They oppose what they see as the government’s pragmatism and official respect for ‘what works’, which they see as a thinly disguised neoliberal ideology sanctioning the quasi-market. I think that the nursing humanities in Derrida’s scheme would be committed to the investigation of ‘the government of health’ in relation to citizen rights and to democracy, an investigation at once political, historical and philosophical. Is health a right of the citizen and to what extent does it underpin democracy? How will the privatization of health affect the delivery of care? Is healthcare a private or a public responsibility? Which medical professions have most to gain and most to loose in the privatization process? How might the quasi-market and parallel forms of private provision change the relationship between nurse and patient? To what extent does the quasi-market compromise the traditional social responsibility of the state in ensuring, funding and providing for the health of its citizens?

To what extent does it lead to a commodification of state health provision? (see also Peters, 2001)

The increasing privatization of health might also be seen to raise questions for the nursing humanities concerning the history or genealogy of health and nursing provision in terms of the public/private distinction. In particular, the question might be asked: To what extent in the era of globalization is the ‘government of health’ passing from the state to the multinational corporation? In respect of this question we might also ask: What effects does the privatization of health have on the research process, especially in relation to the testing of new drugs? Does it entail the privatization of health research with corporate control over the funding, administration, testing and dissemination of new medicines?

In the era of globalization we might enquire as to whether health ought to be construed as a basic right of citizens of a certain territory. Is it a universal right? In the government of health what are the responsibilities of the state and how do these responsibilities impinge on the medical and nursing professions? If health is construed as a universal right, how are the health professions to decide on health problems and issues that do not respect national borders? The borders of national territories do not contain most epidemics, including, for example, AIDS. In view of the viral ecology, the complex flows which can quickly transcend the nation-state (along with flows of people, ideas and capital), how should the health professions articulate universal health rights? Can the nursing humanities provide philosophies of health that address the unequal world distribution of health and life chances? How does the changing world political economy due to globalization impinge upon health rights and the nursing professions?

Finally in relation to these items, there are questions regarding species health rights and intellectual property rights over genetic material, such as the recent furor of stem cell research in the USA under the Bush administration. There is a welter of bioethical questions over rights of reproduction and the cloning of human beings, which are part of the wider professional context within which nurses find themselves. These questions are deep ethical, political and cultural questions that could be the basis
of a progressive research programme in the nursing humanities.

The statements outlined in items 3 and 5 refer to the profession, to professionalization, to the profession of faith. They hint at the professionalization of nursing in universities, to the growth of a nursing professoriat and to the traditional role of the university as ‘critic and conscience of society’. The professionalization of nursing comes at a time when the older professions have lost their authority, at the precise point historically when they have come under suspicion for abuses of power and privilege. How are the new professions within the university to reconstitute and regulate themselves or to theorize the power they exercise? How are the nursing humanities to develop a methodological self-reflection that enables it to theorize relations of power in its pedagogy and practice?

Item 4, while focusing on literature and the history of literature, can be given a social scientific turn, if we consider that social research involves a kind of writing and Derrida’s work has been put in the service of defining a ‘postpositivist’ paradigm of social research (see e.g. Fox, 1995). In relation to this item and, indeed, to Derrida’s tasks for the new humanities, I would simply say: make room for the nursing humanities in the discourses of nursing, the philosophy, history, politics and literature of nursing.

References


