Derrida’s views on the university are complex and can easily be misunderstood. A typically reactionary response to his position is that he offers an “irrational” or “anarchist” critique of the Kantian university by annihilating its philosophical grounds. But, Derrida unequivocally affirms what he calls “a new university Enlightenment [Aufklärung]” (Eyes of the University 132), as well as “the imperative[s] of professional rigor and competence” (150). It cannot therefore be said that Derrida encourages faculty to derail the historical project of the Enlightenment, as Jürgen Habermas has famously suggested, or that he seeks to undermine the Kantian architectonics of the modern university. On the contrary, Derrida suggests that today’s faculty fail in their basic duties to their students by refusing to assume responsibilities that have historically defined teaching and philosophy in the West. Derrida’s views, in this regard, echo those of Heidegger in his 1929 lecture “What is Metaphysics?”; that is, both Derrida and Heidegger suggest that the modern university has become oblivious to metaphysics itself, or to the originary question of Nothingness in Heideggerian terms, or différance in Derridean terms. Both thinkers therefore seek to recall faculty to the responsibility of acknowledging the limitations of competent reason. In a “double gesture,” Derrida affirms the necessity of a pedagogy of competency, but he also calls for its vigilant deconstruction, or, the critical dismantling (analaein) of competency. It is not correct then to say that Derrida is not invested in fostering student competencies in the modern university: The problem is rather that the teaching of competency today is far too modest a goal for the university professor. To more fully appreciate Derrida’s critique of the modern university, it may be helpful to recall that Derrida, like Freud, attempts to offer a materialist account of the human body, or that he insists that both the specter (or “seen” word) and spirit (or “heard” word) are “anything but immaterial” (“Marx &
Sons” 267). His critique of the university entitled “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils” anticipates his later, more detailed discussion of vision, hearing, and blindness, which he published ten years later in his book Memoirs of the Blind (1991). Not unlike what he attempts in this later work, Derrida argues that the Western university, and indeed the Greek philosophical tradition since the time of Plato, construes truth as the visual perception of objective form but, in doing so, forgets that there is a good that comes before the truth of competency. This “good” is not what Heidegger called aletheia, or the truth as unconcealment of the Being of beings, but is akin to what Levinas means by “ethics,” or our groundless relation to the other. In Platonic thinking the transcendental ideal is inextricably linked to the sight of form, or to a concept of truth as an enduring and radiant light that is seen by human eyes. According to Plato’s Timaeus, the mind’s eye sees a truth that cannot actually be seen, and this operation is not to be conflated with the sight of the actual eyes that encounter radiant visual forms in the fallen realm of becoming. So, for Plato, there are two kinds of eyes, or two ways of seeing: There is a seeing with the eye of the mind and a seeing with the ocular eyeballs that are embedded in the human skull. To exclusively teach one’s students academic competencies, faculty inevitably perpetuate the rationalist and logocentric assumption that truth may only be defined as a matter of correct vision, ratio, or integrity. For Plato, as for the Western tradition in general, the essential form that appears in the external world is already present in the very body of the man who sees it. But, Plato acknowledges that there is also khora, or the invisible receptacle, which is necessary for visual form to appear; that is, even for Plato—the thinker who first postulated truth as correct representation—it can be said that there is no competent perception of form without Non-Being (or différance). Derrida therefore asks if a pedagogy emphasizing the competent perception of form without regard for différance finally amounts to a form of professional irresponsibility. “To know how to learn,” Derrida states, “and learn how to know, sight, intelligence, and memory are not enough” (Eyes of the University 131). Beyond the competency of sight, “we must also know how to hear and to listen” (131). Derrida’s writings on the university encourage faculty to ask if students today can actively hear and listen to others, especially those others who are not imagined in advance to be ideal replicas—or mimickers—of themselves. For Derrida, a truly responsible pedagogy would include the annulment of a purely visual competency in favor of an “acompetency” that Derrida describes as an experience of blindness. Faculty fail in their