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COMMONS DEED

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INTRODUCTION

Jacques Derrida—‘un réseau de traces’

Writing is not speaking.

Abdelkebir Khatibi

“He was born, he thought, and he died.” And all the rest is pure anecdote.

Jacques Derrida

“Now that deconstruction and interest in Derrida is largely moribund, what do you see the point of your work being?”

Impure anecdote

I *Confessions*

Two ‘responses’, then, with which we begin.

I began, almost forty years ago, with a reflection on writing, on text. That which mattered to me from the beginning—although I would become a ‘philosopher’ by profession—was literary writing. What is it to write, I asked myself. What is that takes place when one writes? In order to respond, I had to broaden the concept of text and try to justify this extension. “There is no outside text” does not want to say that all is...writing, but that any experience is structured like a network of traces, which return to something other than themselves. In other words, there is no present which is not constituted without reference to another time, another present. The present-trace. It traces and is traced. (JD)

What's the most widely held misconception about you and your work?

That I'm a skeptical nihilist who doesn't believe in anything, who thinks nothing has meaning, and text has no meaning. That's stupid and utterly wrong, and only people who haven't read me say this. It's a misreading of my work that began 35 years ago, and it's difficult to destroy. I never said everything is linguistic and we're enclosed in language...Anyone who reads my work with attention understands that I insist on affirmation and faith, and that I'm full of respect for the texts I read.
(TA)

You open a book, and it begins with two comments extracted from interviews. A voice appears to be here, even though the person speaking them is not, obviously. Writing arrives before the voice. By virtue of the text, there are the traces of that person's words in that person's absence. The present moment is divided. It can never be present fully, even the present in which I write or in which you read. When I wrote *here, there are traces*, and *the present moment*, each of those moments was a present, now irrecoverable. The present moment of writing, always changing, comes to pass, and in that inscription the present consigns, countersigns itself to its own displacement. It is *as if* the present were marked by the appearance of the letters in the nanoseconds after I have pressed the keys and the cursor advances, fractionally ahead. But each and every present moment that I am describing, which I am describing through inscription even as I inscribe the description, is in process, having become traced in the words you are reading, traced by the traces of that present turning and returning to some other moment than that present. This description of what takes place here is not limited to the act of writing in any narrow sense. It is what structures the experience of, well everything.

To restrict that ‘everything’ with an example, a single instance on which we will risk the implication of everything, reflect on your reading of this passage.

First: who is the ‘you’ to whom I refer? It implies an unknowable number of yous, of readers, which number cannot be calculated. One cannot assume a totality or finite number of readers or, for that matter, readings.

Second: for every you who reads, there is a *now*, a present moment of reading. The movement and network of traces informing the times of writing also marks and is remarked by the experience of reading. By extension, the network of traces by which a present folds back onto, echoes with, or returns to some other place informs every experience of the present on the part of a subject.

Third: the present moment of a reading is incalculable. You will continue to read even when you close the book, when you put it down to do something else.

Fourth: though you are reading in a present the traces of the present in which these words are / were written can never be present as such, even though I am / was writing in the so-called present tense. That is a present without presence, and is only simulated by the ‘present-trace’, the trace of the present that is traced and which traces.

Fifth, neither you nor I are present at the moment when the ‘voice’, which is reported above by the collection of traces, and therefore writing, text, spoke those words. Jacques Derrida is not present. His words are remainders. They remain—to be read. They are reminders, every time one reads, that he is not present, that he can no longer be present.

And the same goes for the words I write. Written at a different time than the interviews cited above, and yet another time than those other times of transcription, printing, and all the

times of reading, what I will call ‘my’ words (with a deliberate naïveté) are here/there in my absence. My own present moment is thus inscribed in, as it inscribes itself into, that return of the traces to some other present than the present which this is (7:23 am, Tuesday, 8th August, 2006). I will therefore have been absent, always already absent if you are reading this. There is no ‘I’ here. It is *as if* I were dead. It is always *as if* one is reading ‘the traces of one who has just died...this was what Derrida meant by *writing*...this terrible *Unheimlichkeit* [uncanniness]...there and not there. Still here and, already, not here: now here and nowhere’ (Gaston 2006, 1). To echo a remark from above, this does not mean to say that everything is linguistic. This should be clear, let’s be clear about this. But not everything is clear. Otherwise, we wouldn’t have to repeat the point. It hasn’t been clear—ever. Had it been clear to those whose misreadings are stupid and utterly wrong, then not only would Derrida not have had to say what he says/said in the interviews above and in numerous other places, there would also be no need for books such as this ‘introductory guide’. Although nothing could be clearer than the two reflective commentaries I cite above, we’re not in the clear yet.

II *Autobiothanatography*

Jacques Derrida: this name has become virtually synonymous in some circles with the word ‘deconstruction’. Derrida’s publications have had an enormous, though not uncontested influence on literary study and other academic disciplines in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly since the 1970s. Derrida first came to the attention of the English-speaking academic world in 1966, following a paper presented at a colloquium at Johns Hopkins University. The

following year, 1967, Derrida published three books subsequently translated as *Of Grammatology* (1976), *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), and *Writing and Difference* (1978). These were followed in 1972 by three more in French, translated as *Dissemination*, *Margins of Philosophy*, and *Positions*, securing Derrida's influence. This influence has subsequently spread beyond the study of literature and literary theory, to produce effects in film and cultural studies, in legal theory, in the study and theory of architecture, and more generally throughout the humanities and social sciences. A professor of Philosophy (he once remarked that he was not 'happy with the term *philosopher*'; DO, 140) Derrida's writing has, ironically, though perhaps not surprisingly, met with the greatest resistance—sometimes, more simply, a lack of comprehension—in philosophy departments throughout British and North American universities, and in French intellectual and political circles.

Derrida's own philosophical work began with a study in the mid-1950s of German philosopher Edmund Husserl, before turning to detailed, painstaking analyses of many of the canonical philosophers, from Plato onwards. His published works have also considered a broad range of literary writers, including Shakespeare, Joyce, Paul Celan, Jean Genet, and Francis Ponge. *Glas*, a book presented in two columns, presents discussions side-by-side of Genet and Hegel. There is also discernible to some in Derrida's writing a turn, from the 1980s at least, to more overtly stated questions of ethics and politics, considerations of the identity of Europe, matters of globalization and its implications, the meaning of democracy, the future of the humanities and the role of the university in today's society. His work has also engaged in a sustained fashion with the discourse of psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Sigmund Freud, in numerous essays, *The Post Card: from Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, (1987) and *Archive Fever* (1995). His writing is rigorously

informed, simultaneously, by the great philosophical exegetical traditions and an experimental, playful exploration of tonalities and voices, and an interest in what he has called the ‘non-verbal within the verbal’.

However, it is impossible to sum up Derrida’s work. This is in small part because his published output in both French and in translation is so huge. In 1992, an annotated primary and secondary bibliography was published, which lists over 40 books in French alone, between 1967 and 1991. Not counting chapters in books or interviews, there were over 180 articles published during the same period. More significantly however, it is impossible to offer a summary because, despite views put forward in encyclopaedias, textbooks on literary theory, and in many classrooms, Derrida has neither articulated nor proposed a single theory or philosophical position. Rather, what can be said of his work is that each publication is a singular demonstration of a patient response to the contours, rhythms, and turns of the subject being addressed. This being the case, it has to be recognised, if one attempts to read Derrida faithfully, that his writing necessarily transforms itself according to the given interest. As Derrida puts it “‘good’ literary criticism, the only worthwhile kind, implies an act, a literary signature or counter-signature, an inventive experience of language, *in* language, an inscription of the act of reading in the field of the text that is read’ (SICL, 52). Because of this singular attentiveness on Derrida’s part, it is therefore impossible to elevate the specificity of each analysis to the level of certain general rules.

This has led to a somewhat odd reception of Derrida’s work. The initial phase of reception in both the UK and the USA was marked either by outright hostility, where Derrida had been characterised as an obscurantist charlatan, or by an attempt to extract from his writings certain repeatable practices, thereby producing a theory of analysis from his work, and it is this process

that has come to be termed 'deconstruction', of which, as you will see in the first chapter, Derrida is repeatedly wary, marking a distance between himself and such methodological appropriations. It should not be thought however that Derrida has been simply misunderstood. Indeed, he has a number of faithful, careful readers.

Originally named Jackie by his mother, Georgette Derrida (née Safar), Jacques Derrida was born in El-Biar, Algeria, July 15, 1930. Born into a Jewish family who, under the Crémieux decree of 1875 were 'indigenous jews' of Algeria without rights to French citizenship, Derrida grew up in French colonial Algeria, where, as a Jew and Algerian, he was doubly discriminated against. In 1940, Derrida experienced anti-Semitic discrimination at primary school as a result of the regulations of the Pétain regime, where, because he was Jewish, he was not permitted to raise the French flag, an honour usually given to the top pupil in the class. In 1942, one year after starting school at the Lycée de Ben Aknoun, Derrida was expelled. Being sent to another school, the Lycée Emile-Maupas at which Jewish teachers barred from the public system worked, Derrida spent much of the year until spring 1943 secretly not attending school. Following the Allied landing and a period of dismantling Pétainist control by the De Gaulle-Giraud government, Derrida returned for four years to the Lycée de Ben Aknoun. A poor student, he preferred to play football, and was a voracious reader, reading at the time figures such as Rousseau and Nietzsche, who would later become significant in his writing and thought.

In 1948, Derrida passed his *baccalauréat*, at the Lycée Gauthier, Algiers, where he read for the first time Jean-Paul Sartre and Henri Bergson. Between 1949 and 1952, he was a boarder at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, Paris. His first exposure to Paris and mainland France, Derrida's experience as a student was a difficult one, marked by poor physical and mental health, particularly in 1951-

52. Having failed the entrance exam to the Ecole Normale Supérieure in 1950, he was subsequently admitted in 1952, when he came to know and work with Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, who was to remain a close acquaintance for nearly two decades. In 1957, following success in the *agrégation*, the exam which qualifies teachers of higher education, Derrida travelled to the USA for the first time, to study unpublished work by Edmund Husserl at Harvard University. In June of that year, he married Marguerite Aucouturier, in Boston, Massachusetts.

Conscripted in 1957 for two years by the French army during the Algerian War, Derrida served not in the military but as a French and English teacher. This was followed by a teaching position for four years at the Sorbonne, during which time Derrida met with French historian of ideas Michel Foucault and novelist Philippe Sollers, also publishing his first articles in the radical journal founded by Sollers, *Tel Quel*, an association maintained until 1972, when Derrida made an unequivocal break. In 1964, he was invited by Althusser and philosopher Jean Hyppolite to teach at the Ecole Normale Supérieure, where Derrida remained for twenty years. Though responsible for organizing the first general assembly at the Ecole Normale during May 1968, and taking part in marches, Derrida did not give his support whole-heartedly to particular aspects of the protests.

Travelling frequently to conferences and colloquia from 1968 onwards, Derrida was offered a visiting professorship in 1975 at Yale University, a post he held until 1986, when, along with Yale Colleague and literary critic J. Hillis Miller, he accepted another visiting post at the University of California, Irvine. At Yale, Derrida was identified in the media, along with Miller, Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, and Paul de Man, as belonging to the so-called Yale School of Deconstruction. In truth, no such school existed, but was invented by media misperception and a misunderstanding of the nature of the critical work that Derrida, de Man, and Miller were each, in

their own fashion, pursuing. Such work was mistakenly given the name of 'deconstruction', as though this were a method, a programmatic form of analysis, or, indeed, a school of thought.

Back in France, Derrida and other philosophers organised at the Sorbonne the Estates General of Philosophy in 1979, while the following year he defended his *Thèse d'Etat*. Derrida had never formally completed doctoral work and the examination in 1980 addressed his published work. In 1981, Derrida helped organize the Jan Hus Association, aimed at aiding persecuted Czech intellectuals. While visiting Prague in the same year, to organise a secret seminar, he was arrested on the pretext of producing and trafficking drugs. As a result of François Mitterand's involvement, amongst other measures, Derrida was released and expelled from Czechoslovakia. Another significant organizational work took place in 1983, the founding of the Collège international de philosophie in Paris. Derrida was its first director, whilst also being involved in the Foundation against Apartheid, and the organization of an exhibition, 'Art against Apartheid'. In this year, Derrida was also elected as directeur d'études at the Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, Paris, a position he held until his official 'retirement' at the age of 67.

Jacques Derrida continued to travel extensively, lecturing, taking up visiting posts, participating in conferences, writing and publishing. Two moments of public notoriety attached themselves to Derrida, which speak more of both the public and academic misunderstanding of his work, than they do of Derrida himself. The first, coming in 1987, became known as the 'Paul de Man Affair'. A friend and colleague of Derrida's at Yale, de Man died unexpectedly in 1983. Subsequently, a young Belgian researcher, Ortwin de Graef, discovered some articles written for the right-wing paper *Le Soir* by de Man, while a young man in Belgium during the Second World War. A couple of articles on national literatures expressed anti-Semitic sentiments. While none of

de Man's subsequent publications show any traces of such thought, the discovery of the articles became the excuse for a media feeding frenzy, attacking so-called deconstruction and its 'practitioners', for being nihilist, irresponsible, aimed at destroying the humanities and even, in one or two extreme cases, fascistic. Few if any of these attacks adhered to even a basic reporting of the facts, and showed neither any sign of understanding nor any real willingness to read either de Man or Derrida's work whatsoever. Equally fuelled by misunderstanding and not reading was the 1992 'Cambridge Affair', in which, in an extremely rare occurrence, a small number of Cambridge dons started a campaign against the awarding of an honorary degree to Derrida. Several months of agitation led to letters of objection being printed in the national and international press. Eventually however, the vote went strongly in Derrida's favour, and the doctorate *honoris causa* was awarded on June 11, 1992.

These two incidents are symptomatic of the non-reception of Derrida, both inside the university and at large. They typically highlight the ways in which an author and his works can be received without ever having been read. This is ironic inasmuch as all of Derrida's life and work, regardless of subject, has been devoted to careful, diligent, patient acts of reading and not to hurried or journalistic analysis or what Derrida has referred to as 'reading on the fly'. However, as with so many commonplace terms, such as writing or text, Derrida has expanded radically our notion of the meaning of such words, and reading is no exception. In an interview, Derrida claimed never to have 'read' particular authors. This was not some coy gesture on Derrida's part but is, rather, typical of Derrida's insistence on how one addresses and analyses any textual form. For Derrida, the notion of 'reading' is one that implies a comprehensive commentary on a poem or novel in its entirety, an achievement which is impossible. One can never *finally* read or claim to

have read a text in its entirety. One must continue carefully to read and re-read, because the act of reading is always marked by an ever-receding horizon. It is always to come.

III *This, therefore, will not have been 'Jacques Derrida'*

Where should one start, though, with the text signed *Jacques Derrida*? A biography tells us little or nothing of the work. Certainly, the text cannot be understood only by the biography or restricted to that life as if it were the first and final context. Wherever the biography marks itself on the text, the one is not the same as the other, and biography is not a replacement for close, patient reading of a paragraph or two. It is a narrative device sustained by the authority of raw facts and dates designed to stabilize the reception of an image, co-mingling public and private, as though in doing so one could provide a way into, or a substitute for, the writing of the person being discussed.

If one is to speak to the question of how Derrida reads and writes reading, we ought to begin by understanding that the question for the reader of Derrida is one of inventing ways to disrupt received narratives. Let us therefore conclude this introduction by turning towards the interest of the next chapter, *deconstruction*. The received narratives concerning this word amount to, or include, statements concerning its existence as a form of literary theory. It is a method of analysis, a school of thought, a programme for reading according to an interdisciplinary amalgam of linguistic, philosophical, and psychoanalytic discourses. Regarding the origins of deconstruction, the received and institutional narratives strive to separate the philosophical from the linguistic or literary and stake claims in philosophy rather than language. As you can see though, if you reflect on the first of Derrida's two responses cited at the beginning of this

introduction, there is no simple origin, no single source from which everything can be traced. Instead, what takes place between discourses and remains to be read as the motion, if you will, of the other, that gives to any discourse or institution its determining features whilst remaining other than, and heterogeneous to, those elements—this is what interests Derrida: that which is irrecoverable to any homogeneous order and yet which supports it, causing the identity, meaning, discourse, institution or ontology to take place.

As you will see in the following chapter, representations of deconstruction as method, school of thought, programme and so on, are *misrepresentations* for the reasons explained there. Consider, instead though, the following commentary on deconstruction. Deconstruction, Derrida argues, ‘not only teaches us to read literature more thoroughly by attending to it as *language*...through a complex play of signifying traces;’

it also enables us to interrogate the covert philosophical and political presuppositions of institutionalized critical methods which generally govern our reading of a text. There is in deconstruction something which challenges every teaching institution. (DO, 155)

There is much more to this quotation, and I shall consider it in the next chapter. For now however, notice how Derrida, in speaking of a provisional definition for ‘deconstruction’, emphasizes equally language, philosophy and politics, and by way of a further orientation a challenge to ‘every teaching institution’. By institution, Derrida refers not only to the material manifestations such as universities, but also to the operative and normative discourses, from

administrative protocols and procedures, to the discourses and disciplines, to which the various discourses pertain.

The question is therefore one of *inventing* new translations for reading and writing within the institutional, operating on and transforming them from within. Derrida has pursued repeatedly the effective *invention* or translations of such concepts. (*Invention* will be considered in the final chapter.) His purpose has been to ‘eviscerate and re-assemble them in difference, interrupt[ing] the received programs of perception, interpretation, and experience—and in the process of altering this past...hold open the space for the arrival of the unprecedented event, of a virtual or alternative “future” to those [that are] programmatically foreseeable’ (Cohen 2001, 2). To this extent that a number of academics who claim to read Derrida have not recognized this means the broad contexts of Derrida’s misreception have remained largely static. Insisting on transforming Derrida’s patient acts of reading into methods, and circling around the same arguments concerned with the origins or provenance of Derrida’s thought in the academic context, arguments have remained resolutely unattentive to the aporia, the gaps or impasses in their own structures. They have succumbed to the symptomatic procedures by which they seek to identify both Derrida and deconstruction.

If we can summarize Derrida in any way then, it is as the thinker of this aporia, as a thinker of the space, the gap, the deviation or swerve within any ontology, meaning or identity. His work repeatedly stresses that one can ‘only respond by tracing the gap’ and the ‘histories of the gap’ (Gaston 2006, vii). The gap is necessary to thought. It takes place as a place and as the possibility of a between; unbridgeable in itself it nonetheless opens itself, within a discourse, within an institution, within cultures and politics, in order to give place to the possibility of an other taking

place, the unprecedented event by which transformation, translation, interruption have their chances. Reading after Derrida one must fall, be precipitated headlong into the gap, so as to avoid reappropriation (Gaston 2005, 97) so as to leave oneself naked and open to the unforeseeable, and thus, in taking a chance on the precipitate decision.

It is in thinking the gap, each time in the patient reading or *invention* of a singular text, institution or situation, that Derrida avoids reappropriation, recuperation, not least in terms of 'theory' or programme. There is therefore never an objective position or 'metaposition' (Fynsk 2003, x). Instead, Derrida enters into an engaged, committed relation to the other by which his reading is guided resistant to any ready-made position. There is to his work an aspect of 'fundamental research' insisting, demonstrating repeatedly, tirelessly, the gap or unthought within any system, as this enables an interrogation of the 'structure of representation' (Fynsk 2003, x) by which the system, model, or institution maintains itself. In this fashion, in endlessly inventive and interruptive ways, Derrida opens the textual network of traces and the history of its silences, omissions, and absences, to an unexpected event of reading, and so to other readings to come, beyond the expectation of any programmable or predictable future or horizon.

Thinking without programme from within that structure, and yet with a smiling and affirmative resistance to the systems he inhabits, Derrida achieves a different 'level of reflection', which in any number of examples had previously been unavailable. In its exposure of the limits of any 'language', theory, or philosophy, Derrida may seem to move to 'a new level of complexity or difficulty...[involving, for some] an irritating complication' (Fynsk 2003, xiii). However, for others, he offers profound possibilities for the transformation of the 'realities at stake' undergirding any practice through 'sustained attention to the grain of thought in its textual elaboration' (Fynsk

2003, xiii). Every text by Derrida is a profession of faith in the undecidable and what is to come. It entails a 'labyrinthine movement', a 'performative and at times vertiginous mobility', the 'explosive variants and viral elaborations' of which are the hallmarks of a movement and a spacing in pursuit of an 'irreducible element' (Cohen 2001, 6). It is through an attention to such movement, to irreducible elements such as the *performative*, *writing* and *singularity*, *literature*, *representation* and *being*, amongst other things, that we will speak.