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Revue Alter

THE DOUBLE MEANING OF *DIFFÉRANCE* : REMARKS ON ITS FIRST APPEARANCE

Daniele De Santis

It is in 1965 that, as well known, Derrida publishes in *Tel Quel* one of his most important writings on Antonin Artaud: *La parole soufflée*. In what follow, however, the deep meaning of such an essay is not immediately related to the specifically Artaudian questions it arises, but to the fact that Derrida's most famous neologism – *différance* – makes between its pages (for three times) the first appearance. It is in any case important to keep in mind the distinction between its two different editions: Derrida himself, by republishing the essay two years later in *L'écriture et la différence* (1967), has modified it including furthermore four new additions of "*différance*". Here the passages in question :

Inspiration is the drama, with several characters, of theft, the structure of the classical theater in which the invisibility of the prompter [souffleur] ensures the indispensable différence and intermittence between a text already written by another hand and an interpreter already dispossessed of that which he receives¹.

And this différence, these delays, this relay of representation extend and liberate the play of the signifier, thus multiplying the places and moments of elusion².

Their origin and active movement – differing, différence – are enclosed³.

Furtive différence could not have insinuated itself with the aid of writ-ing but, rather, slipped in between two forms of writing, thereby placing my life outside the work and making its origin – my flesh – into the epigraph and breathless sarcophagus of my discourse⁴.

1. Jacques Derrida, "La parole soufflée", in *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 262. We have taken into account also the English translation by Alan Bass as *Writing and Difference*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1992.

2. J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, op. cit., p. 286.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 288.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

While in the first, second and fourth quotation just the single *différance* is added in 1967, the third quotation is totally absent from the first version.

Nevertheless, before beginning our analysis and reconstruction of the philosophical setting and discussion wherein Derrida writes for the first time the word *différance*, we should recall a very important Eberhard Gruber's essay with his hypothesis on the first appearance of the neologism⁵. Discussing about the three different editions of the text "La différence", Gruber remarks in a footnote: "Derrida mentions for the first time the word *différance* probably in 1959 during his lecture in Cerisy-la-Salle "'Genèse et structure' et la phénoménologie", of which only the publication in *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 239) enables to read the homophony". Here the passage from *L'écriture et la différence* quoted by Gruber:

*This irreducible difference is due to an interminable différence of the theoretical foundation*⁶.

Certainly, we don't have the first version of "'Genèse et structure' et la phénoménologie" (1959), but just its first publication of 1965 as essay in *Entretiens sur les notions de genèse et de structure*⁷, at the beginning of the which the editors have added a footnote to remark: "Mr. Derrida, which has reassessed and completed his text, has added a certain number of explicative notes and references"⁸. If at this point we recall the same passage quoted by Gruber, from the same text, but from this older edition, we could read:

*This irreducible difference is due to an interminable difference of the theoretical foundation*⁹.

Gruber never takes into account the text of 1965, but only its republication (with the addition of a *différance*) in *L'écriture et la différence*, presupposing the first appearance in 1959: in this way we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation in which we have *différance* (according to Gruber) in "'Genèse et structure' et la phénoménologie" (1959); not in the same text six years later (1965) but only in "La parole soufflée" and then, once more, in "Genèse et structure" in *L'écriture et la différence* (1967). On the first appearance of *différance* in the text on Artaud one can find a further evidence in the fact that Élisabeth Roudinesco, talking with Derrida about a politics of difference, refers the reader to "La parole soufflée" for such a first Derridean use of

5. Eberhard Gruber, "Différ(ence)", in Marie-Louise Mallet, Ginette Michaud (éds.), *Derrida*, Paris, L'Herne, 2004, p. 191-198.

6. Jacques Derrida, "'Genèse et structure' et la phénoménologie", in *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 239.

7. Jacques Derrida, "'Genèse et structure' et la phénoménologie", in Maurice de Gandillac, Lucien Goldmann, Jean Piaget (eds.), *Entretiens sur les notions de genèse et de structure*, Paris, Mouton, 1965, p. 243-260.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 243 in footnote.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 251.

The double meaning of “différance”

*différance*¹⁰ : in any way, by recalling only the text of 1967 (as Roudinesco does), and never the original edition of 1965, we run the risk to take into account also the four other additions of *différance*.

* * *

The speculative setting of Derridean analysis oscillates between two kinds of metaphysics : on the one hand there is the dualistic metaphysics against which Artaud writes: metaphysics of differences and oppositions between soul and body, speech and existence; it is a metaphysics of expropriation and dissociation : “the theft of speech is not a theft among others; it is confused with the very possibility of theft”¹¹ –; on the other hand a “metaphysics of subjectivity” which is “powerfully at work in Artaud's thought”¹²; “metaphysics of subjectivity” or “metaphysics of life”¹³, “metaphysics of flesh which determines Being as life”¹⁴ and as “property” : “Proper is the name of the subject close to himself”¹⁵. It is in such a philosophical context – in such a dualism or conflict between dualism (metaphysics of difference and opposition) and monism (“Artaud teaches us this unity prior to dissociation”) – that *différance* makes its first and absolute appearance :

*There we already find prescribed a descent towards the depth at which the distinction of theatrical organs (author-text/director-actor-public), in the manifestation of forces, no longer would be possible. Now this system of organic divisions, this différence, has never been possible, except when distributed around an object, book, or libretto*¹⁶.

Here *différance* means “system of organic divisions”, namely not a single difference or a set of specific distinctions, but the systematic whole of metaphysical differences and oppositions as such against which Artaud argues to reestablish the “unity prior to dissociation”.

One page later, discussing once more about speech and its theft, the second *différance* :

*To let one's speech be spirited away is, like writing itself, the urphenomenon of the reserve : the abandoning of the self to the furtive, to discretion and separation, is, at the same time, accumulation, capitalization, the security of the delegated or deferred decision. To leave one's speech to the furtive is to tranquilize oneself into différence, that is to say, into economy*¹⁷.

10. Jacques Derrida, Élisabeth Roudinesco, *De quoi demain... Dialogue*, Paris, Galilée, 2001, chapter two.

11. J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, op. cit., p. 262.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 266.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 268.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 272.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 285.

It is important to remark the words “reserve”, “accumulation”, “capitalization” and “economy”, because it is in another very similar philosophical and economic context – in *De la grammatologie*'s first edition (December 1965/January 1966) – that we can find a *différance*. Here the passage directly quoted from *Critique* :

*If we could quote the expression ventured by Leroi-Gourhan, one could speak of a “liberation of memory”, of an exteriorization of the trace which, beginning from the elementary programs of so-called “instinctive” behavior up to the constitution of electronic card-indexes, enlarges the difference (we would say différence) and the possibility of putting in reserve : it at once and in the same movement constitutes and effaces so-called conscious subjectivity, its logos, and its theological attributes*¹⁸.

The last *différance* (we come back to “La parole soufflée”) appears at the end of the writing, where Derrida sums his analysis on the two metaphysics – “as the metaphysics of inalienable life and historic indifference... as the metaphysics which lives within difference, within metaphor and the work, and thus within alienation”¹⁹ –, their inner solidarity and complicity. Here the quotation :

*Now difference or différence, with all the modifications laid bare by Artaud – can only be conceived as such beyond metaphysics, towards the Difference or Duplicity – of which Heidegger speaks. It could be thought that this latter Difference, which simultaneously opens and conceals truth, and in fact distinguishes nothing – the invisible accomplice of all speech – is furtive power itself, if this were not to confuse the metaphysical and metaphorical category of the furtive with that which makes it possible*²⁰.

This passage is not easy to interpret because of the recalling of Heideggerian Difference, and of the relation that binds this latter to *différance* itself through the preposition “towards” : “towards the Difference or Duplicity”. On the one hand in fact we have difference and *différance*, on the other hand Difference and Duplicity, so that thinking the former “towards the Difference or Duplicity” could mean at the same time taking *différance* as Difference or simply considering *différance* – “system of organic divisions” – starting from Heideggerian Difference and Duplicity. But the second part of the quotation asserts precisely that “It could be thought that... Difference... is furtive power itself”, but “this were to confuse the metaphysical and metaphorical category... with what which makes it possible”. According to

18. Jacques Derrida, “De la grammatologie II”, *Critique*, January 1966, p. 23-53: p. 46. In this first edition *différance* appears a second time at the end of the text: “This common root, that we have strategically nicknamed *trace*, *reserve*, or *différance*, could be called *writing* and system of *written* signs only within the historical closure of both science and philosophy” (*ibid.*, p. 53).

19. J. Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, *op. cit.*, p. 290.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 291-292.

this last sentence the difference between *différance* and Difference is the difference between the “system of organic divisions” as “furtive power” or “theft” and its condition of possibility; between “metaphysics” or “metaphor” – “It is the metaphor that Artaud wants to destroy”²¹ as phenomenon of difference²² – and its non-metaphorical and non-metaphysical origin. In other words : *différance* means, the first time Derrida has made use of it, the metaphysics itself as expropriation and dissociation : i.e., not a deferring or delaying movement but the systematic whole of metaphysical differences thought, as such, in the light (literally) of Heidegger’s ontological Difference²³. The situation, here, seems to be exactly the opposite of the lecture “La différence” (1968), where “*différance*, in a certain and very strange way, (is) “older” than the ontological difference”, to such an extent to become “the historical and epochal *unfolding* of Being or of ontological difference” :

*are not the thought of the meaning or truth of Being, the determination of différence as the onto-ontological difference, difference thought within the horizon of the question of Being, still intrametaphysical effects of différence*²⁴?

Here the essential features of Derrida’s theoretical position developed throughout “La différence” : as every single (intra-metaphysical) difference is thought within the horizon of Being, namely within the horizon of onto-ontological difference, as this latter, in its turn, is thought within the horizon of *différance*. Derrida writes that “this is why the Heracliteian play of the *hen diapheron heauto*, of the one *différant* from itself, the one in conflict with itself, already is lost like a trace in the determination of the *diapherein* as ontological difference”²⁵. We can present schematically such a situation in this way :

21. *Ibid.*, p. 275.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 267: “If difference, within its phenomenon, is the sign of theft or of the purloined breath, it is primarily, if not in itself, the total dispossession”.

23. Following this reconstruction of the appearance of *différance* we cannot agree, at least philologically, with Lawlor’s hypothesis, according to which “Derrida’s concept of *différance* derives from the Husserlian concept of *intentionality*”, Leonard Lawlor, *Derrida and Husserl. The Basic Problem of Phenomenology*, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2002, p. 3. On the contrary, *différance* is originally conceived to think and translate grammatically the concept of (Heideggerian) metaphysics. See furthermore Dominique Janicaud, “Jacques Derrida”, in *Heidegger en France. II*, Paris, Hachette, 2001, p. 89-126: p. 96. In this interview Derrida confesses us he studied Heidegger between the years 1960 and 1965, with a lecture at the university, in the academic year 1965-1966, on “L’histoire chez Heidegger” that at the last moment he decided (with the title *La question de l’histoire*) to not publish as book. In effect, we have flipped through the pages of *Critique* between the years 1965 and 1970: a Derrida’s text is always announced, but with the title *Les questions de Heidegger*, until 1970. In any case, this interview sustains our reconstruction of the first Heideggerian context of *différance*.

24. Jacques Derrida, “La différence”, in *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris, Minuit, 1968, p. 1-29: p. 23.

25. For other references to Heraclites, see J. Derrida, *Marges – de la philosophie, op. cit.*, p. 8; “L’oreille de Heidegger. Philopolémologie”, in *Politiques de l’amitié suivi de L’oreille de Heidegger*,

différance or *diapherein* → ontico-ontological difference → intra-metaphysical differences

On the contrary, according to "La parole soufflée" (1965), meaning *différance* nothing else but the metaphysics as totality of differences and expropriations to think starting from Heideggerian Difference – and this latter, as Derrida also writes in 1964, not simply has "a sense", because "it is sense"²⁶ – the schematic presentation would be very different :

Heidegger's Difference or Duplicity → *différance* or "system of organic divisions" → differences

* * *

To better understand the meaning of such a first appearance of *différance* we would briefly take into account some of the additions from *L'écriture et la différence*, starting from the long new passage added at the end of the writing after Heidegger's Difference and Duplicity²⁷. Here Derrida adds that Artaud "keeps himself at the limit", the limit between metaphysics of alienation or difference and metaphysics of property : on one side "Artaud's "metaphysics", at its most critical moments, fulfills the most profound and permanent ambition of Western metaphysics", but on the other side "Artaud affirms the cruel... law of difference; a law that this time is raised to the level of consciousness and is no longer experienced within metaphysical naiveté"²⁸. In this way Derrida alters, if not the theoretical setting itself, at least his interpretation of such a setting : while in 1965 in fact he considered as the deepest meaning of Artaud's metaphysics the concepts of "property" and of subjectivity close to himself and without differences, here Derrida suggests that the true meaning of Artaud's metaphysics consists in raising "to the level of consciousness" the cruel law of difference itself. In this way, Artaud's reconstruction of "unity prior to dissociation" unfolds at the same time two contradictory meanings : according to first it accomplishes the "permanent ambition of Western metaphysics" ("metaphysics of inalienable

Paris, Galilée, 1994, p. 341-419: p. 414; "Nous autres Grecs", in AA. VV., *Nos Grecs et leurs modernes*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, p. 273; Jacques Derrida, Maurizio Ferrarsi, *Il gusto del segreto*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, 1997. For the origin of the Heracliteian *hen diapheron heauto*, quoted by Derrida himself several times, see Friedrich Hölderlin, "Hyperion", in *Werke und Briefe*, Bd. I, Frankfurt a. M., Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992, p. 367: "Das große Wort, daß – *en diapheron eauto*, das eine in sich selber Unterschiedne – des Heraklit, das konnte nur ein Grieche finden, das es ist das Wesen der Schönheit, und ehe das gefunden war, gabs keine Philosophie".

26. J. Derrida, "Violence et métaphysique", in *L'écriture et la différence*, op. cit., p. 117-228: p. 200: "Mais si l'ontologie n'est pas un truisme, ou du moins un truisme parmi d'autres, si l'étrange différence entre l'être et l'étant a un sens, est le sens, peut-on parler de 'priorité' de l'être par rapport à l'étant [n.s.]?"

27. *Ibid.*, all the text from "Artaud se tient sur la limite" (p. 291) to "risque toujours de retourner à la métaphysique" (p. 292) is added in 1967.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 291.

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life and historic indifference”), but according to second we should conceive the attempt to go beyond the differences not as an attempt to realize an undifferentiating life but, on the contrary, to become conscious of differences *qua* differences or of their delaying and differing movement.

To enforce this reconstruction of *différance*'s double meaning in 1967 we want to quote another addition too. In the same short passage where *différance* has made the first appearance – and where Artaud opposes to the “system of organic divisions” as “theft of speech” the necessity of an “illegibility” : “In theatrical illegibility, in the night that precedes the book, the sign has not yet been separated from force” – Derrida adds in 1967:

*It is not quite yet a sign, in the sense in which we understand sign, but is no longer a thing, which we conceive only as opposed to the sign*²⁹.

Asserting “it is not *quite yet* a sign” is asserting that such an “illegibility” – totally indifferent to differences in 1965 – has to become a sign. It is asserting, being the “sign” just phenomenon of difference, that it has to become (it is not *quite yet* a difference) difference: its un-postponable differing and delaying. While “illegibility” means in 1965 the mythic place of “inalienable life and historic indifference”, becomes in 1967 the place itself which is still prior to differences and expropriations, but not as their opposite, rather as what, by changing the viewpoint, takes back “to the level of consciousness” the differences themselves in their differentiation.

Here the double sense of *différance*. And this particular duplicity is due to the fact that Derrida, republishing “La parole soufflée” two years later in *L'écriture et la différence*, superimposes to the first meaning of 1965 – *différance* as metaphysical system of divisions and differences thought in the light of Heidegger's Difference – a second and more articulated meaning of *différance* as a differing older than the ontico-ontological difference. In this way the situation we should face at the end of this our analytical reconstruction is the one related to the semantic opposition, or even antinomy, between these two kinds of *différance*: if on the one hand in fact we have a metaphysics of oppositions, crystallizations and petrifications and on the other hand the active, dynamic and kinetic delaying, the question which rises is – “How is it possible, or in what way the differing movement, nothing else but an Heracliteian river, could paralyze itself to such an extent to become a system of oppositions and organic divisions?”. Because there is certainly, between these two “*différance*”, identity of names, but also a so radical constitutional or “ontological” (we use inverted commas) heterogeneity to forbid something as a conceptual communication or possible transit between them.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 284.

SYNOPTIC TABLE ON *LA PAROLE SOUFFLÉE*³⁰

| 1965 | 1967 |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>First appearances</p> <p>“There we already find prescribed a descent toward the depth at which the distinction of theatrical organs (author-text/director-actor-public), in the manifestation of forces, no longer would be possible. Now this system of organic divisions, this <i>différance</i>, has never been possible, except when distributed around an object, book, or libretto” (p. 284).</p> <p>“To let one's speech be spirited away is, like writing itself, the urphenomenon of the reserve : the abandoning of the self to the furtive, to discretion and separation, is, at the same time, accumulation, capitalization, the security of the delegated or deferred decision. To leave one's speech to the furtive is to tranquilize oneself into <i>différance</i>, that is to say, into economy” (p. 285).</p> <p>“Now difference or <i>différance</i>, with all the modifications laid bare by Artaud – can only be conceived as such beyond metaphysics, towards the Difference or Duplicity – of which Heidegger speaks. It could be thought that this latter Difference, which simultaneously opens and conceals truth, and in fact distinguishes nothing – the invisible accomplice of all speech – is furtive power itself, if this were not to confuse the metaphysical and metaphorical category of the furtive with that which makes it possible” (p. 291-292).</p> | <p>Additions</p> <p>“Inspiration is the drama, with several characters, of theft, the structure of the classical theater in which the invisibility of the prompter ensures the indispensable <i>différance</i> and intermittence between a text already written by another hand and an interpreter already dispossessed of that which he receives” (p. 262).</p> <p>“And the <i>différance</i>, these delays, this relay of representation extend and liberate the play of the signifier, thus multiplying the places and moments of elusion” (p. 286).</p> <p>“Their origin and active movement – differing, <i>différance</i> – are enclosed” (p. 288).</p> <p>“Furtive <i>différance</i> could not have insinuated itself with the aid of writing but, rather, slipped in between two forms of writing, thereby placing my life outside the work and making its origin – my flesh – into the epigraph and breathless sarcophagus of my discourse” (p. 289).</p> |

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30. The pages are quoted from Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil 1967.