

RICERCHE

The being-in-the-world of psyche: Derrida's early reading of Freud

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Abstract In this article, I propose an original re-interpretation of the encounter between deconstruction and psychoanalysis as it is described by Jacques Derrida in his early essay “*Freud and the scene of writing*” (1966). My working hypothesis is that Derrida first reads psychoanalysis as a *partially deconstructive* human science. To test this hypothesis, I begin by demonstrating that Derrida's reading draws on the description of deconstructive sciences offered since his early version of *Grammatology* (1965-66). Second, I explain that it traces across Freud's work the increasing adequation of the psychoanalytic account of psychism to the model of a somehow spontaneous archiving machine. Finally, I show that, for Derrida, as a consequence of this adequation, psychism – understood as the origin of life, temporalization and the relation to the other – also marks the beginning of the history of technics. As my analyses develop, it should become increasingly evident that any critical assessments of Derrida's encounter with psychoanalysis must reckon with the overall project of deconstruction in which this encounter is inscribed.

KEYWORDS: Deconstruction; Life; Psychoanalysis; Technics; World

Riassunto *L'essere-nel-mondo della psiche: le prime interpretazioni freudiane di Derrida* - In questo lavoro intendo proporre una re-interpretazione originale dell'incontro tra decostruzione e psicoanalisi come lo descrive Jacques Derrida nel suo saggio “*Freud e la scena della scrittura*” (1966). La mia ipotesi di lavoro è che Derrida abbia letto in prima istanza la psicoanalisi come una scienza umana *in parte decostruttiva*. Per verificare questa ipotesi inizierò mostrando che la lettura di Derrida attinge alla descrizione delle scienze decostruttive offerta sin dalle prime versioni di *Della grammatologia* (1965-66). In secondo luogo proverò a illustrare come si ritrovi nell'opera di Freud un progressivo allinearsi della descrizione psicoanalitica dello psichismo al modello di un apparato di archiviazione più o meno spontaneo. Mostrerò infine che, per Derrida, come conseguenza di questo allineamento, lo psichismo – inteso come origine della vita, temporalizzazione e relazione all'altro – segna anche l'inizio della storia della tecnica. Con lo sviluppo delle mie analisi diverrà sempre più chiaro che una valutazione critica dell'incontro di Derrida con la psicoanalisi debba fare i conti con il progetto complessivo della decostruzione in cui questo stesso incontro si iscrive.

PAROLE CHIAVE: Decostruzione; Vita; Psicoanalisi; Tecnica; Mondo

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The system of “hearing-oneself-speak” through the phonic substance [...] has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between the wordly and the non-wordly

J. DERRIDA, *Of grammarology*

1 Psychoanalysis as a deconstructive science

JACQUES DERRIDA’S ESSAY *Freud and the scene of writing* (hereafter referred to as FSW), first published in *Tel Quel* (1966) and then included in *Writing and difference* (1967), consists in the second part of a talk given at the Paris *Institut de psychanalyse* at the invitation of André Green (1966). Derrida gave this talk after the publication of the early version of his *Of grammarology* in *Critique* (1965-66). As Derrida points out in the brief note preceding the text of FSW, «at that time we were concerned with [*il s’agissait de*] opening a debate around certain propositions advanced in previous of my essays, notably, *Grammarology*».¹

This introductory note includes a short summary of the first part of the talk. I will highlight the two main points of this summary, which reveal the urgency, for Derrida, of measuring deconstruction against psychoanalysis. These points support the argument that deconstruction demarcates itself from psychoanalysis so long as the latter subscribes to so-called logocentrism, identified by Derrida as the repression of writing that drives the history of metaphysics. First, Derrida affirms, «despite appearances, the deconstruction of logocentrism is not a psychoanalysis of philosophy».² As he explains later, we may think that the opposite is true, since deconstruction develops as the analysis of the historical repression of writing since Plato. However, this is Derrida’s second point, all Freudian concepts «belong to the history of metaphysics, that is, to the system of logocentric repression which was organized in order to exclude or to lower (to put outside or below), the body of the written trace as a didactic and technical metaphor».³ As we see later, by complicating this association of psychoanalysis and logocentrism, in his subsequent analyses, Derrida traces across Freud’s work the progressive adequation between the scriptural metaphor and the structure of memory and life and thus the increasing convergence with the project of deconstruction.

My reading hypothesis is that FSW further elaborates the relation between deconstruction and psychoanalysis, in light of *Grammarology*, by interpreting the latter as a *somehow* or *partially deconstructive* human science. This hypothesis builds on the analysis of the deconstructive research carried out by a *part* of modern linguistics, which Derrida provides in the opening part of *Grammarology*. By starting from this analysis, which schol-

arship has overlooked, I will propose an original reading of Derrida’s essay that aims to reckon with the latter’s two main problematics, namely, the being-in-the-world of psyche and the relation between psyche and the history of technics.

In the beginning of *Grammarology*, Derrida casts light on a transformation at work in Western culture – which I will designate as *grammatization* – that amounts to the recourse to the code of writing (*grammē*) in all cultural discourses of his day, from biology (genetic pro-*gramme*) to linguistics, and thus to the understanding of writing as the element of experience in general. Within this framework, Derrida engages in a comparative reading of Heidegger’s question of being against the particular science of modern linguistics.⁴ Interestingly, Derrida argues that there is a part of modern linguistics that exceeds the regionalist organization of knowledge and experience as it is described by Heidegger in *Being and time* §3 – that is, in the lexicon of Heidegger, the subordination of ontic sciences to regional ontologies and, in turn, of regional ontologies to a fundamental ontology.⁵ According to this organization, ontic sciences would wait for a fundamental ontology, which poses the question of *the meaning of being* in general, to being assigned the determinate region of being corresponding to their field of investigation. In the case of deconstructive linguistics, according to Derrida, the latter calls into question the Western concept of language (and the related values of the word and voice), which hinges on the presupposition of *the meaning of being* and thus of a fundamental ontology. For Derrida, deconstructive linguistics takes writing, which, as we know, is traditionally considered a didactic and technical metaphor, as the constitutive movement of language, and thus testifies to the aforementioned grammatization of experience.⁶ Derrida’s argument reads as follows:

If modern linguistics remains completely enclosed within a classical conceptuality, if especially it naively uses the word being and all that it presupposes, that which, within this linguistics, deconstructs the unity of the word in general can no longer, according to the model of the Heideggerian question, as it functions powerfully from the very opening of *Being and Time*, be circumscribed as ontic science or regional ontology. In as much as the question of being unites indissolubly with the precomprehension of the word being, without being reduced to it, the linguistics that works for the deconstruction of the constituted unity of that word has only, in fact or in principle, to have the question of being posed in order to define its field and the order of its dependence. Not only is its field no longer simply ontic, but the limits of ontology that correspond to it no

longer have anything regional about them.⁷

At this point, Derrida wonders if the deconstructive character associated to some linguistics can be extended to other scientific research that would be equally committed to calling into question the regionalist organization of knowledge and, consequently, the logocentrism and fundamental ontology undergirding this organization. He thus makes the case for psychoanalysis as the most promising deconstructive human science. «It is in psychoanalytic research», he observes, «that this breakthrough [*percée*] seems at present to have the greatest likelihood of being expanded».⁸ Here, I suggest, Derrida does not only argue for the deconstructive potential of psychoanalysis but paves the way for the encounter with Freud staged in FSW.⁹

It is time to reformulating my reading hypothesis in light of the detour that I have taken through *Grammatology*. In what follows, I will demonstrate that Derrida tracks those places in Freud's work that exceed the regional limits of the ontic science of psychology, whose field of investigation, as Derrida recalls later, is the region of being corresponding to the psychic as non-worldly or as opposite to the world. According to Derrida, in these places, the psychic apparatus brought to light by psychoanalysis accounts for the scene of writing, understood, in the wake of *Grammatology*, as the game of the world, that is, as the movement constitutive of experience in general, including, as we see later, the difference between the non-worldly (the psychic, or the transcendental) and the world (writing itself, or the empirical).¹⁰ Ultimately, the two components of this apparatus, psychic content and psychic device – whose synthetic account, as Derrida points out from the beginning, constitutes the *telos* of Freud's work and is achieved only at its latest stage – are described as the labor of writing and the functioning of a writing machine, respectively. On the one hand, the psychic content is seen as the general text of experience that opens up the difference between psyche and the world, and thus affirms the singular being-in-the-world of psyche. On the other hand, from a historico-theoretical perspective, the psychic writing device calls into question the metaphysical and logocentric conception of the sovereign and responsible subject of perception and memory, and implies the unfolding of the history of life as the history of technics, that is, the history of the production of increasingly sophisticated writing machines.

2 The Freud reading programme

In the first section of FSW, Derrida presents a reading programme that builds on the project, sketched in *Grammatology*, of exploring the de-

constructive implications of psychoanalytic research. In this programme, we can recognize the interpretative tasks that I have just highlighted. It can be divided into three stages. Derrida starts by illustrating the general aim of his essay: showing that the “historical originality” of the path broached by Freud (*percée*) consists in the deconstruction of the logocentric closure encompassing the history of philosophy and the movement of the human sciences (to begin with, as we know, linguistics).¹¹ Later, Derrida develops this general aim into the specific tasks concerning the two components of the psychic system (or psychism) explored by psychoanalysis (that is, psychic content and device).

First, Derrida explains that the psychoanalytic deconstruction of logocentrism consists in resorting to scriptural or graphic metaphors in order to account for the psychic content. As Derrida points out, these metaphors are not borrowed from spoken language or phonetic writing, that is, they do not draw on the Western concept of language, but they consist in a kind of originary or primordial writing, «a script which is never subject to, never exterior and posterior to, the spoken word».¹² Furthermore, they are not merely didactic or instrumental but indispensable, as they reveal the movement constitutive of experience, which Derrida identifies as the written trace and of which empirical writing is an effect. As Derrida puts it, «if such metaphors are indispensable, it is perhaps because they illuminate, inversely, the meaning of a trace in general, and eventually, in articulation with this meaning, may illuminate the meaning of writing in the popular sense [*au sens courant*]».¹³ To summarize, Derrida announces that, in line with his general aim concerning the deconstructive character of psychoanalytic research, he will focus on these moments in which Freud's account of psychism exceeds the limits of logocentric regionalism and reveals the grammatization of experience. From this perspective, scriptural metaphors are not merely worldly, but prove the irreducible being-in-the-world of psychism (the game of the world, the opening of the difference between psyche and the world, and so forth).

Second, Derrida questions himself concerning the psychic apparatus, of which, at the end of his path, Freud provides an overall account as a writing machine. Derrida seems to suggest that this description of psychism is interwoven together with the history of technics and of writing and archiving technologies. «Finally», he wonders, «what must be the relationship between psychism, writing, and spacing for such a metaphoric transition to be possible, not only, nor primarily, within theoretical discourse, but within the history of psychism, text, and technology?».¹⁴ As we see later, deconstructive psychoanalysis, in the sense suggested in *Grammatology*, casts light on the history of technical production that be-

gins with the being-in-the-world of psychism.

3 The metaphorical model of *frayage*

Derrida's reading of psychoanalysis as a deconstructive science focuses on three moments of Freud's path: the early metaphorical model of *frayage* (*Bahnung*), the description of the psychic content as writing, and the late unified account of psychism as a scene of writing. Following the chronological trajectory of Derrida's reading, I will start from the exploration of the model of *frayage* as the earliest index of deconstruction that, according to my reading, Derrida finds at stake in psychoanalytic research. I will explain that Derrida interprets Freud's recourse to this model as the first stage of a progression that, to his view, frees Freud's path from the legacy of natural sciences (namely, the quantitative explanation of psychic events) and leads it to a deconstructive account of psychism. As we see later, Derrida interprets Freud's model of *frayage* as a metaphorical model that is not merely didactic or instrumental but indispensable to make memory possible, that is, to avoid the paralysis that a so-called naturalist (or quantitative) explanation of memory would necessarily entail. This indispensable metaphor, which is the differential structure of the trace or the movement of difference, thus accounts for the minimal condition for memory and, more generally, life. From this perspective, I will show, Derrida finds already in this early stage of psychoanalysis a deconstructive science that exceeds the limits of ontic psychology.

Derrida begins by recalling the context of the *Project for scientific psychology* (1895). At this stage, the aim of Freud's research is a naturalistic and quantitative explanation of psychic events. In particular, the key task of psychology, still understood as a natural science, is an explanation of memory that draws together the apparently diverging requirements of the permanence of the trace and the virginity of the surface of reception.¹⁵ The explanation proposed by Freud consists in the hypothesis of *frayage*, for which there are two kinds of neurons, the permeable neurons or the neurons of perception (ϕ), «which offer no resistance and thus retain no trace of impression», and other neurons, those of memory (ψ), «which would oppose contact-barriers to the quantity of excitation», and «would thus retain the printed trace» taken as «the breaking through of a path (*Bahn*)».¹⁶ Derrida draws attention to this metaphorical model as it resorts to a kind of originary writing that is irreducible to the ordinary meaning of writing as instrumental to the voice or the word:

Whatever may be thought of the continuities and ruptures to come, this hypothesis is remarkable as soon as it is considered as a metaphorical

model and not as a neurological description. Breaching, the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path. Which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to effraction. The path is broken, cracked, *fracta*, breached.¹⁷

Above all, this metaphorical model is indispensable since it prevents memory from getting stuck and allows for the preferential or differential structure of the mnemonic trace. As Derrida explains on the basis of Freud's remarks, the concept of *frayage* cannot be merely quantitative but must be differential as it presupposes the difference of forces that secures the preference of a trace over others and makes this trace retained. Here Derrida refers the presuppositions of Freud's hypothesis, highlighted by his reading, back to Nietzsche's differential and not merely quantitative conception of force.¹⁸ Therefore, Freud's metaphorical model consists in a graphic model that not only is non-phonetic but also provides the condition of possibility of memory. In other words, like the other contemporary deconstructive sciences mentioned by Derrida (such as biology or linguistics), psychoanalysis casts light on the grammatization of experience in general. Derrida writes:

We find that the concept of breaching shows itself intolerant of this intention. An equality of resistance to breaching, or an equivalence of the breaching forces, would eliminate any *preference* in the choice of itinerary. Memory would be paralyzed. It is the difference between breaches which is the true origin of memory, and thus of the psychism. Only this difference enables a "pathway to be preferred (*Wegbevorzugung*)" [...] We then must not say that breaching without difference is insufficient for memory; it must be stipulated that there is no pure breaching without difference.¹⁹

As it results from these remarks, Derrida reads Freud's early psychological description of memory as something more than the description of the region of being assigned to an ontic science (as its field of investigation) by a fundamental ontology. Here, Derrida focuses on Freud's piercing of the regional limits of the ontic science and his deconstructive account of the element of memory and life as the minimal structure of leaving/retaining a trace. Accordingly, Derrida places the early hypothesis of *frayage* within the broader horizon of an overall Freudian thinking of life as the movement of difference. «In accordance with a motif which will continue to dominate Freud's thinking», Derrida observes, «this movement [of difference] is described as the effort of life to protect itself by *deferring* a dangerous cathexis, that is, by constituting a reserve (*Vorrat*)».²⁰ As Derrida points out later, we should not understand this

thinking of life as an ontic science, for example, a biology, which, according to the traditional organization of knowledge, would be subordinate to a fundamental ontology, but as a deconstructive and grammatological science of life. Therefore, by warning us from his aforementioned definition of Freud's thinking of life, Derrida explains that there is no present life prior to the movement of self-protection or differance, and thus that differance is the *essence* of life. This, in turn, does not mean that life/differance must be thought again from the determination of being (as presence) and thus from fundamental ontology. As Derrida concludes, «life must be thought of as trace before Being may be determined as presence».²¹

In the next section, I will focus on Derrida's reading of the second moment of Freud's progression towards a unified and scriptural account of psychism. Derrida finds this moment in Freud's description of the psychic content (from the unconscious to consciousness) as the labor of writing, which Derrida interprets as the being-in-the-world of psyche (that, by definition, is supposed to be non-worldly, as opposite to the world). Through this reading of Freud, Derrida aims to make his own contribution to phenomenological debates surrounding the conception of the world and, in particular, to the discord between the conception of the origin of the world associated to Husserl and the Heideggerian conception of the being-in-the-world.

4 The Husserl-Heidegger discord about the world

Derrida finds the second index of deconstructive psychoanalysis in the description of the psychic content as a non-logocentric writing circulating across the different layers of psychism (from the unconscious to consciousness), which can be extrapolated in Freud's *Traumdeutung* (1905). To Derrida's view, the stakes of this description consist in the deconstructive reelaboration of the phenomenological concept of the world. Psychoanalysis sheds light on the scene of writing, understood as the being-in-the-world of psychism, and thus onto a new conception of the world that calls into question the opposition between the worldly or the empirical (writing) and the non-worldly or the transcendental (psyche) at work in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, and yet demarcates itself from Heidegger's conception of the being-in-the-world.

Derrida builds on the reading hypothesis that, since his *Traumdeutung*, Freud has recourse to the metaphor of writing to describe the psychic content («the psychic text in its fabric», as he puts it).²² By writing, here, Derrida means empirical writing (that which is commonly understood as writing), which, however, in the description of the

psychic text displayed by Freud, reveals the characters of general writing, that is, of the writing that, according to Derrida, constitutes the element of experience and the code of deconstructive sciences. In the preliminary explanation of his hypothesis, Derrida argues that the texture of dreams is a writing that is not instrumental to the voice and precedes the element of the Western conception of language (the word). «Topographical, temporal, and formal regression in dreams must thus be interpreted, henceforth, as a path back into a landscape of writing», Derrida writes. «Not a writing which simply transcribes, a stony echo of muted words, but a lithography before words: metaphonic, nonlinguistic, alogical».²³ Therefore, Derrida suggests, Freud would understand the interpretation of dreams as «an act of reading and decoding».²⁴ As we see later, this act is not explained as the transposition of a present meaning from text to text, but as an alternative concept of translation that hinges on the circulation of writing across different layers – namely, the game of the world or the general text of experience.

Let us focus on Derrida's reading of the epistemological cut made by Freud's *Traumdeutung* in the Western tradition of dream interpretation.²⁵ Derrida identifies this cut as a new, scriptural description of the psychic text and thus examines the implications of this description for our understanding of interpretation. As I anticipated, for Derrida, Freud employs a conception of writing that reveals the traits of general writing. Therefore, once again, psychoanalytic research transgresses the limits of ontic sciences and calls ontological regionalism into question. First, Derrida recalls that the psychic text is a non-logocentric writing, that is, an originary production that is not secondary with regards to the word and the voice, but implies its own syntax or regulated system of differences. This is why, I remark, in the text scrutinized by Derrida, Freud goes back to look into his own dreams.²⁶ This non-logocentric writing retains an element of irreducibility to any given code and thus to the transposition of its supposedly present meaning into another text. Derrida explains:

Freud doubtless conceives of the dream as a displacement similar to an original form of writing which puts words on stage without becoming subservient to them; and he is thinking here, no doubt, of a model of writing irreducible to speech which would include, like hieroglyphics, pictographic, ideogrammatic, and phonetic elements. But he makes of psychical writing so originary a production that the writing we believe to be designated by the proper sense of the word – a script which is coded and visible “in the world” would only be the metaphor of psychical writing. This writing [...] cannot be read in terms of any code. It works, no doubt, with a

mass of elements which have been codified in the course of an individual or collective history. But in its operations, lexicon, and syntax a purely idiomatic residue is irreducible.²⁷

Second, Derrida finds in this description of the psychic text, as irreducible to any given code, the structural trait of writing in general: it puts a limit to the difference between the signifier and the signified (namely, the presence of a signified as independent from the presence of the related signifier), which makes translation possible. By having recourse to this metaphorical model of originary writing, Freud is seen to do here something more than psychology (as an ontic science), that is, to point to general writing as the element of experience. «The absence of an exhaustive and absolutely infallible code», Derrida explains, «means that in psychic writing, *which thus prefigures the meaning of writing in general* [my emphasis], the difference between signifier and signified is never radical».²⁸ Later, Derrida draws out the consequences of this structural trait for our conception of general writing: «Translation, a system of translation, is possible only if a permanent code allows a substitution or transformation of signifiers while retaining the same signified, always present, despite the absence of any specific signifier».²⁹

Third, Derrida observes that the horizontal impossibility of decoding the psychic text of dreams without rest presupposes the vertical impossibility of the transition from layer to layer within the psychic system, that is, from the unconscious to consciousness. This transition cannot be thought in terms of translation, since the latter depends on the difference signifier/signified as well as on the presence of the meaning and of the text (that is supposed to carry this meaning). According to Derrida, Freud makes his reservations towards the concept of translation as «it presupposes a text which would be already there, immobile: the serene presence of a statue, of a written stone or archive whose signified content might be harmlessly transported into the milieu of a different language».³⁰

At this point, Derrida has a formalization of the conception of general writing that, to his view, undergirds Freud's metaphorical model of psychic writing and allows for a certain translatability within the psychic system. A text, understood as the originary writing that makes the difference signifier/signified tremble, cannot be the present carrier of a present meaning (not even present in the mode of the past), but constitutes a complex and differentiated structure that draws on an originary syntax. Therefore, the meaning of a text can be reconstituted only *a posteriori*, by having recourse to another text that, again, consists in a differential and non-present structure. Derrida writes:

There is no present text in general, and there is

not even a past present text, a text which is past as having been present. The text is not conceivable in an originary or modified form of presence. The unconscious text is already a weave of pure traces, differences in which meaning and force are united – a text nowhere present, consisting of archives which are *always already* transcriptions. Originary prints. Everything begins with reproduction always already: repositories of a meaning which was never present, whose signified presence is always reconstituted by deferral, *nachträglich*, belatedly, *supplementarily*.³¹

From this formalization of general writing, Derrida develops his original interpretation of Freud's energetic model of the transition from layer to layer, within the psychic system, and thus of the transition from the unconscious to consciousness (which, in turn, Derrida describes as «originary and irreducible», «in its very secondariness»). Derrida speaks about «the labor of the writing which circulated like psychical energy between the unconscious and the conscious».³² This may be interpreted as an account of the infratextual communication within the general text to which, according to Derrida, experience amounts, and, more generally, as an account of the very unfolding of this text.³³

Finally, this reading of Freud provides Derrida with the premises for sketching his deconstructive rewriting of the phenomenological concept of the world. Drawing on the conclusion that psychic writing consists in the element of experience and life and thus in the game of the world, Derrida argues that the aforementioned labor of writing (or the general text) accounts for the-being-in-the-world of psychism, that is, for the very opening of the difference between the world (or the empirical) and psyche (the transcendental, or consciousness). Ultimately, for Derrida, this argument does not merely call into question Husserl's argument for consciousness as the origin of the world and thus as independent from all that is worldly.³⁴ It also demarcates itself from Heidegger's critical reelaboration of Husserl's origin of the world into the conception of the being-in-the-world, since this reelaboration does not account for the opening of the difference between the world and the non-worldly, namely, the labor of writing, and, therefore, does not acknowledge the grammatization of experience. Let us reread this dense passage, which Derrida puts between parentheses and yet, on my reading, plays an important role in his text. It claims that psychoanalysis, as a deconstructive science, goes further than phenomenology and ontology:

The “objectivist” or “worldly” consideration of writing teaches us nothing if reference is not made to a space of psychical writing. (We might say: of transcendental writing in the

event that, along with Husserl, we would see the psychism as a region of the world. But since this is also the case for Freud, who wants to respect simultaneously the Being-in-the world of the psychism, its Being-situated, and the originality of its topology, which is irreducible to any ordinary intraworldliness, we perhaps should think that what we are describing here as the labor of writing erases the transcendental distinction between the origin of the world and Being-in-the-world. Erases it while producing it: the medium of the dialogue and misunderstanding between the Husserlian and Heideggerian concepts of Being-in-the-world.³⁵

In what follows, I will explore Derrida's reading of the final stage of Freud's work, namely, the unified account of the two components of this system (psychic content and device) as a scene of writing, which is sketched in Freud's *Notes on the mystic writing-pad* (1925). I will argue that, through this reading, Derrida brings into completion the programme outlined in the opening section of FSW. He develops the theoretical consequences, for our conceptions of subjectivity and technics, which are implicit in Freud's description of the psychic apparatus as a writing and archiving machine. In doing so, Derrida also distances himself from Freud who is finally considered unable to pursue the path that he had pierced.

5 A non-Cartesian conception of space and life

In his reading of Freud's late *Note*, Derrida highlights a three-step analogy between writing and perception,³⁶ which he takes in the traditional sense of the origin of life and of the minimal structure of temporalization and the encounter with the other.³⁷ As we know, from Derrida's perspective, this analogy testifies to the grammatization of psychism and the deconstructive transgression of the ontic science of psychology.

The first step of this analogy marks a significant shift from Platonic tradition. On the one hand, Freud seems to share with this tradition the conception of writing as an auxiliary technique (*hypomnēsis*) external to psychic memory (*mnēmē*).³⁸ On the other hand, Freud describes psychism as a device that integrates the auxiliary operation of writing. «The psychical is caught up in an apparatus», Derrida observes, «and what is written will be more readily represented as a part extracted from the apparatus and "materialized"». ³⁹ As Derrida explains, here Freud is interested in the limitations imposed by ordinary surfaces of inscription to the auxiliary operation of writing. As we know from the early *Project*, this operation requires «indefinite conservation and unlimited capacity for reception». ⁴⁰ Now, Freud points out that

classical writing surfaces are unable to satisfy these conditions simultaneously: by having recourse to this kind of surfaces, one is forced either to renew surface or to destroy inscriptions.⁴¹ In other words, Derrida remarks, Freud denounces the classical and Cartesian geometry underpinning the spatiality of those surfaces and relaunches the demand for another spatiality, which writing – more precisely, the concept of general writing highlighted by Freud – carries with itself. Derrida writes:

Such is the *res extensa* and the intelligible surface of classical writing apparatuses. [...] Their extension belongs to classical geometry and is intelligible in its terms as pure exterior without relation to itself. A different writing space must be found, a space which writing has always claimed for itself.⁴²

It is worth highlighting that, in this passage, Derrida demarcates a classical and Cartesian conception of writing surface, which is merely mechanic and deprived of spontaneity and life (self-relation), from a Freudian and, more generally, compelling conception of writing surface, which is described later as the condition for spontaneity and life. As we see below, for Derrida, despite this preliminary and promising shift, Freud falls back into a Cartesian-type understanding of life and the machine.

As Freud recalls, he had already formulated the hypothesis that such a double capacity could be explained by having recourse to two different systems that accomplish the different tasks of perception and memory, respectively.⁴³ Within this framework, he draws attention to a new writing device recently launched in the market, the mystic writing-pad, which seems to allow for that double capacity and thus to unify the psychic systems of perception and memory. Here Derrida quotes Freud's long description of the mystic pad. It is a complex writing machine that consists of the following two elements: a slab of dark wax and a thin transparent sheet, which is laid over the slab and secured to it on its top end. In turn, this sheet consists of two layers attached to each other only in their ends. The upper layer is a transparent piece of celluloid; the lower layer is a thin translucent waxed paper that adheres to the upper surface of the wax slab, when the device is not in use. To activate the mystic pad, Freud explains, one scratches with a pointed stilus the covering-sheet which rests upon the wax slab:

At the points which the stilus touches, it presses the lower surface of the waxed paper on to the wax slab, and the grooves are visible as dark writing upon the otherwise smooth whitish-gray surface of the celluloid. If one wishes to destroy what has been written, all that is necessary is to raise the double covering-sheet from the wax slab by a light pull, starting from

the free lower end. The close contact between the waxed paper and the wax slab at the places which have been scratched (upon which the visibility of the writing depended) is thus brought to an end and it does not recur when the two surfaces come together once more. The Mystic Pad is now clear of writing and ready to receive fresh inscriptions.⁴⁴

Derrida underscores Freud's attention to the protective role of the piece of celluloid.⁴⁵ This role reminds us of the movement of differance (the putting-into-reserve of the investment) that Derrida had described earlier on as a distinctive feature of Freud's work. Derrida observes that «there is no writing which does not devise some means of protection, *to protect against itself*, against the writing by which the "subject" is himself threatened as he lets himself be written: *as he exposes himself*».⁴⁶ In doing so, Derrida seems to cast light on a kind of self-relation and spontaneity of the writing device, which thus accounts for the minimal structure of life and living subjectivity. In other words, he unpacks the non-Cartesian conception of life and the machine that undergirds Freud's description of psychism as a scene of writing.

At this stage, Freud notes that another step in the analogy is required: if, on the one hand, the surface of the block is clear of writing and capable of receiving further impressions, on the other hand, the wax slab retains a permanent light, which remains visible on certain conditions.⁴⁷ As Derrida remarks, «"memory" or writing is the opening of that process of appearance [of perception]»;⁴⁸ in other words, it is required for a certain "appearance" of perception (as a trace retained in the mnemonic system), which, otherwise, would not appear at all. The third and last step of Freud's analogy consists in the account of the time of writing. For Freud, this time, which consists in a periodic distribution of impulses or investments, describes the very functioning of the multilayered device, that is, the discontinuous interruption and reconnection of the different layers that make writing possible.⁴⁹ As Derrida puts it, this time is «nothing other than the very structure of that which we are now describing», and, a little later, it is «writing as the interruption and restoration of contact between the various depths of psychological levels: the remarkably heterogeneous temporal fabric of psychological work itself».⁵⁰ From this, Freud concludes that the writing device involves two hands: a hand that writes and another that withdraws the upper layers periodically.⁵¹

The first theoretical consequence of the analogy developed by Freud between psychism and the mystic writing-pad is that the conception of the so-called classical subject, namely, of a spontaneity or self-relation that is present at itself and sovereign, is called into question. Freud describes psychism, that

is, the double system of perception and memory and, more generally, the origin of spontaneity and life, as a multilayered writing technology informed by a multiplicity of regulating instances and a discontinuous and periodic temporality. In this framework, there does not seem to be space for classical subjectivity. As Derrida explains:

A two-handed machine, a multiplicity of agencies or origins – is this not the original relation to the other and the original temporality of writing, its "primary" complication: an originary spacing, deferring, and erasure of the simple origin, and polemics on the very threshold of what we persist in calling perception?⁵²

The only spontaneity thinkable here is just the labor of writing with its functioning and temporality – a sort of inner agency, as Derrida puts it, interestingly – which is multiple and periodic. «We are written only as we write», he writes, «by the agency within us [*l'instance en nous*] which always already keeps watch over perception [...] The "subject" of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author».⁵³ Although Derrida does not elaborate it further, we find in this passage the ultimate implication of his interpretation of psychoanalysis as a deconstructive science. The Freudian analogy shakes the very conception of subjectivity and life that undergirds transcendental and ontological regionalism, namely, the conception of a self-present and (as we see later) *responsible* living subject that is independent from writing, is a self-present speaker, raises the question of the meaning of being, and so forth.

6 Conclusion

Prior to introducing the issue of temporality, in his late *Note*, Freud remarks that the analogy that he had developed presents a limit in the fact «that, once the writing has been erased, the Mystic Pad cannot "reproduce" it from within; it would be a mystic pad indeed if, like our memory, it could accomplish that».⁵⁴ Derrida takes this remark as his point of departure for drawing out a second consequence of the analogy developed in the *Note*. He suggests that here Freud seems to carry out "a Platonic gesture", that is, to subscribe to that tradition for which spontaneity and *responsibility* only belong to the psychic (or mnemonic) trace. Therefore, to Derrida's view, Freud also relapses into a Cartesian mechanicism and thus proves himself unable to further elaborate the non-Cartesian conception of life-machine that his text had disclosed. Derrida writes:

Freud, like Plato, thus continues to oppose hyponymic writing and writing *en tei psychei*, itself woven of traces, empirical memories of a

present truth outside of time. Henceforth, the Mystic Pad, separated from psychical responsibility, a representation abandoned to itself, still participates in Cartesian space and mechanics: *natural wax, exteriority of the memory aid*.⁵⁵

According to Derrida, Freud does not question himself concerning the consequences for our conception of life and evolution that follow from the analogy between the mystic pad and the psychic apparatus, that is, as Derrida puts it, from the being-in-the-world of psychism. Derrida argues that this analogy does not only reveal that the writing machine is already at work in mnemonic spontaneity (with all that this implies for our conceptions of life, subjectivity, and so forth). Above all, this analogy can be thought only in light of the historico-technical production of writing and archiving technologies that have been increasingly able to account for the double system of perception and memory. In other words, this analogy does not only constitute the double opening of life and the history of life but also that of technics and of the history of technics, and it interweaves these two openings and histories together. In the following memorable passage, Derrida focuses on the complexity of the game of the world onto which, to his view, psychoanalysis as a deconstructive science has opened our eyes. This passage reads:

Metaphor as a rhetorical or didactic device is possible here only through the solid metaphor, the “unnatural”, historical production of a *supplementary* machine, *added to* the psychical organization in order to supplement its finitude [...] The historico-technical production of this metaphor which survives individual (that is, generic) psychical organization, is of an entirely different order than the production of an intrapsychical metaphor, assuming that the latter exists (to speak about it is not enough for that), and whatever bond the two metaphors may maintain between themselves. Here the question of *technology* (a new name must perhaps be found in order to remove it from its traditional problematic) may not be derived from an assumed opposition between the psychical and the nonpsychical, life and death. Writing, here, is *techné* as the relation between life and death, between present and representation, between the two apparatuses. It opens up the question of technics: of the apparatus in general and of the analogy between the psychical apparatus and the nonpsychical apparatus.⁵⁶

At the end of this passage, Derrida highlights that such an account of psychism as the being-in-the-world and thus of the history of life as the history of technics pierces the frontiers of the ontic science of psychology and unearths the decon-

struction of ontological regionalism. A psychology would be unable to offer such an account as it would hinge on an ontological conception of life, subjectivity, the machine, and technics. Therefore, Derrida writes that: «in this sense writing [the kind of writing thought by Freud] is the stage [*scène*] of history and the play [*jeu*] of the world. It cannot be exhausted by psychology alone».⁵⁷ Furthermore, Derrida observes, this topic of writing also exceeds psychoanalysis since, as we have seen, it reveals an internal split: it entails that psychoanalysis «is not simply psychoanalysis»⁵⁸ and thus that the Freudian piercing is the medium through which we can look beyond the Platonic (Cartesian, and, more generally, metaphysical) tradition and closure, which, finally, seem to encompass psychoanalysis itself.

Overall, in this final part of FSW, Derrida touches on the endpoint of the reading of the deconstructive potential of psychoanalysis that he had programmed since *Grammatology*. This potential, which ultimately seems not to be fully developed by Freud, concerns the elaboration of a new conception of life and technics in light of the grammatization of experience. Thanks to Freud – and *pace* his relapsing into the steps of Plato – for Derrida, we can think of life as the differential and non-humanist labor of general writing, and of the history of life as the historico-technical production of increasingly sophisticated archiving machines.

Notes

¹ J. DERRIDA, *Writing and difference*, p. 246. For an overview of Derrida’s engagement with Freud, which goes from his very first talk on Freud (FSW) to his keynote address to the 2000 International Psychoanalytic Association at the States General of Psychoanalysis (“*Psychoanalysis searches for the states of its soul*”), cf. E. ROTTENBERG, *Derrida and psychoanalysis*. Recent assessments of this engagement against current trends in contemporary philosophy, such as new materialism and biopolitics, are P. EARLIE, *Derrida and the legacy of psychoanalysis*, and R. TRUMBULL, *From life to survival: Derrida, Freud, and the future of deconstruction*, respectively. Furthermore, I recall a recent special issue of *Bollettino Filosofico* (vol. XXXVI, 2021) dedicated to “deconstruction and psychoanalysis”; it is worth remarking that no contribution included in this issue engages in a close reading of FSW. Finally, for an exploration of the impact of Derrida’s reading of Freud upon psychoanalytic theory and of the impact of psychoanalytic theory and practice upon the legacy of Derrida, cf. J. RUSSELL, *Psychoanalysis and deconstruction: Freud’s psychic apparatus*.

² *Ibidem*.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 248.

⁴ On the grammatization of experience and knowledge, cf. J. DERRIDA, *Of grammatology*, pp. 6-7; D. GOLDBABER, *Speculative grammatology*.

⁵ This reading of Heidegger hinges on the earlier and more extended engagement that Derrida unfolds in his 1964-65 course on *Heidegger: The question of being and history*. In

particular, for his remarks on *Being and time* §3, cf. J. DERRIDA, *Heidegger: The question of being and history*, pp. 11-13. On Derrida's early reading of Heidegger, cf. M. SENATORE, *The question of regionalism*.

⁶ Cf. J. DERRIDA, *Of grammatology*, pp. 20-21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Christopher Johnson points out that FSW «should be situated in the context of the deconstruction of logocentrism», especially the deconstruction undertaken in *Grammatology* (C. JOHNSON, *System and writing in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida*, p. 65), which Johnson interprets as the elaboration of a new cybernetic-oriented conception of writing as “general writing”. In line with this interpretation, Trumbull highlights the theoretical thread that goes from *Grammatology*, through FSW, to Derrida's recently published 1975-76 course on *Life death* (pp. 11-34). The analyses developed in this article aim to bring Johnson's insight further by focusing on the link that has just been made explicit between *Grammatology* and FSW, that is, the hypothesis of the deconstruction of ontological regionalism at stake in psychoanalytic research. As I aim to demonstrate, this hypothesis constitutes the indispensable framework to explore the multiple stages of the reading of Freud offered in FSW.

¹⁰ For a definition of the *general* game of the (*du*) world against the *regional* play in the (*dans le*) world, cf. J. DERRIDA, *Of grammatology*, p. 50. On Derrida's concept of the world, cf. S. GASTON, *The concept of world from Kant to Derrida*, pp. 99-134.

¹¹ J. DERRIDA, *Writing and difference*, p. 249.

¹² *Ibidem*. For this kind of unsubordinated writing, see the remarks on Nietzsche made in J. DERRIDA, *Of grammatology*, p. 19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 249-250.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 250.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*. Cf. S. FREUD, *A project for a scientific psychology*, p. 299: «A psychological theory deserving any consideration must furnish an explanation of “memory”. Now any such explanation comes up against the difficulty that it must assume on the one hand that neurons are permanently different after an excitation from what they were before, while nevertheless it cannot be disputed that, in general, fresh excitations meet within the same conditions of reception as did the earlier ones». For a reading of Freud's earlier neurological works in light of Derrida's interpretation of the *Project*, cf. B. BERGO, *Mal d'Archive: Derrida, Freud, and the beginnings of the logic of the trace in 1888*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 252. Cf. S. FREUD, *A project for a scientific psychology*, pp. 299-300.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*. For a comparative examination of Derrida's reading of Freud's hypothesis of fraying against the reading of Levi-Strauss offered in *Grammatology*, cf. C. JOHNSON, *System and writing in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida*, pp. 69-73.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 253. It is worth recalling that Derrida's reading of Nietzsche's thinking of force draws on the reading of the *Will to Power* developed in G. DELEUZE, *Nietzsche and philosophy*, pp. 42-45. For Derrida's early reading of Nietzsche, cf. his essay “*Différance*” in J. DERRIDA, *Negotiations*, pp. 1-28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 252-253. Cf. S. FREUD, *A project for a scientific psychology*, p. 300: «If we were to suppose that all the contact-barriers were equally well facilitated, or

(what is the same thing) offered equal resistance, then the characteristics of memory would evidently not emerge. For, in relation to the passage of an excitation, memory is evidently one of the powers which determine and direct its pathway, and, if facilitation were everywhere equal, it would not be possible to see why one pathway should be preferred. We can therefore say still more correctly that *memory is represented by the differences in the facilitations between the ψ neurons*». For Johnson, Derrida's interpretation of this passage shows that, in the wake of Freud, Derrida subscribes to the shift from the thermodynamic paradigm in the account of mental processes to an informational and cybernetic paradigm (C. JOHNSON, *System and writing in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida*, pp. 76-77). I subscribe to this interpretation as long as we understand cybernetics too as a deconstructive science (on this point, cf. J. DERRIDA, *Of grammatology*, p. 9).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 253.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 254. To my view, Derrida's 1975-76 course on *Life death* can be read as an attempt to interpret what Derrida calls modern biologism and goes from Nietzsche's work, through Freud, up to modern biogenetics, as this kind of more-than-ontic and deconstructive science of life (in particular, cf. §7; J. DERRIDA, *Life death*, pp. 138-55). For an overview of *Life death*, cf. J. BASILE, *Review of Jacques Derrida, Life Death*, pp. 409-415; M. SENATORE, *Nonhumanist histories of life: Grammatology in the twenty-first century*, pp. 1-19.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 259.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

²⁵ Here Derrida reads chapter II of Freud's *Traumdeutung* dedicated to the «the method of interpreting dreams» (cf. S. FREUD, *The interpretation of dreams. I*, pp. 96-121).

²⁶ Cf. S. FREUD, *The interpretation of dreams. I*, p. 105: «My procedure is not so convenient as the popular decoding method which translates any given piece of a dream's content by a fixed key. I, on the contrary, am prepared to find that the same piece of content may conceal a different meaning when it occurs in various people or in various contexts. Thus, it comes about that I am led to my own dreams, which offer a copious and convenient material, derived from an approximately normal person and relating to multifarious occasions of daily life».

²⁷ J. DERRIDA, *Writing and difference*, p. 259. On the relevance of Derrida's emphasis on a non-linguistic structure of the unconscious to psychoanalytic debates of his day, cf. C. SURPRENANT, *The obverse side of Jacques Derrida's “Freud and the scene of writing”*, pp. 121-138.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

²⁹ *Ibidem*. I recall that, in the opening part of *Grammatology*, in the wake of his early course on Heidegger, Derrida also reads Heidegger's concern for the beingness of being in general and his consequent discovery of originary metaphoricity as a quasi-deconstructive call into question of the difference between the signifier and the signified (J. DERRIDA, *Of grammatology*, pp. 22-23; cf. M. SENATORE, *The question of regionalism*).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 265. Here Derrida refers to Freud's preference for an energetic model of transition. Cf. S. FREUD, *The interpretation of dreams. II*, pp. 610-611: «Thus, we may speak of an unconscious thought seeking to convey itself

into the preconscious so as to be able then to force its way through into consciousness. What we have in mind here is not the forming of a second thought situated in a new place, like a transcription which continues to exist alongside the original; and the notion of forcing a way through into consciousness must be kept carefully free from any idea of a change of locality. Again, we may speak of a preconscious thought being repressed or driven out and then taken over by the unconscious. These images, derived from a set of ideas relating to a struggle for a piece of ground, may tempt us to suppose that it is literally true that a mental grouping in one locality has been brought to an end and replaced by a fresh one in another locality. Let us replace these metaphors by something that seems to correspond better to the real state of affairs, and let us say instead that some particular mental grouping has had a cathexis of energy attached to it or withdrawn from it, so that the structure in question has come under the sway of a particular agency or been withdrawn from it. What we are doing here is once again to replace a topographical way of representing things by a dynamic one. What we regard as mobile is not the psychological structure itself but its innervation». I remark that, although Derrida quotes this text only later, it constitutes a key reference for his interpretation of *Traumdeutung* (*Writing and difference*, p. 267).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266. As the text develops, Derrida describes the outcomes of Freud's epistemological cut (the fact that the present is reconstituted belatedly) as «the theme, formidable for metaphysics, which Freud, in a conceptual scheme unequal to the thing itself, would have us pursue» (*ibid.*, p. 266).

³² *Ibidem.*

³³ For a later formalization of the general text of experience (without an external referent), cf. *Life death* §6, where Derrida identifies the biological concept of translation (namely, the translation of the genetic programme carried out in the synthesis of proteins) as the minimal structure of infratextual movement. This structure, Derrida suggests, makes circulation possible across different layers of experience, from cellular development to the discourse of contemporary biologists, which is still a translation of the genetic programme (J. DERRIDA, *Life death*, pp. 115-136).

³⁴ For Derrida's deconstructive reelaboration of Husserl's conception of the world, cf. the analyses developed in *Voice and phenomenon*. On Derrida's interpretation of Husserl's transcendental reduction as the origin of the word, in the wake of Eugen Fink, cf. his earlier essay *Genesis and structure of phenomenology* (cf. J. DERRIDA, *Writing and difference*, p. 206).

³⁵ J. DERRIDA, *Writing and difference*, p. 266-267. For an extended reading of Heidegger's being-in-the-world against Husserl's concept of the origin of the world, cf. J. DERRIDA, *Heidegger: The question of being and history*, pp. 115-124.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

³⁷ For the text of the *Note*, cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, pp. 227-232.

³⁸ J. DERRIDA, *Writing and difference*, p. 278. For Derrida's engagement with Platonism, cf. *Plato's pharmacy*, in: J. DERRIDA, *Dissemination*, pp. 61-172; M. NAAS, *Plato and the spectacle of laughter*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 278-279. Cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, p. 227: «The surface upon which this note is preserved, the pocket-book or sheet of paper, is

as it were a materialized portion of my mnemonic apparatus».

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

⁴¹ Cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, pp. 227-228.

⁴² J. DERRIDA, *Writing and difference*, p. 279-280. Derrida's treatment of spatiality in FSW is discussed in P. EARLIE, *Derrida and the legacy of psychoanalysis*, pp. 48-80. In line with the overall reading developed in my article, this last section situates Derrida's treatment within his exploration of the deconstructive potential of psychoanalysis.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 280. Cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, p. 228.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 281. For the description of the device, cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, pp. 228-230.

⁴⁵ Cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, p. 230: «The layer of celluloid thus acts as a protective sheath for the waxed paper, to keep off injurious effects from without. The celluloid is a "protective shield against stimuli"».

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-282.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 282. Cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, p. 230.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283. Cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, p. 231: «On the Mystic Pad the writing vanishes every time the close contact is broken between the paper which receives the stimulus and the wax which preserves the impression. This agrees with a notion which I have long had about the [discontinuous, as he puts later] method by which the perceptual apparatus of our mind functions, but which I have hitherto kept to myself».

⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 284. Cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, p. 232.

⁵² *Ibidem.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 286. Cf. S. FREUD, *A note upon the "mystic magic pad"*, p. 230.

⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 287. For a resonating account of the history of life-technics, cf. J. DERRIDA, *Of grammatology*, p. 84. In the wake of the anthropologist André Léroi-Gourhan, Derrida describes the concept of life (understood as *grammē*, general writing, and so forth) as the movement of the "enlargement" (*élargissement*) of difference. He unfolds this movement as the double opening of technics and the history of technics: «If the expression ventured by Léroi-Gourhan is accepted, one could speak of a "liberation of memory", of an exteriorization always already begun but always larger than the trace [my emphasis] which, beginning from the elementary programs of so-called "instinctive" behavior up to the constitution of electronic card-indexes and reading machines, enlarges difference and the possibility of putting in reserve» (*ibid.*, p. 84). For a critical development of this account of life-technics as the movement of difference, see the pages dedicated by Bernard Stiegler to this topic in his *Technics and time I* (cf. B. STIEGLER, *Technics and time I: The fault of epimetheus*, pp. 132-179). Stiegler tells us another history of life, marked by the rupture between biological and technological evolution. Finally, I recall that, in *Archive fever* (1995), Derrida offers a later elaboration of the relation

between psychism and archiving technology, which takes the text from FSW examined here as its point of departure (cf. J. DERRIDA, *Archive fever*).

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

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