



DERRIDA NOW

Current Perspectives in Derrida Studies

Edited by John W.P. Phillips

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Derrida Studies

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Editor's Introduction

John W.P. Phillips

Deconstruction: Where It Begins and How It Ends

How are we to calculate the age of Deconstruction? We can ask about its chances. And we can acknowledge that not everything in it comes down to a name, not even that of Jacques Derrida. Nevertheless, it was Derrida who identified from time to time the *necessity* of a deconstruction and who insisted on its traversal across and beyond more familiar categories of academic practice. 'It is because deconstruction interferes with solid structures, "material" institutions, and not only with discourses or signifying representations', he writes in *The Truth in Painting*, 'that it is always distinct from an analysis or "critique"' (Derrida, 1987a: 19). And it was Derrida who insisted that the necessity of a deconstruction couldn't be separated from the chances that we must take with it (Derrida, 1984).

Attempts to write in Derrida's name or in the name of Deconstruction, or even to produce critical readings of Derrida's works, face a peculiar problem. While the general outlines of the philosophy might be reasonably well known, and many exemplary studies exist, the provocation of the Derrida text remains. So, after

Derrida – in his name – it is possible not only to present coherent accounts of the history of western metaphysics and the logocentrism that guides its programme, but also to intervene in that programme by mobilizing the *a priori* insinuation of the trace, of arche-writing, of iterability, of the remarkable mark, of *différance*, or of the supplement at the origin. Such practices, enchainé in the narrative that helps to produce them, are today widespread. What remains, however, is the peculiar problem of the Derrida text, which presents its arguments (in sometimes strange syntactical arrangements) each time in the guise of complex webs of connections, allusions, sometimes obscure references and chains of association, the effects of which leave nothing untouched. If the now familiar narratives of logocentrism and iterability can be detached from the peculiarity of Derrida's written signature, what, then, remains to be read in it? The question turns not on the status of the texts themselves but on an indeterminate (accidental, fatal) predicate that they acknowledge, perhaps uniquely in the history of western philosophy: an addressee at once adequate to reading them and yet absolutely outside determination.

In 2004 Derrida gave an interview, a few weeks before he succumbed to his fatal illness, where he discusses among many other topics matters of inheritance, writing and death. He reframes the question of the intellectual inheritance he will have left in terms of the familiar doctrine of the remarkable mark, already well established by the watershed year of 1967, which signifies the death of the writer in the repeatable form – the obscure repeatability – of the trace. 'The trace I leave', he says, 'signifies to me at once my death, either to come or already come upon me, and the hope that this trace survives me' (Derrida, 2007: 32). This hope, from a writer who repeats here that we *live death* in writing, follows the structural form of 'the most contradictory hypothesis'. Again the formulation traces a familiar pattern. The pathos of structural form precedes and exceeds the active control of the phantasmatic subject:

I have simultaneously – I ask you to believe me on this – the *double feeling* that, on the one hand, to put it playfully and with a certain immodesty, one has not yet begun to read me, that even though there

are, to be sure, many very good readers (a few dozen in the world perhaps, people who are also writer-thinkers, poets), in the end it is later on that all this has a chance of appearing; but also, on the other hand, and thus simultaneously, I have the feeling that two weeks or a month after my death *there will be nothing left*. (Derrida, 2007: 34)

Survival here means not merely 'what has been copyrighted and deposited in libraries' but what still has the capacity to form its readers. The structural role of the addressee therefore haunts our hope for the survival of the written trace. Derrida identifies the peculiar properties of this addressee on several occasions. In a celebrated interview with Derek Attridge the 'dream of a writing that would be neither literature nor philosophy' gives rise to certain thoughts that concern the reader of such a work: 'what it is in the work that produces its reader, a reader who doesn't yet exist, whose competence cannot be identified, a reader who would be "formed," "trained," instructed, constructed, even engendered, let's say *invented* by the work' (Derrida, 1992: 74). Derrida returns to this thought in the last interview, confirming the connection between pedagogy, institutions, writing, experimentation and the future or *to-come* of an unimagined addressee. 'Each book', he reminds us, 'is a pedagogy aimed at forming its reader' (Derrida, 2007: 31). If the writer is to take the 'desired' addressee into account they must 'invent' the law of a one-time event. In yet another interview (from 1987) Derrida answers to questions about the peculiarity of his writing again with reference to the 'necessity of formal adventure', which involves 'incorporating in some way the other's signature' (Derrida, 1995a: 188). The event of deconstruction thus occurs between the signature of the other and the unmarked addressee, which gives way (but never entirely) to the asymmetrical form of a signature-countersignature.

The asymmetry of the formal structure follows what we've just seen described as 'the most contradictory hypothesis', that is, a form that implies (after and in spite of Jean-Jacques Rousseau) 'an intermediary between everything and nothing' (cited in Derrida, 1967/1976: 157). Derrida focuses on the space of necessary invention, the sphere of mediacy (which in this instance Rousseau wants everywhere to efface). The aporia of this impossible mediacy

(between say the immediate and absence) involves the reader in an awkward obligation – not merely ethical but structurally necessary: an estranged fidelity. In reading, we are faced with the impossible choice of ‘*two infidelities*’, as Derrida puts it in his elegiac work, ‘the Deaths of Roland Barthes’ (Derrida, 2001: 45). The motif of reading merges with that of friendship: ‘on the one hand, not to say anything that comes back to oneself, to one’s own voice, to remain silent, or at the very least to let oneself be accompanied or preceded in counterpoint by the friend’s voice . . . to be content with just quoting . . . On the other hand, by avoiding all quotation, all identification, all rapprochement’ (Derrida, 2001: 45). The extremes imply death (hence the ‘deaths’ of Derrida’s title) unless each betrays the other, such that in the intermediate position a reader will ‘learn to read (to “live”) something he or she was not accustomed to receiving from anywhere else’ (Derrida, 2001: 31).

A further related form of asymmetry implies the distinction to which I’ve already alluded between philosophical demonstrations and ‘forms of writing that have their own, sometimes novel, rules’ (Derrida, 1995b: 188). Demonstration therefore falls away from traditional forms. The necessity in these asymmetries lies in the formal doctrine that seems to guide even Derrida’s most adventurous works: the doctrine of the trace.

The Doctrine of the Mark

In nearly every text by Derrida, readers may find some more or less directly programmatic statements, which not only establish principles on which the philosophy must stand or fall but which also can be read as instructions or at least clues for reading the perhaps more puzzling sections of the text. There is never a decisive breach between the *statement made* and the *performance by which the statement is produced*, but it is nearly always possible to begin to identify statement-like sections, which may explain the more ‘performative’ or inventive productions. I use ‘performative’ with caution here because *both* the ideal of *clarity and distinctness of expression* and the ideal of the *pure performative utterance* tend to annul the disturb-

ing force that the doctrine of the mark is concerned to teach. It is a matter of grasping that while the principle cannot exist outside its demonstration, the demonstration could not have been produced were it not for the principle.

The demonstration each time intends to evoke (to simulate or to imitate) the *experience* (a word often underlined by Derrida) of the effects that concern him. Demonstration in Derrida's writing therefore accounts for much of what is forceful and compelling about it. In order to read and to write effectively, in a way that is influenced or inspired by Derrida, one can follow the fecundity of the demonstrations, avoiding the need to establish principles or the evidence that supports them, as demanded by classical requirements. But when Derrida demonstrates the doctrine of the mark through the statement, 'I am dead', to identify one of the clearest available propositions from his intricate reading of Edmund Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, two slightly different things occur simultaneously.

First (and more easily explicable), an analytic argument about meaning is established: the meaning of the statement functions independently of the subject's intention in making it; meaning is dependent on conditions that exceed the expressive function of a subject's speech. Illimitable speakers can say, 'I am dead', and the statement will each time mean what it always means. The principle here, then, as everywhere in Derrida's writings, is that of the mark (and by infinite extension the statement and the text) and its *a priori* repeatability. This *a priori* repeatability demonstrably allows a statement to function as an expression, by which a subject intends a meaning for which he or she takes responsibility. In the *Logical Investigations* Husserl attempts to maintain a strong distinction between the expressive signs of the transcendental subject (in 'auto-affecton') and external (i.e. written) signs, which are always potentially free of sense, reference, addresser or addressee. The expressive and indicative sign (a distinction carried out elsewhere as the difference between speech and writing) turn out to be indistinguishable, separated by a difference that distinguishes *nothing* but *difference-from-self* (Derrida, 1973: 11). The repeatability of the sign in general (the written mark is the privileged example) allows an individual to speak and to write. It may then seem that there would

be no subject without this ability *a priori*. However, insofar as there is a subject, its origin remains permanently 'alienated' from itself. Husserl, activating a desire or at least a preference that dominates western philosophy throughout its history, would like to be able to say that the expression (my present intention and responsibility in producing it) has priority in the order of events and that the repeatable marks of this expression, which he labels *indication*, are derivative and in all senses *secondary*, despite inhabiting every expression as its externalization or transport (Derrida, 1973: 21). The statement 'I am dead' demonstrates (against this preference) that it is not possible ever to distinguish absolutely between an expression and an indication (Derrida, 1973: 54–5). Furthermore, if one is to retain an analytical truth from Husserl's commentary, then the predicates of *indication*, repeatability and internal divisibility, must indeed take preference. Not only must a mark be repeatable but its repeatability immediately also divides it from itself. The incalculable number of instances of the statement 'I am dead' merely manifests, in both act and permanent potential, the logical and practical upshot of the difference from itself of the mark in its *a priori* repeatability. Furthermore, the repeatability of the statement and the responsibility I take for it are mutually enjoined and mutually destructive.

Secondly, the meaning of the statement 'I am dead', which is not now merely an example of a statement, describes the situation. Only because I can say 'I am dead' can I then say 'I am' (Derrida, 1973: 54). My death names the very principle on which the truth of the statement 'I am dead' depends, that it be repeatable in principle to infinity and thus immediately beyond my mortal span and outside my control and responsibility. The play of repeatability and internal division is not, then, an accident that befalls a previously well-formed sentence but one that inhabits the sentence as its *a priori* possibility. My death (the final misfortune, the final danger) inhabits my possibilities, which would not be possibilities without it. And again death is not *merely* accidental. But the principle that connects my death to my ability to speak also infects my language with the accidental. And for this reason we cannot restrict the effects in question (those of chance and death) to writing, language and culture, for these effects operate wherever it is said that chance

and death play a role. And so the doctrine of the mark operates not only in philosophy and literature but also in sciences of what we still call nature and in spheres of religious experience too.

If the principle has any force, however, a further question must be posed. How can one account for the *preference* in the history of philosophy for the priority of the act of the responsible individual, in the face of what looks like repressed yet overwhelming evidence against this priority? The role of *preference* itself thus comes into view as a motive for the interminable ways of calculating risk, economizing on randomness, and affirming, against accidents, time and death, a priority for the present and living intention of my act. This side of the doctrine of the mark – the side of preference, liking for, desire, love, friendship and relation – plays a most important role, to the extent that the structure as well as the institutional ambivalence of the writings function to create the conditions necessary, in light of the doctrine of the mark, for protecting this ancient preference. The fact that this form of protection appears historically to be a veritable *attack* on the principles that traditionally have supported it (and that this is not *merely* the form of a misunderstanding or misreading, though it is certainly that too) can be considered as a function of the principle itself, which in some later works returns in the guise of *auto-immunity*.

Derrida: Credit, Penalty and Death

Motifs gathered around questions of religion, law and violence, which come to the fore in Derrida's writings towards the last decades of his life, had always informed his work to an extent. It is possible to trace their emergence to the earliest work on Edmund Husserl's phenomenology (Derrida, 1973, 1978) through to the majestic readings of Plato (Derrida, 1972/1982) and the exhaustive treatment of Hegel and Genet (Derrida, 1974/1986). But in the 1990s motifs touched by what Derrida comes to identify as an auto-immunity, implying a paradoxical form of self-indemnification, begin to appear more regularly and consistently in contemporary contexts concerned with, and connecting, philosophy, religion,

justice and law. Auto-immunity implies immunizing the self against conditions that both threaten and yet enable it, while at the same time immunizing itself against that very immunization. The motif of auto-immunity turns up at this stage in Derrida's career, in *Specters of Marx* (Derrida, 1994) and in 'Faith and Knowledge: Two Sources of "Religion" at the Limits of Reason Alone' (Derrida, 2002), but also in 'Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides' (Derrida, 2003) and *Rogues* (Derrida, 2005). It also has the virtue of helping retrospectively to clarify structures of thought that demonstrably operate from the earliest texts.

In a notable instance from 'Faith and Knowledge' Derrida identifies what he calls 'the mechanics of a double postulation', implying incompatibly 'the absolute respect of life' and 'a universal vocation' for sacrifice:

This mechanical principle is apparently very simple: life has an absolute value only if it is worth *more than* life. And hence only in so far as it mourns, becoming itself in the labour of infinite mourning, in the indemnification of a spectrality without limit. It is sacred, holy, infinitely respectable only in the name of what is worth more than it and what is not restricted to the naturalness of the bio-zoological (sacrificeable) – although true sacrifice ought to sacrifice not only 'natural' life, called 'animal' or 'biological', but that which is worth more than so called natural life. (Derrida, 2002: 87)

This passage contains many of the motifs that from at least *Specters of Marx* begin to inform Derrida's writing more emphatically. The mechanics of the double postulate (life is sacred, sacrifice is necessary) implies incompatible doubles that nonetheless cannot be separated: the auto-immunological relation; the beast and the sovereign; credit and death; death penalties; law and justice; violence and law; friendship, hostility and hospitality.

Overview of this Volume

Derrida Now collects work that develops the critical motifs touched on here and, by doing so, continues in different ways the sustained formal adventure that the name Deconstruction evokes. The volume arrives at a time when Derrida's seminars are more substantially beginning to appear in print. The seminars open up questions that are contemporarily posed in the better-known published writings to significantly more patient and extended discussion, as appropriate for the pedagogic contexts that gave rise to them. So far one volume of *The Death Penalty* (Derrida, 2014b) and both volumes of *The Beast and the Sovereign* (Derrida, 2009, 2011) have been published in English translation. They currently represent substantial and often surprising opportunities for further examination of these durable yet difficult motifs.

During the planning stages of *Derrida Now* we invited well-known scholars informed by idioms associated with Derrida's work (by way of translation, exposition, commentary, criticism and in various ways application) to contribute to the volume. Some declined for various reasons mostly to do with timing, and of those who agreed some dropped out owing again to various time constraints. We have therefore arrived at some current perspectives on Jacques Derrida (as the subtitle of the volume promises) although these are by no means representative of a complete picture. As chance would have it, we have an inevitably slightly distorted perspective marked superficially by a gender imbalance. Each of the contributors can be regarded as contemporary while at the same time able to draw on the entirety of Derrida's work through demonstrable scholarship and expertise. The later motifs are addressed (the question of animals, sovereignty, the death penalty) but other works from early in Derrida's career onwards are also addressed.

John Phillips puts unavoidable constraints to work in an attempt towards an overview of Derrida's career that emphasizes connections as well as divergences between the earlier and the later motifs and structures of argument. The role of the signature in philosophy serves as a guiding thread.

Geoffrey Bennington offers a characteristically painstaking and thorough reading of the motif of dignity in Derrida and its relation to deconstruction, which draws from the earliest to some of the latest published work.

Roy Sellars approaches the question of interpretation (and the question of approach, the road, the method) via the problem as it is posed in psychoanalysis, and the deconstruction of psychoanalysis, folded out into the fault lines of a general hermeneutics, to which (he demonstrates) neither deconstruction nor psychoanalysis can be reduced.

Graham Allen's article on transparency (and the motifs of vision and blindness) in relation to the university draws on Derrida's reading of Immanuel Kant's *The Conflict of Faculties* to pose some contemporary questions and propositions about the university now, demonstrating the necessity of a deconstruction, which, as Derrida argues elsewhere, 'attacks not only the internal edifice, both semantic and formal, of philosophemes, but also what one would be wrong to assign to it as its external housing, its extrinsic conditions of practice: the historical forms of its pedagogy, the social, economic or political structures of this pedagogical institution' (Derrida, 1987a: 19).

Martin McQuillan follows the motif of animals (in various sites of Derrida's bestiary) to further radicalize Derrida's discourse – especially where it is aimed at sovereignty and the bestiality of man – and therefore to identify the fault in discourses of vegetarianism and environmentalism as belonging to a wider range of problems in contemporary political discourse. Evoking *Specters of Marx*, McQuillan argues the need for 'a new political economy, a new politics of economy and a new economy of politics' (this volume). Deconstruction *beyond Derrida* he suggests would be 'up to the task'.

Irving Goh's reading of *Foi et savoir* mobilizes his own motif of 'the reject' with an eye to rethinking discourses of 'post-secularism'. Goh, like McQuillan, tries to extend the implications of Derrida's text into contemporary thought, with the aim of transforming the most urgent problems by way of thinking beyond the contemporary sphere into a future that can barely be imagined. The role of animals in helping to construct a phantasmatic human

subject is offset by the notion of the auto-reject that Goh develops here.

Peggy Kamuf offers a subtle re-reading of 'Plato's Pharmacy'. Kamuf's reading emphasizes the elements of testimony in the theatricality of the trial represented by the 'trial of writing' in Plato's text. Necessity (as in 'the necessity of a deconstruction') comes to mean something other than 'the necessity of a theoretical or epistemological proof' but instead grounds as their condition the giving and receiving of legal testimony. Kamuf therefore emphasizes the paradoxical role of fiction in the procedures of arriving at truth. Kamuf's reading emphasizes the two tropes of composition and displacement so that a simultaneously legal, literary and philosophical interest presides over her argument.

Nicholas Royle's literary speculations, reading Derrida as a portal – or a series of portals – through which to understand better what the future of the novel could be, show his own literary singularity at work in reading Derrida and stretching the meaning of reading beyond the normal or standard frameworks.

Finally we include an essay, one of the very last, by Hugh Silverman. 'Derrida, Code Enforcement, and the Question of Justice' presents a questioning reading of *The Human Stain* (The Philip Roth novel and the film adaptation) through the lens of Derrida's texts on justice. Silverman died shortly after submitting the article, so we publish it here by way of a memorial to his teaching and to the graduate classroom, which this article evokes.

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