

Jacques Derrida's Deconstruction of Western Metaphysics: The Early Years

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1. Logocentrism and the Metaphysics of Presence

According to Jacques Derrida (1930-2004), the history of metaphysics is closely linked to the systematic “repression and suppression of writing” (*WD* 196/*ED* 293). For Derrida, metaphysics, “in spite of all differences, not only from Plato to Hegel (even including Leibniz) but also, beyond these apparent limits, from the pre-Socratics to Heidegger, always assigned the origin of truth in general to the logos” (*OG* 3/*DLG* 11-2). Within this history, writing is systematically differentiated from, and accorded an inferior position in relation to, a domain of “full” speech. For Derrida, who, here, indicates the influence of Martin Heidegger, this “logocentric” or “phonocentric” metaphysics is connected with the historical determination of the meaning of

Being in general as *presence*. According to Martin Heidegger, from Parmenides, Plato and afterwards, Being is comprehended as a simple unit, a completely transparent and self-subsistent origin or foundation. This determination of Being manifests itself in the historical forms of metaphysics through the “presence of the thing to the sight as *eidos*”, presence as “substance”, “essence” or “existence” (*ousia*), “temporal presence as point (*stigmé*)”, the “self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity” (*OG 12/DLG 23*). Concepts, such as, essence, truth, origin, are linked and grounded in the conception of a direct presence. The search for truth of (including the truth of history) is merely a “detour *for the purpose of* the reappropriation of presence”; the “end” (*telos*) of this search was always presence (*OG 10/DLG 20*).

This “metaphysics of presence”, according to Derrida, conceives meaning only on the basis of presence. For this tradition, a foundation exists beneath every meaning, which constitutes an immediate presence. For Plato, this foundation are the “Ideas”, for Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it is the “passions”, while for Edmund Husserl it is “pure consciousness”. This origin, which is present-in-itself, confers an immediate and intuitive meaning upon what is expressed through language. It presupposes nothing beyond itself and, therefore, does not develop a system of signs other as a mere repository of already fully formed concepts. For the “metaphysics of presence”, speech is an articulation which remains nearer to this present-in-itself origin of meaning than that of writing. The voice appears to ensure the proximity of the speaking subject to itself, the immediate and full presence of consciousness to itself. Whatever in speech is sound, voice or breath, when it takes the form of written presentation, when it is transported onto to the written page, into the space of the inscription of words, it is transmuted into dead letters, ink, silence. For Aristotle, as Derrida observes, spoken words (*ta en tē phonē*) are the symbols of mental experience (*pathēmata tes psychēs*), and written words are the symbols of spoken words (*De interpretatione*, 1, 16a3) (*OG 11/DLG 22*). Hence, the voice, as the producer of the first symbols, has a relation of essential and immediate proximity to the soul. For Derrida, this proximity – the presence of consciousness to itself, which in the phenomenology of Edmund

Husserl constitutes the structure of autopathy (“hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak”)¹ – explains why all metaphysical determinations of truth, “even the one beyond metaphysical ontotheology that Heidegger reminds us”, are inseparable from logos (*OG* 10/*DLG* 21).

Writing has been underestimated by the totality of the philosophical tradition due to its “exteriority” to expressed meaning. Contrary to the *ideographic* systems of writing, in which each word is represented by a single sign, that is unrelated to the component sounds of the word itself (e.g. Chinese characters, Egyptian hieroglyphs), in the *phonographic* systems of writing (which include the *alphabetic* and *syllabic* writing), the role of written signs is traditionally considered to be limited to the depiction of sounds that make up a spoken word.² Writing, by definition, cannot offer the guarantees of an absolute presence, since it is separated from the writer, and therefore it is fatally connected with the necessity for interpretation.

Nevertheless, Derrida’s reduction of apparently different philosophical positions to a single homogeneous history, a “historical totality”, as he himself refers to it (*OG* lxxxix/*DLG* 8), has raised serious objections (e.g. Abel 1974, Wood 1989). Derrida’s *totalizing* treatment of the history of philosophy, as “metaphysics of presence”, rather than detaching itself from this history, indicates its potential to be the continuation of this “metaphysics of presence”. Derrida’s project undertakes to make “present” the history of metaphysics, to make it appear in its “truth”, something, which seems, according to David Wood, to situate Derrida “firmly within the logocentric tradition he is criticizing”.³ Nevertheless, while some diagnose, in the Derridian interpretation of the history of philosophy, a contradiction, Derrida, and others, respond that this initial position, from which deconstruction commences, is a necessity: namely, that deconstruction is compelled to initiate its interrogation from

¹ Derrida undertakes the deconstruction of the Husserlian structure of “autopathy” in *Speech and Phenomena* (1967).

² According to Derrida, the phonographic system of writing is “that within which logocentric metaphysics, determining the sense of being as presence, has been produced.” (*OG* 43/*DLG* 63)

³ D. Wood, *Deconstruction of Time*, New Jersey: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1989, p. 280.

within a philosophical tradition of logocentrism in order to generate the capacity to criticize or deconstruct it.

In order to reveal and question the unequal position of writing in relation to speech, Derrida undertook, during the 1960's and early 1970s, a series of immanent readings of major thinkers, as Plato (*Dissemination*, 1972), Rousseau, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss (*Of Grammatology*, 1967) and Husserl (*Speech and Phenomena*, 1967). He makes apparent in these readings, that every effort to subjugate writing to the immediate expressiveness and full presence of speech to itself, continually produces, and, thereby, immediately indicates a contradiction with the declared intention of the author, a framework in which language in general is "a species of writing" (OG 8/DLG 18). Why? Because speech is conditioned by all these characteristics, which are attributed, by metaphysics, to writing and constitute the reason for its debasement. Spoken language – as written language – is *always already* structured by difference and non-presence. Consequently, what applies to the written sign applies also to spoken language. More generally, difference and non-presence constitute the condition of possibility for any linguistic sign. Derrida's claim is that presence, identity, speech, meaning, etc., include precisely those elements which they seek systematically to exclude, which, in turn, renders the priority of these phenomena, and the entire system of logocentrism or phonocentrism, impossible.

2. "Différance"

Derrida's remarks on meaning, language, presence or origin, are condensed in the neologism, or better neographism "différance".⁴ Derrida produces the neographism *différance* from the present participle *différant* of the French verb *différer*, which has two different meanings, those of "to differ and defer", meanings that it draws etymologically from the Latin verb *differe*. Différance encapsulates what finally emerges from the metaphysical texts through their deconstruction, namely, that despite the desperate efforts of their metaphysical authors to found and maintain meaning in presence, meaning is always

⁴ J. Derrida, "Différance", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. A. Bass, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982, pp. 1-27.

already conditioned by difference and non-presence. The thought of “différance”, as the Heideggerian thought of Being, opens upon something prior to presence and identity that remains unthought by metaphysics: that absence and difference are not mere deviations from presence and identity but their very conditions of possibility (as well as constituting the conditions of *non* possibility of an *absolute* presence or identity). As such, différance names and renders more radical a series of gestures, which emerged, in part, from the separate critiques of presence by Nietzsche, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas.

The notion of différance can be understood through the problematic of semiology, and, in particular, the Derridean radicalization of the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) constituted by its determination of the sign as arbitrary and differential. For Saussure, the linguistic sign “unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” or, respectively, a signified (*signifié*) and a signifier (*signifiant*).⁵ Through the dissolution of this connection between sense and reference, Saussure moves away from the classical theory of the sign that considers that the idea, the concept, or the meaning exist independently of words. The meaning of signs is not determined by their innate relation with a referent (an object, a being, an event, etc), rather, they receive their meaning differentially, that is, through their place in a chain of conceptual and phonetic differences (e.g. the word ‘I’ receives its meaning from its difference from the words ‘you’, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘we’, ‘they’ or the word *red* through its difference from the words *black*, *green*, *yellow*, etc). As Saussure claims, “*in language there are only differences*”.⁶ Moreover, these differences are not differences between positive terms, that is, between pre-existing identities, because “*in language there are only differences without positive terms*”.⁷ Language possesses neither ideas nor sounds that would pre-exist the linguistic system, but only conceptual differences and phonetic differences that emanate solely from this system, and have meaning only within it.

Yet, if a signified concept has meaning only to the extent that

⁵ F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. W. Baskin, London: Fontana, 1974, pp. 66, 67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷ *Ibid.*

its position is registered in a chain or a system of differences, then, for Derrida, it is never present in and of itself, it does not constitute a sufficient presence which would refer only to itself (*P* 26/*POS* 37-8). Consequently, the structure of the sign is always marked by difference and non-presence. The game of differences that constitutes the conceptual identity of a sign, something that, thus, inscribes within it difference and non-presence (hence already constituting all traditional notions of the identity of a sign as problematic) is described, by Derrida, with the neographism *différance*, where the ‘e’ of *différence* has been replaced by the ‘a’. *Différance* is the prerequisite of both conceptualisation and the existence of words. As Derrida declares, it is “the playing movement that ‘produces’ [...] these differences”. It is “the non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating origin of differences. Thus, the name ‘origin’ no longer suits it” (*MP* 11/*MPh* 12). In a linguistic system, each “present” element signifies by referring differentially to another element and, consequently, it is never present in itself in a subsequent presence that would refer only to itself. In this sense, a sign is just a “trace” – a term that Derrida borrows from Emmanuel Levinas – a present, which has only ever existed as a trace of a present. The present is constituted by a differential network of traces, where the interval between the elements is described as “spacing”, (*espacement*) and the temporal difference between them as “temporization” (*temporisation*). *Différance* is the name for these two different dimensions of signification, namely, that of spacing and that of temporization. Thus, *différance*, in the sense of the verb *to differ*, means that something is different from something else, and, in this way, includes a *spatial* dimension, which refers both to the space that separates the differing signs from one other and to the space that is opened up within the sign itself, since the sign is not identical with itself (due to the fact that it is itself determined by its difference from other signs). *Différance*, as postponement or deferment, has a *temporal* dimension, which refers to an infinitely postponed achievement or fulfilment of presence. Consequently, each sign is structured by *différance* that simultaneously promotes and postpones presence. As difference and deferment, *différance* renders possible the production of differences while it simultaneously prevents these differences

from being absolutely present in themselves. Meaning is nowhere absolutely present in language, it is always subject to a kind of semantic drift (or deferment) that precludes the sign from ever coinciding with itself in a moment of absolute identification.

Nevertheless, not only philosophers from the analytic tradition⁸ but also others who are favourably disposed towards Derrida's philosophical position, consider Saussure's structural linguistics as a rather problematic approach to language.⁹ Saussure's theory of language as a theory of structural linguistics was an important theoretical problematic, particularly for Claude Levi-Strauss's anthropology, Jacques Lacan's reading of Freud and Roland Barthes's exceptional literary and cultural analyzes. Yet, the presence of this problematic of structural linguistics within the work of these aforementioned thinkers does not itself resolve the question of the coherence and plausibility of Saussure's position, that meaning in language is *exclusively* a matter of difference: that the word 'red' is furnished with its meaning 'red' merely by its difference from the word 'red', 'blue', 'green' or 'brown'. Certainly, we should agree with Saussure that 'red' does not represent an idea given prior to language, that it does not constitute the invariable imprint of an unchangeable reality that is seen in the same way by all languages. We should also agree with him that someone could not comprehend what 'red' is without conceiving its difference from other colours. Nevertheless, when someone says that two things are different, what he or she means is that one of them has at least one attribute that the other does not have, or, while they share precisely the same attributes, they are numerically distinct. In Saussure's case, it is obvious that, from the moment that "in language there are differences *without positive terms*", concepts are unable to be differentiated by the two forms indicated above. Yet, while Saussure says that concepts differ from one another, he does not say *how* they differ. Because of this inherent ambiguity, it is reasonable that there are some, who consider that Derrida's elaboration of the notion of *différance*, through its

⁸ See, for example, R. Tallis, *Not Saussure. A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*, London: MacMillan, 1995.

⁹ See S. Critchley, "Derrida's Influence on Philosophy... And On My Work", *German Law Journal*, 6:1, 2005, p. 25.

engagement with Saussure's problematic, remains shaped by the limitations of this structural linguistics.

3. Deconstructive Reading

Contrary to some Anglo-American analytic philosophers, who seem to believe in the possibility of the existence and elaboration of a formal language that could deliver philosophy from the tribulations of metaphysics, Derrida thinks that such an escape from metaphysics is not feasible, since we do not possess a language, which would be free from metaphysical presuppositions, and within which a non metaphysical discourse could be articulated (*P* 19/*POS* 29). Derrida agrees with both Ludwig Wittgenstein, who writes, “[a] *picture* kept us captives. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably”,¹⁰ and Nietzsche, who claimed that, “[w]e cannot change our means of expression at will”.¹¹ Thus, as Derrida remarks in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966), “[t]here is no sense of doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language - no syntax and no lexicon - which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (*WD* 280/*ED* 412). Hence, in response to Michel Foucault's claim in his book, *History of Madness (Folie et déraison, 1961)*, that he attempts to write the history of madness, not in the language of logic, namely, the language of psychiatry that led madness into silence, but by leaving madness to speak for itself,¹² Derrida objects, in “Cogito and the history of madness” (1963), that it is impossible for any historian to escape from the closed metaphysical circle of the order of reason. For Derrida, “[t]here is no Trojan horse unconquerable by Reason (in

¹⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, § 115.

¹¹ F. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. W. Kaufmann & R. J. Hollingdale, New York: Vintage Books, 1968), § 625, p. 334.

¹² M. Foucault, *Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, Paris: Plon, 1961, p. vii.

general)" (*WD* 36/*ED* 58). Only from within reason we can protest against reason.

Nevertheless, despite the captivity of language within metaphysics, Derrida finds, within the texts of the metaphysical tradition, the traces of an alterity which is irreducible to metaphysics, "which is no longer that of presence but of *différance*" (*MP* 16/*MPh* 17). Deconstruction shows that, within the "system of fundamental constraints" and "conceptual oppositions" of metaphysics, there is, as the non-transcendental or "quasi-transcendental" condition of its possibility (and its impossibility), a heterogeneous nexus of non-oppositional differences and deferments, a *différance*, an "archi-writing", that metaphysics has tried to repress. Thus, for Derrida, to "deconstruct" philosophy [...] would be to think - in the most faithful, interior way - the structured genealogy of philosophy's concepts, but at the same time to determine - from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnameable by philosophy - what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, making itself into a history by means of this somewhere motivated repression" (*P* 6/*POS* 15).

Derrida has declared that, when he initially introduced the word *deconstruction* in 1967, he aimed at the translation of Heidegger's terms *Destruction* and *Abbau* (dismantling).¹³ Heidegger had used the term *Destruktion* in *Being and Time* (1927) (in the sub-chapter entitled "The task of Destroying the history of ontology") not in its Latin sense of destruction or annihilation, but in the sense of dismantling, of the dissolution of the sedimented layers and accretions that were accumulated by the metaphysical tradition, and, thereby, occluding the "premordial experiences, in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being – the ways which have guided us ever since".¹⁴ The meaning, not of destruction or annihilation, but of dismantling, is also maintained in the Derridian term "deconstruction", in which, with the insertion of the syllable – con- in the term *Destruktion*, the Heideggerian intention is better

¹³ J. Derrida, "Letter to a Japanese Friend", trans. D. Wood & A. Benjamin, in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other*, Volume II, edited by P. Kamuf & E. Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008, p. 2.

¹⁴ M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992, p. 44.

expressed.¹⁵

Nevertheless, for Derrida, the Heideggerian “overcoming of metaphysics”, as it is embedded in the senses of the words *Destruktion* and *Abbau*, contains the risk of finally reaffirming that which is to be deconstructed. “By repeating”, as Derrida observes in “The End(s) of Man” (“Les fins de l’homme”), “what is implicit in the founding concepts and the original problematic, by using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is equally, in language”, the Heideggerian strategy remains insufficient, to the extent that it attempts an exit from metaphysics without essentially changing terrain (*MP* 135/*MPh* 163). Hence, in “*Ousia* and *Grammē*: Note on a Note from *Being and Time*”, a text which deals with Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle on time, Derrida notes that “[a]t a certain point, then, the destruction of metaphysics remains within metaphysics, only making explicit its principles” (*MP* 48/*MPh* 54). More specifically, Derrida argues that the concept of time that Heidegger wants to oppose to the corresponding naïve concept of time promoted by metaphysics remains metaphysical, because time *in general*, in all its aspects, belongs to the resources and possibilities of metaphysical conceptuality, and it names the domination of presence: “In attempting to produce this *other* concept, one rapidly would come to see that it is constructed out of other metaphysical or ontotheological predicates”. In consequence, “the extraordinary trembling to which classical ontology is subjected in *Sein und Zeit* still remains within the grammar and lexicon of metaphysics” (*MP* 63/*MPh* 73).

However, Derrida thinks as equally insufficient that strategy of overcoming of metaphysics – the strategy that he identifies with some French philosophers, particularly with Levinas – which consists in deciding “to change terrain, in a discontinuous and irruptive fashion, by brutally placing oneself outside, and by affirming an absolute break and difference” (*MP* 135/*MPh* 162). This strategy is insufficient, because “the simple practice of language ceaselessly reinstates the new terrain on the oldest ground”. Thus, while the first “strategy”, that of Heidegger, rightly recognizes that someone is forced to draw the means for the deconstruction of a certain conceptual edifice from the building itself, something that the second strategy overlooks, it

¹⁵ J. Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend”, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-6.

fails to perceive “the necessity for a ‘change of terrain’”, something that is rightly promoted as something imperative by the second strategy. Consequently, “the choice between these two forms of deconstruction cannot be simple and unique”. Derrida proposes a “new writing” that “must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction” (*MP* 135/*MPh* 163).

The impossibility of a simple and unproblematic escape from metaphysics, compels us, according to Derrida, to abide within it, to a critical re-examination of its history, to a continuous re-reading of it - a practice, which Derrida names “deconstruction”. Derrida undertakes to oppose the western metaphysical tradition within its own field, with its own weapons, but to operate through an extended and radicalized concept of writing that metaphysics cannot control; a writing which “no longer issues from logos” and which “inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos” (*OG* 10/*DLG* 21).

The aim of deconstructive reading is, initially, to render visible the latent metaphysical structure of a text. In the readings that he undertakes, during the 1960s and 1970s, Derrida shows that the particular philosophical text is constituted by a set of hierarchical binary oppositions (e.g. identity/difference, speech/writing, inside/outside, man/woman, nature/civilization, good/evil, etc). This hierarchical ordering is generated from one element of a binary opposition which expresses the meaning of an originary “presence”. This attribution is simultaneously the constitution of its primacy in relation to which the other element is necessarily constituted as subordinate. Thus, absence, for example, is conceived as a lack of identity, writing as a mere representation of speech or woman as a degenerated form of man. From this, deconstructive reading concentrates on those elements of a text which not only cannot be incorporated into the “metaphysics of presence”, but also disorganize it, making apparent another logic that is not of that of traditional metaphysics.

According to Derrida, a metaphysical text is *never* “homogeneous”, “self-identical”, “never totally governed by ‘metaphysical assumptions’”. In short, a text does not always coincide with its declared intentions. Together with the

“dominant” “metaphysical model”, there are “counter-forces which threaten or undermine this authority”.¹⁶ More specifically, Derrida’s claim is that the metaphysical text cannot maintain the seemingly impermeable boundary between the two poles of every oppositional pair (for example, remedy/poison], inside/outside, and so on) because linguistic meaning is conditioned by difference and deferral (*différance*). Every time a metaphysical author attempts to use an *equivocal* term (for example, the *pharmakon* in Plato or the *supplement* in Rousseau) or a binary opposition (for example, speech/writing) in one of its two senses, sooner or later, due to the “differential” constitution of opposites, - namely the presence of the “trace” of the one term within the other - the other meaning also comes to the fore in order to haunt the text, despite its author’s intentions. The principle of *différance* is presented as working unceasingly in the texts of philosophical tradition against their authors’ explicit intentions. In this manner, a philosopher’s views do not subsist until refuted by another philosopher. They are always already refuted by language itself, which exceeds the will of authorial intention.

In *Of Grammatology*, in the Chapter entitled “The Exorbitant. Question of Method”, Derrida notes that deconstructive reading situates itself in the gap between what the author “commands” within her text and what she does not “command”, that is, what takes place in her text without her will. This distance, fissure or opening is something that deconstructive reading must “produce” (*OG* 158/*DLG* 227). Yet, in order to produce this fissure or opening, deconstructive reading must first reproduce what the author “wants-to-say”, something that requires the submission to classical reproductive reading practices. As Derrida points out in one of his later texts, entitled “‘To Do Justice to Freud’: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis” (1991):

In a protocol that laid down certain reading positions...I recalled a rule of hermeneutical method that still seems to me valid for the historian of philosophy...namely the necessity of first ascertaining a surface or manifest meaning...the necessity of gaining a good understanding, in a quasi-scholastic way,

¹⁶ J. Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’ (An Interview with Jacques Derrida)”, in *Acts of Literature*, edited by D. Attridge, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 53.

philologically and grammatically, by taking into account the dominant and stable conventions, of what Descartes *meant* on the already so difficult surface of his text, such as it is interpretable according to classical norms of reading: the necessity of gaining this understanding...*before and in order to* destabilize, wherever this is possible and if it is necessary, the authority of canonical interpretations.¹⁷

The *traditional* reading (the reproduction of the authorial or textual intention) is then *destabilised* through the utilisation of all those elements that have refused to be incorporated within it, with the result that the meaning of the text is different from that which its author intends it to say. For example, in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida writes:

To speak of origin and zero degree in fact comments on Rousseau's declared intention [*intention déclarée*]...But in spite of that declared intention, Rousseau's discourse lets itself be constrained by a complexity which always has the form of the supplement of or from the origin. His declared intention is not annulled by this but rather *inscribed* within a system which it no longer dominates. (*OG* 243/*DLG* 345)

Hence, the meanings produced during the *first* reading of deconstructive reading become "disseminated" during the *second* reading. In other words, during the second reading, the text loses its initial appearance of semantic determinacy, organized around the axis of its authorial intention, and is eventually pushed into producing a number of incompatible meanings which are "undecidable", in the sense that the reader lacks any secure ground for choosing between them. For example, in "Plato's Pharmacy", Derrida exhibits the way in which the text of the *Phaedrus*, despite Plato's intention to keep the two opposite meanings of *pharmakon* - namely the meanings of "remedy" and "poison" - separate, ends up affirming *à la fois* both, thus exhibiting another logic, that of "both...and" (namely, *pharmakon* is "both remedy and poison", both beneficent and

¹⁷ J. Derrida, "'To Do Justice to Freud': The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis", in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. P. Kamuf, P.-A. Brault, & M., Naas, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 84.

maleficent).¹⁸

A deconstructive reading, therefore, contains both a “dominant”,¹⁹ reproductive reading and a “critical”, productive reading. The *first* reading, which Derrida calls a “doubling commentary” (“*commentaire redoublant*”) (OG 158/DLG 227), finds a passage “lisible” and understandable, and reconstructs the *determinate* meaning of a particular passage according to a procedure that the deconstructive reader shares with common readers. The *second* reading, which he calls a “critical reading”, or an “active interpretation”, moves on to *disseminate* the meanings that the *first* reading has already determined.

In this double reading or “double gesture” (“*double geste*”),²⁰ Derrida is obliged to use classical interpretative norms and practices and, at the same time, to negate their power to “control” a text, to thoroughly construe a text as something determinate, and to “disseminate” the text into a series of “undecidable” meanings.²¹

Derrida’s “double” interpretive procedure is one which can only undermine the position of a text from the tradition by commencing from the assumption that its meaning has a high degree of determinacy. In order for a text’s *intentional* meaning to become destabilised, the text needs to possess a certain stability in its meaning so that it can be rendered determinate. However, the fixity generated by this preliminary procedure is necessarily undermined by Derrida’s subsequent destabilization of this textual determinacy of meaning which precludes the attribution of any (even “relative”) stability to it.²² It is this shift between the two practices of reading which reveals a tension within this procedure. Hence, despite the fact that he thinks that

¹⁸ J. Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy” in *Dissemination*, trans. B. Johnson, London: The Athlone Press, 1981, p. 70.

¹⁹ Derrida calls this initial reading that deconstruction enacts on the text, “dominant interpretation” (“*interprétation dominante*”) (J. Derrida, “Afterword: Toward An Ethic of Discussion”, in *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993, p. 143).

²⁰ J. Derrida, “Signature Event Context”, in *Limited Inc*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

²¹ M. H. Abrams, “Construing and Deconstructing”, Rajnath (ed), *Deconstruction: A Critique*, London: Macmillan, 1989, p. 44.

²² For this contradiction, see G. Kakoliris, “Jacques Derrida’s Double Deconstructive Reading: A Contradiction in Terms?”, *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 35:3, 2004, pp. 283-292.

no communicative action or textual practice is able to prevent the *dissemination* of meaning – a *dissemination* which is “irreducible to *polysemy*”²³ – or all he says about the endless play between concepts, the fissure that *différance* effects on the core of presence, the sign which is just a “trace”, or, in the language of the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure, despite the fact that “the self-identity of the signifier conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move” (*OG* 49/*DLG* 72), Derrida treats authorial or textual intention as something which can be determined *univocally*.²⁴ Hence, deconstruction seems to be conditioned by the paradoxical and contradictory textual necessity that the determination of the meaning of a text has to be *stable* since the destabilising force of deconstruction can take place only on something that possesses a certain stability whilst, simultaneously, being unstable in order for deconstruction to be possible.²⁵

The above paradox flows from the necessary prerequisites of deconstruction itself. Deconstruction is installed between a text's intended meaning (its *declarative* layer) and the text itself (its *descriptive* layer). Derrida's deconstructive reading repeatedly uncovers opposed meanings between what the metaphysical author (for example, Rousseau) “wishes to say” and what “he says without wishing to say it”, or between what the author “declares” and what the text “describes without Rousseau's wishing to say it”:

He *declares* what he *wishes to say* [Il *déclare* ce qu'il *veut dire*], that is to say that articulation and writing are a post-originary malady of language; he says or describes that which he

²³ J. Derrida, “Signature Event Context”, in *Limited Inc*, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

²⁴ See G. Kakoliris, “How Radical is Derrida's Deconstructive Reading?”, *Derrida Today* 2:2, 2009, pp. 177-185.

²⁵ One could agree with Derrida that a certain textual structure, although stable, is potentially destabilizable: “a stability is not an immutability; it is by definition always destabilizable” (J. Derrida, “Afterword”, *op. cit.*, p. 151). It is always possible for someone to find elements in a text which destabilize its intending argument. Nevertheless, the contradiction in the case of deconstruction is located in the fact that Derrida invokes the same precisely reasons for the deconstruction of certain textual structure that would preclude it from any stability.

does not wish to say [Il dit ou *décrit* ce qu'il *ne veut pas dire*]: articulation and therefore the space of writing operates at the origin of language. (OG 229/DLG 326)

Or

Rousseau *would wish* [*voudrait*] the opposition between southern and northern in order to place a natural frontier between different types of languages. However, what he *describes* [*décrit*] forbids us to think it... We must measure this gap between the description and the declaration. (OG 216-7/DLG 310)²⁶

What Rousseau declares and wishes to say is what is determined by standard reading; what the text, irrespective of authorial intention, proceeds to divulge is disclosed by the second level of deconstructive reading.

Derrida divides the second level or motif of deconstructive reading, - the 'active interpretation' or the deconstruction of the textual or authorial intention *per se*, into two phases. In the first phase, that of "inversion" (*renversement*), the emphasis is placed upon the reversal of the metaphysical primacy accorded to the particular elements of each binary opposition which structures the text. Hence, when someone is confronted with a text, which accords primacy to speech, reproducing the dominant hierarchical binary opposition between speech and writing, the first move will be to reverse this hierarchy, that is, to find those elements in the text, which, against the intentions of its author, support the priority of writing. The aim of the second phase - that Derrida names "displacement" (*déplacement*) - is to prevent the reappearance of this old opposition, even in an inverted form. The aim of deconstruction is to go beyond the metaphysical system of conceptuality, and this presupposes a radical rearrangement of the conceptual field through the re-inscription of the new (privileged) term, in a new extended form, into the body of the system. This new term is "undecidable", from the perspective of the old field of binary oppositions, in order to prevent its reappropriation by the metaphysical structure of this field (for example, the "pharmakon" is *both*

²⁶ See also, OG 200/DLG 286, 238/338, 242/344, 245/348, 246/349.

remedy *and* poison, the “trace” is *both* present *and* absent, the “supplement” is both surplus and lack or the “hymen” is *both* inside *and* outside).

These “new undecidable concepts” resist the symmetrical, formal structure imposed by the hierarchical binary logic of philosophical opposition, demonstrating another “logic”, which has been repressed and excluded from the history of metaphysics, and which Derrida names “logic of supplementarity” (*logique de la supplémentarité*) (OG 144-5, 215/DLG 207-8, 308).

While binary logic takes place between the limits of a disjunctive “either... or”, the “undecidable” logic of supplementarity constitutes the conjunctive logic of “both... and”, which, not only denies, but also disorganises classical binary thought. The fundamental laws of binary logic are the “principle of identity” ([A]=[A]) and the “principle of non-contradiction” (no [A and - A]). The movement of the “undecidables” exposes a different “principle”: (*both* A *and* - A). The *pharmakon*, for example, is “remedy and poison, both... good and bad”. *Pharmakon* “plays” between the poles of remedy and poison and, therefore, its rendering as *either* remedy *or* poison, as metaphysical binary thought ordains, prevents the revelation of the essential ambiguity of the word. Derrida refuses to determine a categorical, unambiguous meaning for *pharmakon*, or for the other undecidables. On the contrary, he stresses their characteristics of intensity and oscillation.

During 1960s and 1970s, Derrida’s deconstructive readings of philosophers such as Plato, Rousseau,²⁷ Hegel, Husserl or Levi-Strauss, are accompanied by the composition of more overtly playful texts (e.g. *Glas*). His aim is to show that any exhaustive interpretative determination of a text is impossible, because

²⁷ For a critical reading of Derrida’s deconstruction of Rousseau in *Of Grammatology*, see my articles: “Writing as a Supplement: Jacques Derrida’s Deconstructive Reading of Rousseau’s *Confessions*”, *Philosophy Study*, 5:6, June 2015, pp. 302-313 & “Misreading Rousseau? Jacques Derrida’s Deconstructive Reading of Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Languages*”, *Philosophy Study*, 5:10, October 2015, pp. 499-512. Also, I discuss Derrida’s deconstruction of Plato’s condemnation of writing in *Phaedrus* in my article: “The ‘Undecidable’ *Pharmakon*: Derrida’s Reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*”, *The New Yearbook of Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, XIII, 2013, pp. 223-234.

language does not draw its “meaning” from some deeper conceptual layer, a “transcendental signified”, which would exist outside of any system of the sign and, which, at some point, “would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign” (OG 49/DLG 71), that is to say, it would put an end to the search for a true meaning. This, therefore, is the basis upon which to comprehend Derrida’s statement that “*There is nothing outside of the text*” (OG 158/DLG 227). According to Derrida, this phrase “does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naive enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this “real” except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assumes it except in a movement of differential referring.”²⁸

Abbreviations

- DLG *De la Grammatologie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1967.
ED *L’écriture et la différence*, Collection «Essais», Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1967.
MP *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982.
MPh *Marges de la philosophie*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972.
OG *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976.
P *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, London: The Athlone Press, 1987.
POS *Positions*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972.
WD *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.

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²⁸ J. Derrida, “Afterword”, *op.cit.*, 148.

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to offer a critical overview of Derrida's deconstruction of Western Metaphysics, concentrating in particular on his early texts (e.g. *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, *Dissemination*, etc.) during the 1960's and 1970's. Besides the discussion of key Derridian concepts as "logocentrism" or "différance", the paper approaches deconstruction as enacting a process of "double reading". This double

reading commences with an initial stage or level which seeks to reconstruct a text's authorial intention or its *vouloir dire*. This initial level then prepares the text, through identification of authorial or textual intention, for the second stage or level. At this second stage or level, which is the passage to deconstructive reading *per se*, the blind spots or aporias of the text are set forth.

Keywords: Derrida, deconstruction, différance, double reading,.

