AN INTRODUCTION TO DERRIDA

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Introduction

In 1967 Derrida made an impressive entrance onto the French intellectual stage by publishing two collections of essays and a short study of the early Husserl (1967, 1,2,3). The importance of this intervention stemmed from the fact that while he endorsed the critical distance from phenomenology that was de rigeur for all pan-structuralists, he simultaneously developed a critique of the Saussurean concept of the sign on which 'structuralism' rested. And as he both considers his work political and 'not inconsistent with Marxism' while maintaining a carefully tuned distance from any particular Marxist or radical texts, he has posed a considerable problem of assessment ever since.

To understand the position from which this tissue of distances was set up, we need to appreciate the way he appropriated and fused into a new way of reading, the work of a number of his predecessors. These include the accounts of the closure or exhaustion of metaphysics developed by Nietzsche and Heidegger, the radical critique of the concept of meaning that Saussure's semiology implicitly opens up, and the Freudian critique of the enthroned subject of consciousness.

As formative intellectual elements these do not however pick out Derrida from the Parisian crowd. What does distinguish him is the way he organises these elements. He uses the critique of metaphysics to develop, by rethinking the classical concept of the sign, a new 'concept' of writing, which functions as the basis of a new diagnostic programme. What he gains from it is a more direct access to the metaphysical alignments and commitments both of his contemporaries (Levinas, Foucault, Lacan, Levi-Strauss and of many 'classic' texts (including those of Plato, Rousseau, Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger).

Derrida's position is based on the belief that there are two radically different ways of understanding language - ways parallel to the distinction Husserl makes between indication and expression, on which Derrida fastens in his book on Husserl (1967.1). One can understand language as deriving its 'meaning' from some underlying semantic layer, such as experience, consciousness, or even the Platonic world of forms. Or one can understand its meaning as self-constituted, brought about by the play of differences between terms, by their repetition, without reference to some field of sub-linguistic guarantees (1). The alternative to an expressivist or foundationalist account of language is one that treats meaning not as the basis of language but as an effect of language. On such a view language is understood 'primarily' as writing.

This term has however been the source of a certain misunderstanding, or non-understanding. It does not in principle involve any claim about the relative ranking of the spoken or written word (2). Derrida's championing of writing is an intervention that opposes itself not to speech but to speech considered (however silently) to be privileged, as linked by a hot-line to meaning (3). To announce that speech is a form of writing is simply to deprive it of this metaphysical status, and to assimilate it to the articulatory condition of all meaning, for which the term 'writing' stands. The violence done to our linguistic reflexes by the apparently perverse inversions found in Derrida's discussion of the relation between speech and writing is strictly therapeutic. When we discuss his procedure of deconstruction we will get some idea of the general strategy involved.

But if Derrida is not in principle committed to a concern for the sort of writing found in books it is to this area that his work is largely confined. To say that his work is heavily parasitical on other writing is not just to utter a truth about all writing, but to say something special about his. Other thinkers have intellectual debts, take issue with the published views of others, even try to refute them. And even if, like the later Wittgenstein, one is concerned to come to terms with people's linguistic intuitions in the field of everyday speech, one is still using a public language. But Derrida's modes of parasitism are quite other. In a whole series of texts, of which Marges and Glas are the prime examples, he doesn't just feed off his prey, he hatches his eggs inside their flesh. Sartre once talked about the worm at the heart of Being. The possibility of a Derridean inworming lies at the heart of every text.

If there is one principle behind this inworming it is a basic questioning of authorial identity. What is put in question is any principle that (a) guarantees the distinction between writer and critic, host and parasite and (b) guarantees the unity through time of the critic himself. This questioning has its origin (and not just a temporal one) in the philosophical problem about the nature of personal identity (the theological problem of the nature of the soul). In France this problem appears both in the form of a defense of the concept of a person as an ethical a priori - in the Christian tradition especially - but also in the shape of the phenomenological concept of the subject, which either in its transcendental form (Husserl) or its existential version (Sartre) seems to embody a commitment to the a priori unity and continuity of the subject that to many a post-Nietzschean nose is something short of metaphysical. Identity is the atheist's plastic soul.

By using the term 'writing' Derrida is bringing the problem of meaning back to language for its solution. (Back to language because it started as a problem about general names.) It is by a parallel 'linguistic turn' - that is, a turn towards language - that we can understand the transformation being performed on the metaphysical problem of personal

1 Cf. the distinction between logical and rhetorical models of language in Newton Garver's preface to Derrida (1967.1) (E.T.1973).

2 See for instance Plato's Phaedrus, the locus classicus of this view.

3 See e.g. p55 of Derrida (1967.2) (E.T.1976).

identity. We can understand Derrida as endorsing, at the level of 'writing', the criticisms that Heidegger (see e.g. Being and Time Ø 19) before him had already made of the classical Subject. These criticisms included the rejection of the subject's a priori unity through time and the rejection of its metaphysical independence from the 'external' world. And what replaces the problem of personal identity, in the new linguistic idiom, is the problem of textuality. The fact that dreams display such textual articulation is a symptom of the theoretical displacement of the 'enthroned conscious subject' (4) that this linguistic turn involves. Indeed even consciousness will be seen to have a structure based on the sign. This is the theme of Derrida's first book, and I shall now begin to explain in more detail how some of the ideas I have discussed have been presented in specific Derridean texts.

The Text and Meaning

Derrida's first published work of importance was devoted to the analysis of the work of Husserl, whom Oedipal fingers point to as the father of phenomenology. His first unostentatious foray into the field of Husserl criticism began with an introduction (171 pages) to his accompanying translation of Husserl's late and much shorter essay on the Origin of Geometry. And this was followed by his account of Husserl's masterpiece, the Logical Investigations (E.T.1970). The key word in the title of the short essay that attracted his interest was 'origin', and it is no coincidence that he should also write on Rousseau's Essay on the Origin of Languages (in 1967.2) , and, later, an introduction to Condillac's Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge (1973). The English reader may not know quite how to assess Derrida's selection of objects of interest. Many of us will never have looked at Condillac let alone that 'essay', and neither Husserl's nor Rousseau's essays are the first pieces one would normally read in trying to understand their work. Matters are a little different in France, but even if Condillac is the Locke of French philosophy, Derrida focuses on parts of the 'essay' which are not normally taken as central, even in France. We can understand what Derrida is up to, however, without great prior knowledge of these texts. They are simply vehicles by which he is exemplifying his practice of reading.

In each case the reference to an origin, even when it is presented in a historical context - and after all geometry, one supposes, did start sometime - is a reference to a point or a site possessing a primary epistemological power, a pure source of meaning, a ground with which we can come into direct contact. Under the guise of a history we find metaphysics. They trace the past to find a présence, a point beyond which we need not go in trying to give a foundation to language, to geometry, to knowledge, a point which it may still be possible to reactivate. What Derrida shows is that in each case the theories and models employed are shaped by this theme of présence. (5)

One of the interests of this analytical procedure is that it allows Derrida to assimilate rather different, indeed otherwise opposed points of view. Husserl's position, for example, is one which founds meaning on intuition, while Rousseau founds it on feeling. While the two can be so contrasted, they still share a common assumption about what counts as an adequate account. In fact such an assumption is the basis of their conflict. An adequate account of meaning has to discover a source which is non-conventional, non-artificial, non-constructed, but primitive. For Rousseau this means 'natural' and for Husserl it means 'pure'. Rousseau posits a natural language of cries, Husserl a pure order of experience. Derrida is not offering us here a scholarly summary of their theories but rather a metaphysically symptomatic reading in which he displays certain forms of theoretical appeal. And it would be a mistake to think of this discovery of a ground, of a centre, of what Derrida calls a présence simply as a detached interest in the form of theories. The metaphysical or logocentric tradition as he calls it, can be seen as a tradition of inviable textual authority. We are not referring just to the traditional authoritative texts such as bibles, law books, rule books etc, but to the legitimation structure of certain apparently innocent texts. The tracing back of conclusions to points, or presuppositions that cannot be questioned because of their privilege, hidden by the metaphysical value that they embody, is in fact the exposing of a textual power, a power given authority by the metaphysical privilege of presence. We can perhaps understand metaphysics in Derrida's account as the legitimation of textual power. The attack on the privilege of presence parallels the political attack on the divine right of kings. I take up this line of thought again later.

What I have said so far is thoroughly schematic. I do not apologise for this and I shall return with another simple schematism a little later, but we still ought to give some illustrations of how Derrida actually goes about the business of uncovering logocentrism in his chosen texts. I will take two classic cases, of Husserl and Saussure, for his account of these thinkers explains how he is situated in a complex space between and beyond both phenomenology and structuralism. Derrida began his matricidal exercise on Husserl, as I have mentioned. Husserl's Logical Investigations, a long and systematic attempt to provide for logic and what was called logical grammar (the supposed a priori structure of language) a foundation that was neither purely formalistic nor psychological, begins with what Derrida rightly calls a 'portentous distinction' between two different senses of the word 'sign'. We can understand by 'sign' both 'expression' and 'indication'.

Before we explain what Husserl means by this distinction it is worth recalling the theoretical commitments he had already made. He had already been attacked by Frege for the psychologism of his first work, and was trying this time to ensure that no traces of the empirical remained in his account of the foundations of logic and language. Later on, in Ideas (1913), the exclusion of the merely empirical was to be accomplished by a kind of epistemological screening procedure, the phenomenological reduction. Here, dealing with what we might call the raw material of logic - relations of signification - the distinction he draws between two sorts of sign serves the same function at the semantic level.

Those signs he calls 'indications' include both natural and conventional signs, that is, both causal or similarity relations (smoke/fire is a causal

4 On this displacement Lacan is the obvious source. See also Derrida (1967.1)

5 See Derrida (1967.2) (E.T.1976) p12) for the manifold meanings of presence.

example) and arbitrary linguistic relations (like that of 'chair' to a chair). These cannot be the basis of the ideal 'sciences' with which he is concerned because they lack necessity. They are just links by which the mind happens to move from one thing to another. Husserl thinks of relations of indication as external, superficial, so much epistemological dross. What is important to him, and so to carefully separate and describe phenomenologically, is that class of signs he calls 'expressions'. These have an intimate relation of direct acquaintance with what they 'mean' and the paradigm of such an acquaintance is our own inner experience on uttering words to ourselves, perhaps silently.

This involves Husserl in a view of the social employment of language as a derivative and secondary phenomenon with no contribution of its own to make to the production of meaning. As the public formulation of one's ideas in language involves one in the use of indicative signs (a public language consisting of arbitrary relationships between words and things) Husserl insisted on the need to conduct his enquiry into ideal meanings at the level of the expressive signs constituted in 'solitary mental life', prior to their taking on an external linguistic form however necessary that might be for communication. Husserl, in summary, thinks he can and must bracket out the impure, external, empirical aspects of signification leaving the pure ideal aspects available for internal and immediate inspection by a pure consciousness. If we appear to be making a great deal out of the indication/expression distinction it is because Husserl devoted the first of his Logical Investigations to the distinction, and hung the rest of them on it. And Derrida hangs Husserl on it.

Derrida approaches Husserl's position here at two levels. The first is an ironic one: to insist that the separability of the ideal from the empirical in the form of these two types of signification is a presupposition that Husserl makes. And as phenomenology takes presuppositionlessness to be a founding value, there is something of an inconsistency here. Derrida also recognises in this presupposition and particularly in the way Husserl appeals to a privileged sphere (pure consciousness) to establish the independence of expression from indication, the most basic metaphysical theme of presence, in its particular form of the presence of meaning to consciousness. As Husserl is dedicated to the elimination of metaphysics, which he thought of as the cause of most of the sterile debates in the history of philosophy, this criticism is one to which phenomenology is peculiarly sensitive. (6)

Derrida does not just assert the metaphysical nature of Husserl's appeal, he argues for an alternative account of the sign and of meaning, which would destroy the credibility of Husserl's privileged 'presence'. The idea of presence is a very powerful one. Its power rests on the way it combines a spatial and a temporal sense, a here and a now in a single value. And the appeal to it as an epistemological ultimate has, dare we say it, an immediate plausibility. We usually rely on what we can see in front of us. If the literal visual cases of seeing are subject to sceptical doubts, we would eliminate these doubts it might seem, if we restricted ourselves to the kind of 'seeing' with which consciousness apprehends its objects. And the problems scepticism has with memory (what is only remembered is not immediately available and so subject to doubt) can be solved by sticking to what is immediately given at an instant of time. Derrida demonstrates however that the immediate plausibility of the value of presence does not survive closer inspection, as I shall now show.

Central to Husserl's account of the non-empirical status of language, logic and philosophy - all of them 'ideal' disciplines - was the concept of ideality. He understood the ideality of a term, say, or a sentence, as the possibility of its infinite repetition. Derrida, however, interprets the notion of infinite repeatability extensionally, that is, he insists on cashing it out into a real infinity of operations, with which of course we can never be presented, which can never be 'given'. And so it follows that we can never be acquainted with 'ideality'. If we then say, as Husserl does, that series are completed in the imagination, then we are faced with a problem that the imagination is linked to the very empirical world Husserl has fought to exclude. The final blow is struck when Derrida juxtaposes Husserl's assumption that there could be an instant, a pure temporal presence in which this confrontation with meaning took place, with Husserl's own fully developed account of time-consciousness (1966). And here a real inconsistency appears. Husserl gives us an account of the purified structure of time which makes quite clear that there can be no pure present. Any 'now' is shadowed by the past, and casts a light forward on the future. The 'now' is from the outset structured in terms of the past and future. There is no pure present. Consequently there is no temporal site, says Derrida, for the privilege Husserl has accorded to presence.

As well as pointing out internal flaws in Husserl's account, Derrida also introduces an account of the nature of signs which is thoroughly at odds with the view that they are merely the external form given to meanings. Signs relate to other signs, by opposition, by derivation, by a whole 'play' of differences. All these 'horizontal' relationships make nonsense of the 'vertical' model of Husserl's which ties signs down to individual meanings. To retain that model, we would have to suppose that the 'horizontal' relationships we have mentioned, such as opposition, were to be found at the level of

6 It is worth pointing out that Derrida is not the first French philosopher to have criticized Husserl's account of a purified consciousness. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty each made this a measure of their distance from transcendental phenomena. Derrida's distinction is to have undertaken this criticism not by an appeal to the impossibility of bracketing out 'existence' but to the irremediable other relatedness (in many different senses) of the sign, which is the structure of consciousness. Derrida would claim a common inspiration in Heidegger, but I cannot help wondering about a more direct relationship to the 'vulgar' Sartre.

meanings, but in that case it would be impossible for them to be discretely grasped in conscious acts, because in the act of immediate grasping, their relationships to other, absent signs would have been excluded.

Meaning for Derrida is always mediated, never immediate. And by mediation is not meant just a deferred presence which finally comes, but a permanent state of deferment. The play of differences that Derrida substitutes for Husserl's immediacy of presence can never be captured in a system, can never be represented (7). The wish for such a structured semantics is nothing but the reappearance of the belief in presence at another level.

Derrida has cut a great swathe through Husserl. One could argue that he has not given Husserl a fair run for his money - perhaps Husserl could have reconciled the two accounts of time, drawn after all from different periods and contexts, perhaps he would have disputed the whole extensionalist interpretation of ideality by a more careful account of the idealising functions of the imagination. Perhaps Husserl was saying many other things that Derrida has missed out. But there is no doubt that Husserl, as they say, will never be 'the same' again.

In his critique of Husserl, Derrida used not only the Heideggerian view of metaphysics as the interpretation of Being as presence, but also the Saussurean account of the sign. It was the externality of the signs to itself, the claim that all signs are what they are by their relation to other signs, that Derrida finally substituted for Husserl's account of language, and this is essentially a Saussurean doctrine. But how can this be if Derrida, as we have said, also attacks Saussure? The time is ripe for an account of Derrida's Saussure.

Saussure is the main focus of the essay Linguistics and Grammatology (in 1967.2). The way Derrida begins his study of Saussure is characteristic. If we grant the expanded scope of the concept of writing that we have already introduced, then one might imagine that just as semiology, for instance, is the general science of signs, that there could be a science of writing. This however raises certain reflexive problems, problems that the subject matter of such a science throws up for the status of the enterprise as science. Firstly, might it not be that the rigour and objectivity of science as such presupposes writing as 'the condition of the possibility of ideal objects'? Secondly, if we were to grasp the appearance of the science of writing as the product of particular historical conditions, are we not then confronted with the dependence of history on the possibility of writing? Thirdly, a brief exploration of the subject would reveal that the concept of science is dependent on a highly determined relationship between speech and writing. The general difficulty, then, is that writing does not simply serve to define the scope of its science as an obedient subject matter should, but is the problematic ground for the idea of science as such.

Given these problems - which are genuinely fascinating - we might perhaps wonder whether linguistics, supposed after all to be a general science of language, might not be some help.

On the contrary, as the reader may have guessed, the hope that Saussure might be able to come to our rescue is doomed to disappointment. What is at stake in understanding Husserl is the status of Saussure's work as science. And Saussure is immediately suspected of having made a grave though not original assumption about the relationship between speech and writing, a presupposition which is nothing short of metaphysical. It is not the first time that Saussure has been charged with having invented a pseudo-science (8). But Derrida's reasons for making this charge are original. He shows that the scientificity of Saussure's choice of an object of study - which turns out to be spoken language, rests on his identification of the spoken sound with meaning (thought). This phonocentrism can achieve the integrity of its object only by treating writing as merely an external, secondary supplementary addition to the spoken word. What Husserl claimed about language as such - its externality (to thought/meaning/consciousness/expression) appears in Saussure as the relationship of writing to speech. Writing is just an external notation. Derrida shows that this exclusion of writing from linguistics is the product of an attempt to draw the boundaries of linguistics in such a way that it be a closed system. But the principle on which writing is excluded from consideration - its mere externality - is one which is contradicted by the extraordinary Ch. VI of the Cours (E.T.1974) in which Saussure inveighs against the damage done to language by its transcription into writing, a sort of dead skin that corrupts. Writing is seen as a danger to the purity of the system of speech. Derrida points out, too, the extraordinary language of contamination, pathology, perversity associated with writing, in opposition to the natural purity of spoken language. This contradiction -between writing as empty externality and writing as source of contamination - is symptomatic. Saussure is unable to consistently theorise the primacy of speech over writing. For Derrida this ranking is based on the privilege of presence that Saussure as a representative of the logocentric tradition accords to the spoken word.

What is Derrida's response? Saussure is part of a tradition that needs deconstruction, but what does this consist of?

> "deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not befall an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing." (1967.2)

The rejection of a simple reversal is a lesson learned from Heidegger and Nietzsche. If we are trying to change the framework within which opposed terms appear, then a mere reversal will not be adequate, it will merely be a repetition of the original structure. So when Derrida shows how language is 'first ... writing', it is 'in a sense' he must explain, a new sense.

To explain it, we might look at some of the patterns of Derrida's thought so far. In the texts we have already referred to, what is particularly striking is that he is constantly pointing to ways in which these texts are organised according to metaphysically loaded patterns of space and time. He

7 Can it even be captured in a single article? A number of Derrida's essays are dedicated to an interventionist exposition and elaboration of a substitute of non-meaning, or difference (Différance (see 1967.1)(E.T. 1973), Derrida's answer to Heidegger's (1929) is the classic case.

8 To give a home-grown example, we find Ogden and Richards (1923) opening the book with the objection that Saussure's 'langue' - the supposed object of linguistics - is a fiction, created by the 'primitive impulse to infer from words some object for which it stands' (p4). Despite the real differences between Derrida and Ogden and Richards, it is fascinating that they both attribute to Saussure an error based on a metaphysical conception of language.

defines logocentrism, for example as 'the exigent, powerful, systematic and irrepressible desire for a "transcendental signified"'(1967.2 p49 E.T.). What he means by a transcendental signified is a meaning which would exist outside any system of signs, and 'would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign'. In other words it would end regresses in the search for the real meaning. A philosopher's stone.When Nietzsche said that we had not got rid of God if we still believe in grammar, it is just this structure of a privileged first point to a series that he is talking about. Here Derrida has located a constitutive feature of metaphysics - the metaphysical organisation of an ideal temporal series so as to produce a beginning, at the level of the text. And in the same way, he shows how one of the most basic topological structures - the relationship between inside and outside - is loaded to carry a metaphysical weight. If it is the case (and it would take me an argument for which I have neither time nor space to develop here) that there are such analogues of spatio-temporal organisation in, at least, all theoretical texts, then the assignment of a privilege, or an orientation to such structures, silently, or invisibly, allows them to carry a metaphysical message.

If this sort of analysis is correct, one would expect Derrida to have something to say about space and time in the textual sense, and of course he does. Most of his 'constructive' as well as his deconstructive essays contain some account or at least a trace of an allusion to an alternative theory of language, one which can only function as a substitute for the one he is dismantling for those who have managed to shake off the 'powerful desire' to which we have just alluded. Kant's solution was to demonstrate to us the proper limits of reason so that reason would then cease to stray with the slightest hope of success beyond those bounds, like a trained dog that will not pass an open gate. Derrida's solution is to intervene with a new set of terms, and a new account of the spatiotemporality of the sign to 'underpin' it. Some of this can be found in the remainder of this essay on Saussure. But the best source is the essay Differance. It is a difficult essay and not a little eccentric but with a little priming it is well worth reading. His explanations of the packing and unpacking of the term 'differance' allow one to locate him in a history of 'influences' (1967.1 E.T. p130) and to see what I mean by his alternative spatiotemporalisation of the textual meaning.

I said above (see note 7) that Differance is Derrida's answer to Heidegger's lecture What is Metaphysics? I did not mean that it was a conscious reply, but that it occupies a parallel place in his writing, that it is even more outrageously 'brilliant', and that it presents many of the same problems of assessment. The Heidegger lecture is all about Nothing (which is neither a thing, nor simply nothing) while Derrida's lecture is about Differance (which is neither a word nor a concept). And both offer accounts of the role of their 'terms' which sound like new transcendental roles, while this status is vigorously denied. There are many more things which should be said just for the record about the influence of Heidegger here, but they will have to be deferred for the time being. I will proceed to the task of trying to summarize what is going on in this essay.

We must understand that 'difference' (with an 'e') is itself derived from the French word 'differer' which already embodies a combined spatio-temporal sense in its two meanings 'to differ/differentiate' and 'to defer'. 'Differ' or 'differentiate' are understood as spatial in the sense of involving differences that are most naturally represented on some sort of spatial grid. Derrida transforms 'difference' (with an 'e') into 'differance' with an 'a' to mark a difference between his term and the one he is modifying. Marking the difference with an 'a' is something of a serious joke. If we remember that 'Derrida's project can be viewed as the establishment of the primacy of 'writing' over 'speech' when the latter is understood logocentrically, then the fact that the difference between 'difference' and 'differance' is only visible and not audible is Derridean wit. Why 'a'? Think first of the ABC ... Has not 'a' a sort of privilege? And Lacan's 'a' for 'autre' (otherness). Or 'a' for 'arche' - origin or first point. 'a' may not be defined but it is not unmotivated and such an unfinished series of allusions is just the sort of 'meaning' that 'differance' allows. If we are not happy with the sort of ways he introduces 'differance' it is because we hanker after something which could be properly defined like a concept, but that is to fall back into the logocentrist account of language of which differance announces the limit, if it cannot tell the end. With all the subtle reflexivities and theoretical embodiments of the term differance it is really a very brutal way of nose-rubbing in the materiality of language. But at the same time it clearly does connect to all the themes we have described. The way Derrida puts it, it sounds like a tin-opener:

> "it opens up the very space in which ... philosophy produces its system and its history" (1967.1 E.T.p135)

It performs this role by being carefully used in such a way that it cannot be thought in terms of the traditional oppositions constitutive of that space, so that it can never legitimate those forms of blindness that philosophy has necessarily taken so seriously.

Derrida distinguishes the two senses of differance as spacing and temporising (9). Insofar as the traditional concept of the sign has involved the representation of a presence (e.g. a thing or a meaning) in its absence, breaking out of that conception will involve us in dropping our commitment to that presence which is deferred, and to understand deferment without implicit reference to a final realisation. We can understand differance in its sense of 'spacing' by referring to Saussure's account, which some have found hard to swallow, of signs as having a differential character. Signs have their value by the differences that relate them to other signs, an explanation dispensing with any fixed or privileged point. Or 'in language there are only differences and no positive terms' as Saussure put it. What Derrida extracts here is the odd way in which Saussure's principle of difference seems to be of a different order to that of the signs that it accounts for. As differance incorporates this Saussurean sense, we can understand it as a 'play of differences', a play which, while making concepts possible, is not itself a concept.

Derrida cannot however bring himself to say that it is an activity, nor that it has effects. That would be to attribute to it the function of a new ground or

9 The English translator entirely misses the distinction that Derrida makes between temporizing (playing for time?) and temporalizing (op. cit. note 7, p136). Cf. the original, p47.

founding principle of a metaphysical order. And then all would have been in vain, the game lost. He christens the non-effect of this non-cause the 'trace'. He cannot avoid the use of metaphysical terms to explain himself, but his commitment to them is only an expediency, part of a deconstructive strategy. It is impossible to do without them, but the implication is that one can use them to contest the very system of which they are a part. This reference to strategy gets cashed out not only in relation to the future but also in terms of the whole chain of terms with which differance can already be linked, drawn from his other texts (10). So differance, neither a word nor a concept, takes its place in a guerilla army of similar 'terms' none of which are exactly synonyms, but each of which shares the job of displacing the logocentric competition and disordering the field in which they are place. Summaries, strictly writing, are impossible, and summaries of summaries are subject to the law of even more diminishing returns. For that reason I shall leave the very rich second part of Differance for unguided exploration. What Derrida does is to reveal the campaign contributions of Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Freud and Levinas, in a tantalising collection of trailers for more important occasions.

Before I make some more critical and general remarks on what Derrida is doing I ought to fill in some of the ground that I have not covered so far. I have concentrated on presenting some of the more accessible routes to the Derridean heights. But I have not exhausted the field. In particular, I ought to repeat that Derrida writes texts in which the classical authorial function is abandoned, in which the author as friend who explains what he is doing, who presents his ideas with ease of comprehension in mind, who at least plays at producing a classical text - this author has left the scene. Glas (1974) is the extreme case but the principle of withdrawing guarantees of unambiguous textual identity is one distributed throughout his work. The further principle of exemplifying his theory of writing in his practice of writing is inevitable given its radical nature, and yet makes for considerable difficulty in reading him. The reason he has to exemplify his theories performatively is to be found in his sympathetic account of Hegel's problems with prefaces (11). Prefaces to philosophical texts attempt the impossible, for texts cannot be summarised (12). The summary is simply a different text. There is no meaning that can be boiled down. The attempt to do so just leads to its evaporation. Consequently there is an irreducible aspect of demonstration or 'showing' or practice about Derrida's work, and a showing in the form of an articulated doing.

I have so far tried to keep fairly close to the ground, but I would now like to take up a certain distance from Derrida, and pose some questions for him, to which I shall offer some sorts of answers. But there is no pure distance, only within a particular space.

Deconstruction and its Implications

Where does Derrida stand in relation to other sorts of radical theory and practice? I shall raise some general problems based on the work we have already considered, and try to answer them in part by reference to his published interviews. In trying to come to terms with the political dimension of Derrida's writing, I will make a provisional distinction between on the one hand the question of Derrida's theory of reading, and its relationship to a Marxist reading of philosophy, and on the other, the wider political relevance of Derrida's work. I will begin with the first question.

I will take it for granted that if there is any single method that captures Derrida's theory of reading it is the practice of what he calls 'deconstruction'. While accounts of this can be found in a number of places in his work perhaps the most important is an account of what he calls its 'general economy' in the title interview of Positions (1972.1, p56) with Jean-Louis Houdebine and Guy Scarpetta.

The subject matter of deconstruction on any particular occasion is a text, either a philosophical text in the traditional sense, or a theoretical text with critical pretensions such as Saussure's Cours. The local aim is to display the latent metaphysical structure of the text, according to a theory of what constitutes metaphysics (the privileging of some 'presence' or other) and then to transform it. The deconstruction of a particular text derives its wider meaning from a neo-Heideggerian account of the history of Western thought, in which it is claimed that this entire system of thought, with a few heroic exceptions, is a kind of internal debate employing certain fixed conceptual oppositions, and is essent-

10 For a very useful list of references to Derrida's terminological exposition see Derrida (1967.1) (E.T.1973 p142 n. 6).

11 See Hors Livre (1972.2).

12 Cf. Barthes (1977), Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers: 'the summary is a dislike of writing'.

ially finite, that is to say, it has limits and these can be described. Derrida's forte is to apply his method to texts which themselves take up a severely critical attitude to their own tradition and to show that these texts are nonetheless naive in their understanding of that tradition, that they repeat the errors they criticize in a disguised way.

Deconstruction is a critical method of displaying the latent metaphysical structure of texts, which is distinctive in the way it tries to avoid falling into the same traps itself, even if this is to some extent unavoidable. In the interview we mentioned above Derrida's account of deconstruction is directed to this complex problem of how to transform a text without merely endorsing the wider framework to which its terms belong:

> "one would have to avoid, at one and the same time, a simple neutralisation of the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply remaining (resider) inside, and so confirming the closed field of these oppositions." (op. cit.)
> [my translation, as below]

In many respects this is just updated Nietzsche so far. In order to prevent one's critical enterprise from being aborted in this way, Derrida distinguishes the deconstructive strategy (for that it is) into two phases. The first he gives a name to - reversal. The second we will call transformation.

1 Firstly, why 'reversal'? What is reversed?

> "in a classical philosophical opposition [and it is out of oppositions that texts are structured - DCW] we do not find a peaceful co-existence between the two sides, but a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically, etc) occupies the higher place. To deconstruct the opposition one must first of all, at a given moment, reverse the hierarchy."

So if we were confronted with a text promoting idealism, working with a loaded opposition between the ideal and the material, the first move would be to reverse this hierarchy, to argue for the priority of the material, etc. If instead of doing this one were to merely transcend the opposition straight away, then

> "one passes too quickly without giving the first opposition much consideration, to a neutralisation which practically speaking would leave the first field as it was, depriving oneself of any means of effectively intervening in it."

Reversal, even if naive in the last analysis, is at least a move in the game. It is strategically justified if one can use it as the first move in changing the game. It is important that Derrida finds it natural at this point to draw a practical analogy:

> "we know what the practical (and in particular the political effects have been of leaping immediately beyond all opposition, and of protests in the simple form of neither/nor..."

Derrida is not in favour of transcendental politics. And yet this determinate negation of the hierarchical organisation of one concept's relation to another is useless by itself.

> "The hierarchy of the dual opposition always reconstitutes itself. To hold onto this stage one needs the second stage."

2 The second stage - transformation - corresponds to what I earlier described as Derrida's hatching his eggs in his host. The aim of stage two is to prevent the old opposition from simply re-establishing itself, by putting a conceptual spanner in the works.

> "This involves operating further on the terrain and in the interior of the deconstructed system. One must also, by this double writing, carefully stratified, displaced and displacing, mark the distance between the inversion which, by deconstructing the sublimating or idealising genealogy, brings it lower, and, on the other hand, the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept', one which no longer allows itself (not that it ever did) to be understood on the earlier ground."

So it becomes clear that inversion or reversal is only a preliminary to a more radical reorganisation of the conceptual field brought about by the introduction of a new term.

Derrida's concept of 'writing' is a good case in point. The first stage of his deconstruction of the privilege of speech is to privilege writing instead. The second stage is to redefine writing, if only by use, so as to include speech and indeed any other such articulations. The first stage brings about an engagement with the present field, the second stage aims at transforming it so that it cannot reform itself into the old pattern. He imports into the field concepts which are 'indecidables' from the point of view of the old field, and which to be handled at all require that the work of deconstruction be left intact.

Many of his essays consist of a putting these new terms into a new textual practice so that they acquire, by example imitable patterns of use, recognizable functions, if not quite meanings. 'Differance' which he originally claimed was neither a 'word' nor a 'concept' because of the unwanted presuppositions that can be read into these innocent terms, he now concedes has become a word!

But if we have now got a clearer picture of what at least the 'general economy' of deconstruction consists of, how should we assess it? I would first like to point out two quite contrasting aspects of this method, which, united, give it power. Firstly, it is a highly formal method of criticism, and second, it is nonetheless guided by considerations of strategy which are thoroughly practical (in a limited sense). It is formal in the sense that he is concerned with the structure of philosophical texts, or with reading a structure in them which betrays the imbalances and hierarchies that are grist to his mill. At this level there is not much to choose between Derrida and other philosophers with a general view of the history of philosophy, except perhaps the ingenuity and originality of his analyses. The difference comes at the second level with his strategies for forcing a permanent change in the ways we read not just the texts he has chosen but theoretical texts in general, including as we shall see, the texts of the Marxist tradition. For it is clear that these strategies have analogues, not to say models in what seem to be extra-textual struggles. But are they? There is nothing, Derrida has said, 'hors text'. We will return to this question.

My analytical separation of the formal and practical aspects of deconstruction has severe limits. One of the most revealing features of Derrida's writing is the use he makes, even in describing what I have called the formal strands of his method, of militaristic and 'political' language. 'Peaceful co-existence', 'violent hierarchy', 'dominate', 'structure of conflict'

even 'strategy' itself. We have already learned from Derrida that metaphors are never innocent.

We can perhaps understand the force of these terms but how do we assess them? One might think of them simply as a rhetorical enhancement of a less dramatic way of putting the whole business, one that perhaps reflects Derrida's own unhappy consciousness of his own political irrelevance or impotence. But more plausible is the view that politics and struggle are inseparable from the rethinking of language and writing on Derridean lines, and that one can use the sharpened sense these terms can acquire in their use to describe a strategy of interventionist reading, to reaccentuate their relevance in conceptualising and structuring other forms of political action.

If not wholly accurate this second reading of Derrida's language is closer than the first. It is clear that he thinks the form in which certain problems of radical transformation occur at the level of rethinking writing is one we can learn a great deal from. Let me illustrate this point further. At the end of his paper The Ends of Man he gives us a distinction between two sorts of deconstructive strategies, the first of which he associates with Heidegger, involving the kind of inworming or internal subversion we have just described, and the second a kind of break, a standing apart, a refusal to participate, the invention of one's own dance, laughter... There is something of Nietzsche in this account (and a bit less in the first). Derrida suggests that both can be used, and even intermingled. The point is that both are solutions to a problem, of how to overcome what I would call the conservative logic of system recuperation, that has a very distinct political analogue. The absorption and toleration of dissent characteristic of Western 'democracy' and the development of strategies to prevent such recuperation has, for example, been one of the central themes of the post-war Frankfurt school. Indeed Derrida's remarks about the illusions of freedom of speech at the beginning of his delivery of that paper could have come straight from Marcuse, for all their other differences. The illusions of opposition, originality, 'revolution' which litter the history of logocentric philosophy offer Derrida an ideal field in which to develop the vocabulary of escape from the seemingly inescapable, the very predicament so often felt by those engaged in radical politics. This account does not however go far enough. It still makes the relationship between the practice of deconstruction and of radical political action just one of analogy and Derrida would contest that limitation, as I shall explain shortly.

Derrida says at one point that he does not think that he has ever said anything inconsistent with Marxism (a remark which could have come straight out of a heresy trial), but that needs a lot of unpacking. To understand Derrida's relation to Marxism there is no substitute for at least a glance at his relation to Heidegger (see below) and Hegel. First of all, with all his rejections of humanism as a form of metaphysics (13), Derrida has a certain sympathy with Althusser. But Derrida has a different reading of Hegel, and great debts to Nietzsche and Heidegger. Derrida's Hegel, if we can discount his eschatology, his teleology, the final return of presence in that terminus he calls Absolute Knowledge, has a profound understanding of writing as such, of philosophy as textuality. Even if his thought is finally a testimony to the logocentric tradition, Hegel's system is an account of the progressive discovery of the limits of other philosophical systems, the destruction of their finite forms, the instability of their oppositions, and perhaps most important, the understanding of any 'knowledge' as a mnemonic 'trace' which is never purely present except 'at the end'. The journey from the Hegelian concepts of dialectic and Aufbehung (overcoming, sublation) to 'differance' is a journey through mined territory, fraught with complications. To merely stand Hegel on his head would be to continue to work within the same metaphysical space. One does not escape a frame of reference by negating someone else's terms. Derrida tries to produce fron. Hegel a new text free from logocentrism. If Marx found Hegel a representative of German Idealism, Derrida sees him through the spectacles of the logocentric tradition. The relationship between logocentrism and idealism? Derrida tries to explain this in the course of answering the criticism that he 'underestimates, even ignores the struggle between materialism and idealism' (14). His answer is complex. He argues that if he has neglected that problem it is because he thought that the most necessary and urgent task was to give a 'general determination of the conditions of emergence and of the limits of philosophy and of metaphysics' and all that it entails. But in principle he has not neglected it, because logocentrism firstly, is also fundamentally idealism; secondly, it is the matrix of idealism; thirdly, idealism is the most direct representation of logocentrism; and fourthly, logocentrism is a larger concept than idealism. These variants are trying to capture the fact that one need not be an idealist to be logocentric, but all idealists are logocentrists. He goes on to insist that as the deconstruction of logocentrism is at the same time the deconstitution of idealism, he has not 'ignored' (efface) the 'struggle' against idealism. In saying that, however, he has not actually said where he stands in the struggle against idealism; he has left out the questioner's reference to materialism. And the reason must be that materialism too in any ordinary sense that opposes it to idealism must itself be exposed as metaphysical. Indeed he goes on to say that certain so-called non-idealists, and anti-idealist philosophies are part of this tradition.

Two questions arise from this account. The first is the status of the necessity and urgency of the task of delimiting philosophy. This surely poses the question: necessary or urgent for what? But Derrida will not stay for an answer. Secondly we are not much closer to understanding what he thinks of Marx. His questioner obviously thought the same, because the status of the problematic of writing in relation to dialectical materialism is raised a few pages later. Derrida talks like a lawyer. Insofar as logocentrism shares being a critique of idealism with dialectical materialism, he agrees with it. What he doesn't say is which bits he rejects.

Derrida shows himself extremely reserved about Marxism. He claims that his thought is not incompatible with Marxism, but insists that if there are gaps in his work about his relationship to Marx, these are deliberate. That is work yet to be done. He cannot spell out in any simple way what that

13 See The Ends of Man E.T. of Les Fins de l'Homme in (1972.2). Criticizing the latent humanism in Sartre, for example, he says: "Everything takes place as though the sign 'man' had no origins, no historical, cultural, linguistic limit, not even a metaphysical limit." (In this assessment of Sartre he follows Heidegger closely.)

14 See (1972.1) p69.

relationship is. And he concludes by indicating the sorts of reservations with which he would read Marx. He does not think of the texts of Marx, Engels or Lenin as homogeneous, and in reading them he would necessarily transform them, as Althusser has already demonstrated.

Derrida's reserve is not hard to understand. He cannot abandon his critical perspective, and that is constituted by a whole apparatus for the dismantling of philosophical and indeed any theoretical texts. From that vantage point, Marxism appears as a series of texts with debts to the past, with internal conflicts, limitations etc, i.e. as complex objects for analysis. To set up Marx's writing or anyone else's writing as an ultimate point of reference is to repeat an old error. And if one wanted a concrete example as to why, he would point to the pervasive concept of 'contradiction', a concept which has not yet been freed from its 'speculative, teleological, eschatological horizon'.

There is another influence on Derrida central to understanding the distance he takes up to Marxism: Heidegger - the same Heidegger for whom Marxism is 'the spirit taken (= falsified as) as intelligence'(15). Derrida's debt is both to Heidegger's understanding of the history of philosophy as the metaphysics of presence, what Derrida calls logocentrism and the problematic of the limits of philosophy as well as the development of a language that might take one beyond those limits - of 'difference', 'appropriation' etc. Derrida is no simple disciple - he in turn accuses Heidegger of bringing back presence in the shape of the problematic of Being, but what he does seem to accept is the possibility of what we might call an 'internal' audit of the history of philosophy, an assessment which confines itself to the field of its texts. Derrida, like Heidegger and Hegel, will tell us about the relationship between Marx and Democritus before he will mention capitalism. It is important to realise that neither Derrida nor Heidegger think that in having these priorities they are failing in their duty. One can understand this in Heidegger's case, because he allows himself the language - at least - of German idealism. The term 'spirit' gets one a long way in being able to write about thought, culture and politics in the same 'breath' (see 15) but that language is not available to Derrida. Does he nonetheless harbour the same generalising confidence about the scope of the logocentric tradition? And the effects of dismantling it interminably?

If we bear in mind the influence on Derrida of these theorists of metaphysical closure, and of the illusions of escape, of the snares, the traps and the ironies we can at least appreciate if we do not accept, why the question of strategy is so central for Derrida, and at the same time why the question of political commitment is so difficult for him.

Before I conclude with an assessment of the political directions in which his work could lead us, I would like briefly to consider some previous assessments of his political significance.

Christine Buci-Glucksman, first of all (16) draws a basic distinction between a 'political' reading of a text and a Derridean reading, and describes the commitment latent in Derrida's practice of deconstruction as, in so many words, intellectualism. At its sharpest points, she says, deconstruction bears witness to the division of intellectual labour, the hierarchical ordering of languages in society (she refers here to Barthes), and to the division of the human sciences into separate disciplines. She asks moreover whether we can really be happy with a theory of the effects of a philosophical discourse which is only concerned with the theoretical practice of the text.

Much the same criticism is made by Jameson (17). He draws certain parallels with Marx: the givenness of the past built into the idea of a 'trace' corresponds to Marx's (but equally Heidegger's or Sartre's!) account of the givenness of social existence, the attack on logocentrism is seen as a sort of demystification, but his final analysis is that Derrida falls into a kind of text-centrism:

> "in the very act of repudiating any ultimate or transcendental signified, any concept which would dictate the ultimate or fundamental content of reality, Derrida has ended up inventing a new one, that of the script itself." (pp182-83)

Finally, after the Althusserian and Hegelian marxist, we might perhaps recall Foucault's drops of acid (1972). Foucault's main objection is again to Derrida's text centredness. He reduces 'discursive practice to textual traces', '... It is a historically sufficiently determined little pedagogy ... that tells the pupil that there is nothing outside the text...' It is a pedagogy, he thinks, because it gives the maître the power to license his pupils in endless readings. The archaeologist of the 'document' must be peculiarly aware of the problems of this sort of reduction. But is he right to claim that Derrida offers no account of discursive practice? Derrida's answer must be that writing is a practice, that he does not distinguish theory and practice in the way implied, and that all discourse has the form of writing, a point that takes us back to our earlier point about the non-privilege, on Derrida's analysis of either speech or writing (in the old sense) as such. But it does raise an important point and that is that although Derrida ascribes no metaphysical privilege to writing (old sense), for he does not simply invert the classical privilege of speech, and although all that he says about writing (new sense) is applicable not only to speech but also to consciousness (if we take his account of Husserl seriously), Derrida nonetheless specializes in the analysis of writing in the old 'literal' sense. That is, he concentrates on what people have written in books in a way that Barthes, for example, does not. Now there are many reasons for this. We need only recall the urgency he claims for a rather special project - of delimiting the boundaries of philosophy. And yet that need not confine one to the analysis of written texts (old sense), as Wittgenstein demonstrated. Indeed the latter's later work is a rejection of such a confinement on philosophical grounds! Might it not be that the focus on the text, which Derrida repeats, is the basic presupposition responsible for the continuation of the metaphysical circus? Even if one limits oneself to the study of written texts (such as books) without claiming any completeness of purpose, does one not still presuppose the adequacy of an analysis restricted to the level of the text, an adequacy which would be challenged by anyone for whom the non-philosophical nexus within which philosophical texts are produced, is important? Derrida can recognise this only in the abstraction of an 'outside'. How important or urgent is the limited project that concerns itself only with the classical philosophical tradition?

15 See Heidegger (1953) p39.

16 In L'Arc 54 devoted to Derrida. Her essay is entitled Deconstruction et Critique Marxiste de la Philosophie.

17 See Jameson (1972), p183.

My point, in brief, is that the belief that one can come to understand the logocentric commitments of particular texts involves a number of highly dubious assumptions. The tracing of a universal theme like this is blind to the particular contingent conditions to which such a theme may on each occasion be responding. To talk about logocentrism as an irrepressible desire and to relate it to anxiety reduction, as Derrida does, is to psychologize metaphysics, and there is an alternative: without naivety, to historicise it.

In the abstract, Buci-Glucksman's objections to the intellectual division of labour that Derrida's practices involve could equally apply to her critique. But if we concretize it, it is worth reminding ourselves that Derrida does have to (!) teach philosophy at the highly traditional École Normale. And for at least some of his courses, the topic is laid down by a higher educational authority, as is the method of textual exposition. In that context, a radical reading of texts is the obvious answer to keeping one's job and one's sanity at the same time. But this surely does not endorse Foucault's 'little pedagogy' accusation.

What we seem to be drawn into is the question about whether there might not be quite different ways of raising the question about the limits of philosophy other than the textual/metaphysical ones that Derrida chiefly concerns himself with, and these questions relate to philosophy as a practice.

A Linguistic Politics?

I would like to conclude this introductory paper with some positive remarks about the application of his work and in such a way as to try to answer some of the questions and doubts I have raised or ventriloquised.

I think that the most obvious uses to which one can put Derrida's work in political practice are in those areas with a strong linguistic infrastructure. I would pick out three main areas: educational institutions, other linguistically dependent institutions, like mental hospitals and families, and everyday ideological struggle.

1 The role of some version of the strategy of deconstruction in schools, polytechnics and universities to be quite concrete, seems to me clear. De construction illuminates in previously innocent books, structures of presupposition, structures of authority which run diagonally across the logical order of argument. Derrida's commitment to liberating educational practices and the role of philosophy in that liberation is clear in his founding support for Greph, a group of lycee philosophy teachers formed to fight the Haby 'reforms', which would substitute job-oriented school-teaching for such endless games as philosophy (18). I am also convinced that Derrida has something like the Leninist view of philosophy, as the class struggle at the level of theory, and consequently of the value of doing battle at that level. There does seem to be some point in this, if only a limited one, in that the effect of Derrida's readings on intellectuals/academics is to make naive appeals to philosophy's treasurehouse of ultimate justifications considerably less plausible. Kant's arguments against masturbation will fall on sterile soil.

2 Derrida's strategies can, I think, be adapted for use in challenging the linguistically embodied structures of power in such institutions as families, factories, mental hospitals and, at a different level, schools etc (as above). How this adaptation should be performed is a difficult question. One would need to adapt the insights about the ways in which oppositions are so loaded as to give one side a 'privilege' so as to provide a theory of the hidden use of power in discourse. And what we are not in a position to tackle is the degree of importance to attach to the linguistic dimension of power, in relation to, say, the powers of physical confinement, which are exercised by all these institutions.

These remarks about institutions are partly based on remarks I have heard Derrida make about the use of deconstruction in the disruption of conventions of discourse, and thereby to challenge the structures of power that depend on those conventions. I would suspect that the problem of handling system recuperation, as I have called it, would require in these linguistically 'impure' areas, where power is of many kinds, a different analysis, one which Derrida has not given.

3 This reference to the relation between power and convention brings me to the last category of the direct political application of Derrida's ideas. I have called it 'everyday ideological struggle'. My point is simple. That struggle takes the form of intervention almost entirely linguistically mediated, into what are often our own practices and habits. These interventions often take the form of questioning language, questioning assumed patterns of domination. Derrida has given us techniques for the contestation of linguistically rooted domination, and they can be applied.

Derrida once gave the example of a press condemnation of foreign workers as 'parasites' on the French economy - the same term often applied in Britain to the unemployed. He has on a quite different occasion attempted to challenge the appearance of one-way dependence implied in the judgement of parasitism (in the context of the philosophical claim that an unusual use of a philosophical term is 'parasitical' on the standard case, in discussing Austin). His philosophical deconstruction of the concept of 'parasite' is given a new lease of life in a political context.

To give another concrete case, the fight against sexism has a very important linguistic element and involves the perpetual exposure of the privilege language accords men in its most habitual practices. The complicity of language with phallocentrism is the perfect target for a Derridean-inspired assault. It is no accident that very many of Derrida's most serious 'disciples' are women. It is also worth stressing that one of the most common and discursive practices is that of justification - of actions, 'state of affairs' etc. Philosophy does not rule the world, and never will, but crude versions of the principles it sometimes manufactures, and often cleans and perpetuates, are inseparable from the public world of discourse. Insofar as the metaphysical ground of these principles is an appeal to 'presence' (see above note 5) and Derrida specializes in diagnosing such appeals, he has an important contribution to make to every-

18 See Gordon and Ree (1977).

ERRATUM: In line 10 from bottom - for 'and discursive', read 'and important discursive.

day argument. I am well aware, both here and in relation to the last section on institutional applications that it might well be thought that there are others whose work requires far less effort to apply to communication situations, such as Foucault, or Habermas, but I cannot go into a comparative study here.

These attempts at marketing Derrida may, when all is said and written, be utterly misguided. Both when reading Derrida and listening to him reply to questions, one can see why he claims that all that he does is a risk, a gamble, that it demands his constant vigilance to ensure that he is not misunderstood. I have been as tempted as others to conclude that what Derrida is actually offering, however surrounded by disclaimers, warnings, reminders, signposts, are new sorts of transcendental arguments which would take us back - perhaps even deeper into the metaphysical mire. Is there any reason to suppose that he would be spared this sort of misunderstanding if he was used as the basis for a new form of extratextual political practice? Texts have controls (indeed are systems of control) that speech does not have. That is something of the secret of Derrida. But might not his 'text-centrism' be his Achilles heel?

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