

A PASSION FOR THE MARGINS: RELATIVISM AND WRITING AFTER THE 'DECONSTRUCTION OF METAPHYSICS'

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Abstract

This paper reviews the complex and nuanced treatment of metaphysics in the first major works of Jacques Derrida (1967-72), and it supplements deconstruction with existential themes in order to safeguard it from the accusation of nihilistic relativism. The critique of logocentrism, often systematized through a paradoxical 'ontology of the trace', has been embraced by phenomenology and post-deconstruction, but also seen as insufficient for today's challenges. Returning to Derrida's demonstrations, I explore why metaphysics must be textual if it is to produce two operations constitutive of thinking: a certain technology of forgetting and an experience of meaning as singularized in words. This textuality is, specifically, that of writing, which reveals how, beyond truth, it is meaning-making that is sought by metaphysics and its writers. The *techné* of writing, then, plays a special role in individual, existential empowerment, but this interpretation of the history of ideas as a power struggle does not amount to moral relativism, because writing can help us sustain a unique and constructive passion for the margins.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida; Metaphysics; Relativism; Truth; Writing; Margins; Empowerment.

Introduction

"Que reconstruire après la déconstruction ?"¹. This intriguing question was the title of a conference hosted at the Sorbonne in January 2022, organized by supporters of the *Printemps républicain* movement, and with a special introduction by then-Minister of Education Jean-Michel Blanquer, poster-boy of a rising 'anti-woke' campaign. Derrida is a paradigmatic case for those conservative voices, supposedly more troubling and incompatible with French republicanism and its allied universalism, than some of his contemporaries from the 1970s, such as Foucault or Deleuze. This caricature is symptomatic of a wider discomfort with deconstruction. As we celebrate the twentieth anniversary of his

¹ "What to reconstruct after deconstruction?"

death, institutions and the prevailing opinion, in France, seem to continue the trend observed during Derrida's life: he was better received abroad than back home. But this was never simple either. Michiko Kakutani's *The Death of Truth* (2018, 55), a *New York Times* bestseller, argued that Derrida held some responsibility for the emergence of the post-truth era embodied today by Donald Trump, while, three decades earlier, after 1989, deconstruction was named the next enemy and threat to 'American values' by conservatives. On the Left as well, voices like Terry Eagleton (1996, 124) argued that the most progressive aspects of Derrida's thought could not redeem him from the underlying relativism of his philosophy.

This chronology is interesting to sketch out, however, for this association of Derrida with relativism was further complicated by the series of books and seminars he dedicated, in the 1990s, to several themes that sounded much more classically humanistic: the incalculable, Messianism without Messiah, infinite hospitality, etc. The powerful critique of metaphysics of his early works could seem, at first sight, already repressed, while the scope for effective applications was still fairly obscure. This development appeared difficult to justify to a wide range of students and peers. Jean-Luc Nancy, Bernard Stiegler, Catherine Malabou, and recently emerging voices such as Francesco Vitale, Ian James and Deborah Goldgaber, have reclaimed those radical founding theses, but to bring them in another direction than Derrida's. That feeling of surprise, perhaps even disappointment, in the face of an apparent return to seemingly universal values, was probably shared by a second genealogy equally indebted to the canonical works of Derrida from 1967 to 1972. French phenomenology, as found in the works of Jean-Luc Marion, Renaud Barbaras or Jean-Louis Chrétien, has had to integrate the critique repeated by Derrida through his 'phenomenological beginnings', as a close reader of Husserl: the necessity to practice phenomenology beyond the metaphysics of presence.²

Derrida could thus be seen as a nodal point for key ideological and cultural debates of our times, both in the public sphere and in academia, but the scale of these issues is such that truth and relativism after the 'deconstruction of metaphysics' were necessarily already broader themes of modernity in general. In this development, Heidegger played a cardinal role too, through the dismantling of the classical correspondence-theories of truth, in favor of a deeper meditation on truth, its essence and the special meaning it has

² See, respectively and as indicative examples of each position: Nancy (2016), Stiegler (1998), Malabou (2009), Vitale (2018), James (2012, 2019), Goldgaber (2021). See also Dika & Hackett (2016) for a series of interviews of French phenomenologists, and several mentions of their complex relation with Derrida.

for us, once the groundless ground of Being is acknowledged. Derrida radicalized this epoch-defining thesis, where groundlessness also reached as far as meaning and traces – and this could certainly sound like textbook relativism. But instead of a simple claim, many of the early works of Derrida contain an intimate and bold engagement with this appearance of relativism, highlighting its necessity, and striving to contain its dangers. One has to acknowledge, first, how this ungrounding, prominent at the heart of the modern condition, was indeed a progressive one, as it subverts and challenges classical patterns still dominant in today's ideologies and institutions. And yet, the very difficulty of this discourse rested in its similarity with nihilistic relativism. When Derrida questioned, after Heidegger, the possibility, and more precisely, the desire to return to the originary site – whether it is that of Being or of meaning and traces – this thought of the relative, of 'related-ness', the affirmation of beings in their plurality as relative and inter-related, did *not* amount to moral relativism, or the belief that all things are of the same value, that all values are equal. Value is central indeed, but not as the last word in all debates, making any further thinking obsolete. There is valuation behind any judgement and claim, as the thread guiding any individuality. The battle, therefore, should not be one of truth, in the classical sense, naively hoping to disprove people's beliefs as wrong, but that of renewing means and strategies to influence individual value-systems. This is the complex and very ambitious project that Derrida aimed to undertake in this period. The ambiguous legacy he still carries today speaks for the difficulty of the task, the controversial nature of the problem, and the varying success of his attempts. Through a new interpretation of Derrida, read with key markers of existential philosophy (meaning-making, temporality, instrumentality), it seems that we can draw from the founding works of the 1967-72 period a criterion to distinguish conservative relativism from this progressive thought of groundless, related-ness. Derrida showed, through his writings and through his acts, how we can still act and write 'after the deconstruction of metaphysics'. This requires us to write at, and for, the margins: to seek, instead of just truth as statements corresponding to an existing reality, to turn around the positions of power and force.

In this paper, I will explore the challenge posed by Derrida through the 'deconstruction of metaphysics', with a special focus on the six major works published between 1967 and 1972: *Speech and Phenomena*, *Of Grammatology*, *Writing and Difference*, *Margins of Philosophy*, *Dissemination* and *Positions*. These can be considered as a privileged space where Derrida imposed a turn to several dominant theoretical traditions, and as the starting point for the new directions that will be found both in his later works, and

in various fields that include post-deconstruction and phenomenology. In an initial section, I shall argue that his critique of the metaphysics of presence, in these texts, often focused on recent versions of humanist tropes, but in a manner that already highlighted how he was unable to free his own project from an underlying humanist horizon. This led Derrida to the dual strategies that he famously proposed, to think, write and act after metaphysics: by remaining within it, showing its inner dismantlement, or by trying to push writing to its margins. I will explore, in a second stage, how the first strategy would be foundational both for the later generation of post-Derridean thinkers, and in fact for most of the scholarship focusing, until now, on the socio-cultural propositions of Derrida in the 90s, and that this groundless ground could be called a paradoxical *ontology of the trace*. But, as I will argue in the third section, the risk, then, is to return to, and satiate our old desire for the grounding of knowledge and values. This is when the intimate relation of metaphysics with traces and textuality has to be understood. It is through his patient engagement with phenomenology that Derrida observed how its own limit, the repression of its 'relation' with language and expression, is what caused its collapse. When Derrida argues that metaphysics is necessarily textual, as it appears that it must be more than a field of ideation but one that was always already *in* language, he explains that metaphysics has needed certain 'technologies', all along, to stand as a meaningful discourse. I will focus here on two specific functions, overlooked but vital for metaphysics: the possibility of forgetting, and our need for appearances of singularity, within a plural network of meanings. However, this singularity does not emerge through battles of ideas, but in the biographical and libidinal singularity of writers of metaphysics. In the last section, insisting on the existential context of any metaphysics, I will suggest that this question of truth and relativism could be a remarkable means of tackling another long-standing question left open by Derrida: the specificity of 'restricted writing'. What is the specific power of writing, alongside speaking and thinking, in the emergence of that unique kind of discourse that is metaphysics? Through this interpretation, I will propose that behind truth, it is empowerment that emerges as the implicit, underlying objective of all metaphysics. This could also indicate how 1967-1972 marked Derrida's departure from the methodological and thematic tones of phenomenology: he arrived at a philosophy of the trace and writing no longer grounded simply on an economy of consciousness, but, on a broader economy of life, with a special attention to *our* life, as human, existential subjects. This bears consequences for the question of metaphysics, and for the risk of relativism. One must wonder, then, if Derrida's insistence on writing can help us to contain this threat.

Anti-metaphysics and the threat of relativism

Derrida's propositions, in the 1960s and 1970s, while they remain faithful and relentless towards the underlying question of metaphysics and its overcoming, are nonetheless internally differing – as if any philosophical project was less the defense of a thesis than the repeated rumination of a tension whose poles must remain raw and torturing – or, to quote from his commentary of Antonin Artaud: "forcing the substitution of *discourse*, the detour made obligatory by sites, for the punctuality of the *position*" (Derrida 1978, 245). This is what one encounters in Derrida when he elaborates upon the moral and practical implications of this deconstruction. At the time, any classical ethical enquiry would have been seen as inevitably falling back into naive moralism, too ignorant of the perspectivist turns of Nietzsche, Freud or Heidegger. Yet Derrida, otherwise careful and measured in his judgment, not only joined the bandwagon but spoke strong and loud against recent revisions of humanism, for instance in Sartre or Lévi-Strauss:

Man calls himself man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity: the purity of nature, of animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity. The approach to these limits is at once feared as a threat of death, and desired as access to a life without difference. The history of man calling himself man is the articulation of all these limits among themselves. All concepts determining a non-supplementarity (nature, animality, primitivism, childhood, madness, divinity, etc.) have evidently no truth-value. They belong – moreover, with the idea of truth itself – to an epoch of supplementarity. They have meaning only within a closure of the game. (Derrida 1976, 244-245)

The underlying condemnations of this discourse are well known, and broadly valuable, until today: the critique of a reductive sense of universalism, denying the plurality of cultures and the singularity of individualities, under the tyranny of totalizing norms, around centers of symbolic and political domination. But how far can the historical reduction of "the idea of truth itself" go – and could it not slide dangerously far away from what Derrida hoped to open with such words? In "The ends of man", after having (supposedly) disqualified Sartre, he recalls Heidegger's sentence: "every humanism remains metaphysical" (Derrida 1982, 116, 118). But if that is the problem, is there an alternative? What could a discourse be that would let go of "the idea of truth itself", or that would try to not imply any version of humanism? In the same text, Derrida reconstructs the hermeneutic question at the heart of Heidegger's project, as not so much a rupture, but a *relève* or *Aufhebung* of humanism (Derrida 1982, 134). How could Derrida, in turn, protect himself from the same idea: how could his contesting of humanism not be its *relève*, that is,

not so much its negation, but its morphing and continuation through other means? What kind of an anti-humanist is a man who still acts, writes, says something and many things, and assumes that there are still causes worth defending? "Thus, discourse chooses itself violently in opposition to nothingness or pure non-sense, and, in philosophy, against nihilism" (Derrida 1978, 162). Although Derrida and many, in his epoch, questioned the dominant normative logics of a classical humanist discourse, for instance around ethics, they could not escape the concern for valuation which existential philosophy had shown as implicit and necessary behind any act. Heidegger and Sartre demonstrated that meaning and value come about only to the human condition as characterized by consciousness and living in the world.³ Since Derrida's thoughts were the fruit of his choices in expression, that is, of his actions, we must go back to giving some credence to the Sartrean slogan, and how he, too, exemplified it: "In choosing myself, I choose man" (Sartre 2007, 24-25); any act assumes a prescriptive vision of humanity as a whole. Derrida did not abandon the ambition of meaning, he *only* complicated our understanding of its constitution. Sartre, again, proves relevant here: "there is a truth of knowledge. But this truth, although releasing to us nothing more and nothing less than the absolute, remains strictly human" (Sartre 2003, 241). An anti-humanist, immoral or amoral project would have expressed itself differently, possibly in silence – if ever silence was an option.

The question of philosophy, or writing, or, perhaps, action 'after metaphysics' is the horizontal question of many articles of Derrida in this period. But this 'after' is realized as paradoxical, impossible, even perhaps absurd, right from the moment of its utterance. It points to realms of paradoxes that will never leave Derrida alone, as he would have to insist for decades that his project did not amount to old nominalist approaches, or to a version of apophatism or negative theology.⁴ But it was arguably impossible to play with such subtle and literally ab-normal directions, without resorting to a quasi-mystical language: see, for instance, the claims that philosophy cannot think the trace, since "Only presence is mastered" (Derrida 1982, 65), or that difference/différance could only be thought beyond metaphysics (Derrida 1978, 243-244). Alongside such chimeras, two alternatives emerge in these early texts, and are consolidated as the two strategies Derrida seemed eager to assess and invest, to *relever* philosophy and writing after the admission

³ This seems still relevant, even if consciousness, as the cornerstone of phenomenology, was to be rightly lambasted as flawed and always partial by Derrida and his generation.

⁴ See Derrida's own avowal of a proximity with it in "Différance" (Derrida 1982, 6), and Bradley's rapprochement with negative theology since he too "recognize(d) the impossibility of writing a discourse that does not negotiate the transcendental" (Bradley 2002, 71).

of the problematicity of metaphysics. What we could call 'Derrida's fork' knows several versions, adapted to the concepts explored by each article and the positioning of the discussed author(s), between these two alternatives. In "White mythology", for instance, it is adjusted to the question of the general metaphoricity of metaphysics.⁵ Derrida suggests that this question has been encountered and tackled, on the one hand, through "the metaphysical *relève* of metaphor in the proper meaning of Being" (Derrida 1982, 268), that is, the teleological ambition and hope of philosophers, across history, to clear metaphysical discourse from its founding metaphors, so to arrive at real, non-metaphorical knowledge – but always to reach, instead, the impossibility of this double goal. The alternative strategy "still has the form of a generalization, but this time it is no longer a question of extending and confirming a philosopheme, but rather, of unfolding it without limit, and wresting its borders of propriety from it. And consequently, to explode the reassuring opposition of the metaphoric and the proper, the opposition in which the one and the other have never done anything but reflect and refer to each other in their radiance" (Derrida 1982, 270-271). This second approach no longer counts on the promises of metaphysics, and explores, rather, specific techniques that performatively demonstrate the limitations of its structures. In other words, both strategies are means for the deconstruction of presence, of metaphysics as the metaphysics of presence, but already through paradoxical means where a clear liberation from metaphysics and its discourse is understood as impossible. In the case of the metaphoricity of metaphysics, in "White Mythology", both arrive at the self-destruction of the metaphor, and metaphysics with it, but through distinct and apparently opposite means.

Derrida accepts to suggest proper names as the possible faces of those tactics – yet always indicatively: "The heliotrope of Plato or of Hegel on the one hand, the heliotrope of Nietzsche or Bataille on the other, to use metonymic abbreviations here" (Derrida 1982, 271). A cursory look at the essays of this period indicates, indeed, a familiar, and formally simple, if not simplistic split into two groups. On the one hand, dominant figures of metaphysics are read by Derrida as having noticed aspects of the metaphysics of presence up to a certain point, before becoming their renewed advocates (Plato, Rousseau, Hegel, Freud, Husserl, Saussure, Heidegger, Sartre, Levinas, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault). On the other, often pushing to the edge of classical philosophy, towards poetry and more esoteric forms, Derrida accompanies, each time, the reader's discovery of a language that tries to move around the borders of metaphysics, around the realm of the *play* (see for

⁵ For another example, see "The ends of man" (Derrida 1982, 135).

instance Derrida 1976, 259 and Derrida 1982, 7, 22) – always to find that they end at the tragic dilemma of the necessity of playing strategically, at least punctually, inside metaphysics and its language, at the risk, otherwise, of just remaining in non-sense (Nietzsche, Mallarmé, Heidegger, Artaud, Bataille, Levinas, Jabès, Sollers⁶).

The first of these two hypotheses consists in accepting to enter metaphysics, its discourse and its pretensions, either willfully or through an underestimation of its problematic nature. This is not just the way of tradition; it can be done – and Derrida does it at times – to highlight, within metaphysical discourses, the impossibilities or insufficiency of metaphysics, its incapacity to totalize without a remainder: it reaches and reveals its closure (Derrida 1981b, 6). And those who deny this horizon arrive at it nonetheless – or such would be the demonstrations sought by Derrida. "Simultaneously, by means of rigorous, philosophically *intransigent* analyses, and by means of the inscription of marks which no longer belong to philosophical space, not even to the neighborhood of its other, one would have to displace philosophy's alignment of its own types. To write otherwise" (Derrida 1982, xxiv). The risk, in that first hypothesis, is that, while showing always more of the inner deconstruction of metaphysics, it may still deepen and revive too many of the tragic moves philosophers have operated through that dominant history of thought. This strategy, when adopted by Derrida, is undeniably invested with the belief that it would contribute to cultural and moral 'progress', even in the most minimal sense of the term: no publication of Derrida's was meant as an ironic performative event, hoping to show through his writings precisely what he thought would be detrimental to the world. And even such a move would have been inevitably progressive, the author determining his discourse necessarily from some logic of valuation.

The second alternative is, broadly speaking, the way of another form of language, of what we still call, naively, 'literature' – but of a renewed sense of literature, which, extended, will also come to include the prose of philosophers.⁷ Between the embracing of fictionality and metaphoricity, this second path begs equally challenging questions to

⁶ See for instance how, according to Derrida, Artaud returns, against his will, to metaphysics inevitably, as soon as he gives in to putting in writing some of his intentions for his plays (Derrida 1978, 246); or, in the same book, the risk for Bataille's discourse to fall back into sense, reason and philosophy, just when he seeks to escape them (Derrida 1978, 332).

⁷ "Maurice Blanchot writes: "Is man *capable* of a radical interrogation, that is to say, finally, is man *capable* of literature?" (Derrida 1978, 95).

the matter of truth. Lacoue-Labarthe will radicalise this direction, arguing that "(Meta-physical) thought, *theory*, is", in its essence, "fictioning" (Lacoue-Labarthe 1989, 71),⁸ and Derrida recalled how "philosophy, during its history, has been determined as the reflection of poetic inauguration" (Derrida 1978, 33). He also repeated in that period how empiricism, which could be the name of this *other* of philosophy, only made one mistake – and if it was so close to being irreproachable, this invites us to wonder how far Derrida saw his explorations as distinct from that tradition. But that mistake was a major one: it could not ground its own nature as empirical (Derrida 1978, 173 see also Derrida 1976, 138-139 for a similar argument on bricolage). Culler adds that this challenge to the conception of language as a tool of *representation* cannot be embodied in the texts of Derrida and his peers, or that would have implied that they saw their own claims as not more truthful than any competing theories (Culler 1975, 252).

But in fact, Derrida presents his own discourse as combining both approaches.⁹ His own language" irreducibly belongs to the system of metaphysical oppositions" (Derrida 1978, 22), and he admits that "For us, *différance* remains a metaphysical name" (Derrida 1982, 26). This is even announced as a necessity for deconstruction to be valuable: any hope to undertake a critique of philosophy that could free itself from the use of its concepts would directly come out as stemming from "denegation or precipitation, ignorance or stupidity" (Derrida 1982, xxii, see also Derrida 1978, 244-245). And yet, within that appearance of a metaphysical discourse, the stretching of the frame then takes place. In other words – at least in the texts of this early phase – Derrida's discourse inhabits a combination of the metaphysical fidelity of the first strategy with the penetration of the strategic moves invested by the second group of authors. "It [...] goes without saying that the choice between these two forms of deconstruction cannot be simple and unique. A new writing must weave and interlace these two motifs of deconstruction. Which amounts to saying that one must speak several languages and produce several texts at once [...]" (Derrida 1982, 135).¹⁰

⁸ See also "Tympan" which presents the aim of the book it introduces, *Margins of Philosophy*, as being that of recounting "the very history of the truth" (Derrida 1982, xxvii).

⁹ See also Derrida's assertion that his texts belong neither to the "philosophical" nor to the "literary" registers (Derrida 1981b, 71).

¹⁰ "Tympan" and *Glas*, through their research for a new kind of form, are the most famous examples of this second strategy, which remains, however, fairly rare through Derrida's works, especially after the 1980s. He seemed to have preferred, instead, to remain within the more classical tone and formal constraints of academic and philosophical language, that is, within the first strategy. Hence, our deepening on this strategy through the following section of the present paper, but our final

Either way, discourses are still elaborated, and Derrida was certainly not laconic. This would unavoidably amount to a situation where his practice overcame (or even denied) the theoretical limitations he so carefully established. A similar contradiction is found at the heart of Sartre's project, as remarked by Christina Howells: "For if Sartre denies the possibility of absolute, objective truth, and Derrida its desirability, as philosophers (of whatever sort), they are caught in the paradox of necessarily appearing to espouse in practice the truth-claims they are in theory rejecting" (Howells 1989, 172). The stake of truth is therefore not lost and it has certainly not fallen in a relativistic deadlock: any discourse accepts the challenge of having a meaning, a sense: "Taken by itself, the sign is maintained only *in sight* of truth" (Derrida 1982, 80). Discourse and truth cannot do without one another. I contend that this inseparable couple is the greater stake that was hiding behind Derrida's inaugural argument on orality in writing. And it is one of relation, of priority, of power dynamics, and ultimately, of valuation. Which, of writing and metaphysics, is at the service of the other? Is writing a tool for the research and expression of metaphysics? Or could metaphysics become just one tool amongst others, available to writing for its dissemination?

Grammatology and the 'ontology of the trace'

The first strategy, a nuanced but undeniable negotiation with metaphysics, was announced by Derrida in *Of Grammatology*. This title, already, declares a strange discourse. It is not the name and elaboration of a new region of knowledge (the -logy of writing and traces), since its very formulation indicates its problematization, which will be elaborated through clear warnings in the text (see for instance Derrida 1976, 74, 83-84, 87). But it is not a dismissal of the very ambition of constructing such a science either, or he would never have dedicated such a rich and informed work to the question. Already here, the word uttered says more, and less, and something different, than its 'meaning'. This book was, rather, the call for the impossibility and the necessity of grammatology, an invitation, back then just like today, to continue navigating through knowledge and practices around the trace, that absent center that will never consolidate as a totalized field. These impossibilities are fundamental, and they make for the essential limitations to the very question of a 'science of writing', but Derrida insists that the horizon of building a grammatology remains "a necessary and difficult task" (Derrida 1976, 93), and he

proposition can be read as suggesting that the two strategies may be, ultimately, indistinguishable.

is acutely sensitive to what it is not (Derrida 1976, 83-85).¹¹ One may ask, therefore, how different this approach was from the 'classical' approach of philosophers and scientists through the history of metaphysics, whose doubts and precautions, admitted or denied but always emerging through their prose, also amounted to such speculative efforts. Or, if we give Derrida the benefit of the doubt, we may ask *how far* his discourse here was from theirs. Since, in this initial strategy, metaphysics is not thoroughly rejected on principle, we must find where Derrida arrives at concretely – irrespective of his declared intentions.

A recourse to Heidegger and Sartre may provide a useful nuance to free Derrida and his readers from that fundamental project of the 'impossible-but-necessary', and arrive at a more practicable form for his propositions. While metaphysics is the object of most, if not, implicitly, all suspicions, in Derrida, but also in Heidegger, in Sartre too and in fact, in the most dominant and conservative lines of modern western philosophy, via Nietzsche, Kant, all the way back to Descartes, its counterpart, or perhaps its double, ontology, does not receive quite as much criticism. The recourse to the distinction between ontology and metaphysics, in the Heidegger of the period between his early works and the *Kehre*, and, more clearly, in Sartre, can relegitimize the concept of ontology for our enquiry. Sartre defines metaphysics as "the study of individual processes which have given birth to *this* world as a concrete and particular totality", and this allows us to consider the following analogy: "metaphysics is to ontology as history is to sociology" (Sartre 2003, 639). Sartre foretells Derrida's rejection of metaphysics as the pretension to the ability to ask the *why* of reality, but embraces ontology as the interrogation of its *how*, and confirms that it is what philosophy, and especially phenomenology, can actually achieve. Metaphysical knowledge cannot be reached, because asking the very reason of being implies already the complementary thought of nothingness, while that would already presuppose a being that may perform nihilation (it is also an unfair question, since being, if contingent, does not have to comply to necessary reasons). Ontology embraces and integrates the questioner in the questioning. But Sartre also proposes that every being still develops their metaphysics as that which connects the threads of meaning they re-constitute from the world (see the concepts of "metaphysical purport" and "coefficient" in Sartre 2003, 624).

¹¹ See Delain (2005) for the claim that grammatology was the first name of a general attempt by Derrida ("exhausting limit-concepts of metaphysics"), before it would become, or be replaced by, a "performative practice" in his later works.

Informed by this nuance, and also the recollection of the self-positioning of Derrida in the heritage of phenomenology, right from his school works in the 1950s – isn't the critic still a heir? – we can arrive at the idea that *Of Grammatology* seems to reach what we could name an 'ontology of the trace'. In fact, this expression, long considered blasphemous, is now apparently in use, as encountered in recent academic events.¹² We should take this expression seriously, at least as a hypothesis, when an entire page of *Of Grammatology* (Derrida 1976, 92-93) finds the author enthusiastically enumerating all the very concrete power dynamics that have been triggered by the advent of writing in all societies, and, a few years later, the seminar *Life Death* (Derrida 2020) confirmed contemporary usages of the concepts of *trace* and *writing* to discuss biological processes. Following this momentum, the 'new materialism' of French thought (James 2019, 2) especially in Derrida's students, Bernard Stiegler and Catherine Malabou, but also in more recent explorations by Deborah Goldgaber and Francesco Vitale, all share the conviction that the power of Derrida's works rests in accepting the compromise of letting go of the safe but ineffective meditation of the 'impossible-but-necessary', to invest instead the ontology of the trace, even if at the cost of repeated words of caution. Charles Ramond's *Dictionnaire Derrida* elaborates a convincing list of the extremely concrete forms of *différance* in the life and works of a society, from economics to education, politics, law, psychology and morality (Ramond 2016, 69, see also Derrida 1982, 17). In fact, all the discussions on Derridean contributions to cultural and ethical questions, now dominant in the field, rest upon believing that traces are to be found far beyond Derrida's initial discussion of the written trace, which means that they must acknowledge at least implicitly the systematic potential of the idea of the trace, thus elevating it to the status of an ontology.

This difficulty has to do with the problematic slogan of the "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" ("There is nothing outside of the text" or "There is no outside-text", Derrida 1976, 158), which has kept scholars and teachers challenged for decades. One is caught between a desire to embrace the enthusiasm of such an ambitious and all-encompassing proposition, but often brought back to humility when having to nuance, before skeptic readers, that this does not imply that 'language is everything', or worse – and it is very much the point here – the relativistic undertone of the claim that knowledge and truth are only

¹² 'The Idea, Theory, and Ontology of Trace', panel of the 2020 conference of the Northeast Modern Language Association conference; see also this expression in "Logiques impossibles du vivant et amour de la vie chez Jacques Derrida", a paper presented by Charles Ramond at a conference in Université Paris 8, in 2021, and later published (Ramond 2024).

movements within a predetermined game. 'All is writing': the phrase is simplistic, but we must accept that Derrida's legacy and his repeated movements between 'restricted' and 'generalized writing', have to do with the evocative power of this formula. It ought to be treated seriously, at least, and it carries all the power and relevance of Derrida, because writing is not just restricted writing, and because not all texts are written texts: Derrida uses the concept of text in an "infrastructural" sense (Derrida 1976, 164). This recalls another ontology as paradoxical ontology, in Buddhism, where the challenge is to 'think' interrelated items that do not have any substance on their own (*Anatta*, non-self), that is, to imagine a net without points of crossing, or perhaps, an ontology of blurs (hence also the *hauntology* of Derrida's later works).¹³ This game of patterns is not simply Derrida's idiosyncratic and creative submission to a new metaphysics; it claims to describe what has actually happened all along in metaphysics. "Différance" (Derrida 1982, 14-5) recalls how the question 'what is' is always already relational: at the very moment when we seek to determine what an entity is, what a word means, to 'stabilize' it, we find satisfaction, in fact, in bringing it under the fold of other entities and words. Concretely, we feel we gained clarity, but we just reached a bit more opacity by overlaying the blur of one concept upon that of another. "(T)here have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement" (Derrida 1976, 159) "I have never believed that there were *metaphysical* concepts *in and of themselves*. No concept is by itself, and consequently in and of itself, metaphysical, outside all the textual work in which it is inscribed" (Derrida 1981b, 57). Any discourse, and thus also metaphysics, is "caught in the graphic of supplementarity" (Derrida 1976, 246).

Undeniably, this ontology, and the risk of it feeding back into metaphysics, demands us to consider it at best as a paradoxical ontology. Derrida truly made a powerful discovery when, inspired by contemporary discussions in Nietzsche and Levinas (Derrida 1982, 22), he realized that this concept of the *trace*, in use and with equivalents in most languages, designates precisely that which has no substance, that which calls attention to the relation, the remainder that is left after something happened. A footstep in the mud is a trace, but 'it' *is* nothing, we cannot locate or contain and grasp the footstep: it is the paradoxical concept that designates the trace of a past event (in time) onto other entities (in space), here, the surrounding mud. "Ousia and gramme" makes it clear: there is no

¹³ *Of Grammatology* proposes another image: a text is a "system of roots" (Derrida 1976, 102).

trace-itself, no trace "as such" (Derrida 1982, 66). And yet, Derrida thought, spoke, and wrote about the trace – wrote of the impossibility to write, specifically and 'as such', about it. The hypothesis of an 'ontology of the trace' is fertile and powerful, but it still risks fulfilling our classically metaphysical expectation of assuming that a structure of reality preceded our assessment of it – and that orality, and even more, writing, would only serve to express it *a posteriori*. Aware of this risk, Derrida goes further and suggests that the mention of an "originary trace" or "archi-trace" is required to halt the habitual "precritical" reflex of seeking an origin of the trace: each trace is a trace of traces, which interrupts our desire for an origin (Derrida 1976, 61). Writing can help approach and avoid this desire. It has its own, distinct word to say about the trace, and that is where Derrida calls our attention. It is only in writing that Derrida could occasionally repeat the Heideggerean gesture of the *rature* or erasure. The erasure is still a mark, and a written mark: Derrida seemed to see in writing a better means to 'access' the non-representability of the trace. "Différance" (Derrida 1982, 24) argues that, in Heidegger, it is in a text that the trace of being is kept – and the central question will be to ask, beyond the sole case of Heidegger, whether this location in writing is contingent, historical, 'just technological', or necessary – or both at once. Behind the blur always appears the shadow of writing – because a blur is already a trace, a density, and because, for reasons still undetermined two decades after Derrida's passing, humanity seems to have held a unique and irreplaceable rapport with writing, amongst all tracing technologies. It is in writing, in our written traditions, in the legacy of written texts, that Derrida invites us to understand why this medium is at once the space of metaphysics and of its deconstruction. We must ask why metaphysics is so intimately linked with writing.

The textuality of metaphysics

Technologies of forgetting

When asking ourselves about this relation, it is hard, still today, even after Derrida, to completely let go of the instrumentalism criticized so thoroughly in his works. But, again, this association is part of the difficulty, or part of the experience, of our modality of access to both writing and metaphysics, and the paradoxical responses of Derrida only confirm that no way out of this tension is possible. Considering orality and writing as fundamentally *just* means of expression of metaphysics, is not bad, or a mistake: the problem is that we probably cannot stop thinking writing and metaphysics as maintaining this

rapport, and yet we have to become sensitive to another aspect of this reality. And this is called for, since even the most deconstructive of philosophical projects has continued this historical omission of writing. In the case of Heidegger, it is all the more striking since he was already aware of patterns of *mise en abyme* in the thesis of the 'forgetfulness of Being', which acknowledged a paradoxical circular conjunction of the means and the content of thought.¹⁴ These theses in forgetfulness are paradoxical in their very nature: always simultaneously proven and contested, decried through an utterance that contradicts the claim of the lament. While a series of texts already regretted the forgetfulness of Being since the earliest traces of our cultural history (with Heraclitus or Anaximander) that omission of the silent center that was the condition of their having any sense, was therefore never quite complete (Derrida 1982, 24-25). An actual, 'pure' forgetfulness would not bear this name, it would bear no name and would have never been discussed. Or rather: it would have 'been' an absence. But we generally think of forgetting and absence as negative concepts, while the moment they name which entity is absent or forgotten, the entity is both lost and still recalled as lost. If Derrida deemed it necessary to devote not only an inaugural, quasi-programmatic book to the impossible-but-necessary 'science' of writing, and in fact for a least a decade more, an obsessive return to this question, it is because he sensed that the forgetfulness of writing was not just a remote cousin, or a sub-category of the forgetfulness of Being noted by Heidegger. It might have been, more ambitiously, its *relève*, its *Aufhebung*: the creative, lexical innovation of another generation to try to tackle a perennial problem anew.

This assumption of instrumentalism is tenacious, because everyday thinking seems to remain largely mental, 'internal', in this self-dialogue of the inner voice, that *se parler* which much of Derrida's early works presents as the experiential ally of the founding tenets of logocentrism (see specifically Derrida 1973). What we call consciousness continues to propel this impression of immediacy, how ideas take forms 'directly' into words, said to oneself – and sometimes uttered vocally, and, finally, secondarily and occasionally, in writing. It would therefore seem reasonable to consider, with the doxa, that the fact that we access and assess our metaphysical traditions through the written works of philosophers does *not* imply that metaphysics can only happen in writing. Everyday oral exchanges on the matter, or simply, the 'silent' meditation of concepts 'with oneself', would suffice to strengthen the instrumentalist view.

¹⁴ Or to quote Derrida commenting on Heidegger's reading of Aristotle: "What is metaphysical is perhaps less the evaded *question*, than the *evaded* question" (Derrida 1982, 47).

Derrida's demonstrations give us a way out of this profound assumption. The fact that philosophy and metaphysics have always denied their vital reliance upon writing invites us to invert the logic, and ask whether this pattern of forgetting could be essential to writing in general. Is writing the *tekhne* of forgetting, or worse, perhaps, of a denial? For two and a half millennia, an entire family of discourses, metaphysics, has repeated, in written texts, that writing and expression are supplementary instruments to thought. From Plato to Hegel, from Heraclitus to Nietzsche, metaphysical texts have traced the closure of their own legitimacy, the outer limit of their capacity, the terrain their theory would not pretend to touch, in written utterances that nonetheless expressed these impossibilities very clearly. Any discourse not only forgets Being, but it marks, in the negative, the frame of its fundamental pillars, the minimal conditions of its standing, the means of its claim to truth or meaning. It always theorizes, implicitly, what it precisely pretends to *not* do, to *not* say: it traces its *margins*, and Derrida's desire is precisely to bring those to our attention (Derrida 1982, xxiii). These statements, any statement as implying and going past its own edges, requires the technological means for such an essential forgetting. The statement must be said, to be forgotten; the claim must have been made, to be denied: "this erasure of the trace must have been traced in the metaphysical text" (Derrida 1982, 66). This invites us to think of writing as the *tekhne*, the infrastructure of these practices of forgetting that we call thinking: a philosopher needs to mention, and then 'forget' the previous word, to write the next, and a generation must 'forget' its heirs, at least for an instant, to start thinking concepts through new combinations.

Technologies of singularity

Therefore, behind the thesis of instrumentality, behind the tenacious hierarchy of means and content, hides, instead, a condition of possibility, which is more complex and essential to metaphysics, than the mere idea of expression being at the service of thought. No statement can emerge in history without silencing other competing statements, replacing them, while necessarily bearing their trace through the very framing of their form. In other words, the means or technology of expression are as important as the continued negotiation of inherited concepts – and the horizon posed by Derrida, probably inaccessible to us, is to try and think both as co-substantial. The limit (form) is precisely that which permits and constitutes the message (content).

This impoverishment is the condition for scientific formalization. Unequivocality is furthered in the extent to which the complete repetition of sense in meaning is given

up. Therefore, one cannot even say that a factual, accidental, inessential noncompleteness is reduced via a teleology of scientific discourse, or that it is included as a provisional obstacle within the horizon of an infinite task. The *telos* of scientific discourse bears within itself, *as such*, a renunciation of completeness. Here, the difference is not a provisional deficiency of the *epistēmē* as discourse, but is its very resource, the positive condition for its activity and productivity. It is as much the limit of scientific power as it is the power of the scientific limit: the limiting-power of its formality. (Derrida 1982, 168-9)

A statement must say *not-everything* to say *something*. Thought is, in its very form, and forever, an experiment (Derrida 1976, 162), a wager: if only we did not forget, or repress, all the statements that we decide not to say at the time of each unique statement, we would not tolerate this folly and would not speak ever again. Any sentence is an event, a cesura in the course of time, unaccountable, always broadly unjustified, but also the umpteenth iteration of an untraceable series that led my thoughts until the one I am having now. Just like the footprint in the mud, a word, a sentence is the mark of earlier words (the trace left by the shoe), shifted onto other words (the mud surrounding the footprint). We all have the vague impression that our consciousness or thoughts guide our reflections, but they are determined, much more overwhelmingly, by this personal, and inter-generational lineage, both in its content and in its form, that is, in its technicality. In his introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, Derrida argued how *technes* of projection, even if 'simply' mental, had been vital for certain geometric concepts to be sustained even in their 'simple' utterance as objects of one's consciousness across a minimal duration (Derrida 1989, see also Derrida 1978, 208). Bernard Stiegler would radicalize this intuition: we should not think in terms of mental processes 'outsourcing' some operations onto external, technological objects, but rather, we may consider that our so-called 'internal' abilities have internalized operations that were only possible through external objects in the early stage of each field (Stiegler 1998). The claim ought to be generalized indeed: without *techné*, *any* *techné* as techniques of tracing, of marking and letting the mark deceitfully disappear, thought would not just be empty: it could not come to be, to start with, it could not satisfy the minimal formal requirements for it to take shape: to take some shape, any shape.

A lot changes when the footprint replaces the atom as a metaphor of meaning. The expectation of stability explodes, or rather implodes, from the very blur of meaning. From the hope of reaching a stability of reality and of our linguistic representations of it, we move to appreciate, instead, the interdependence of any 'entity'. Metaphysics, as a language, deemed secondary and derivative, comes to haunt and take over metaphysics as a

field of ideation: it never was, it never could have been anything else than an *expressed field*, already language right from the 'time' of its being thought. According to Bruce Baugh, "Derrida's key move consists in making the temporality of the sign the transcendental ground of intentionality" (Baugh 2003, 134), which is, in fact, the prerequisite to permit the iterability of any object of consciousness, as recognized as remaining itself across time (Derrida 1976, 62). The repeatability of the trace (Derrida 1981a, 191-192) is indeed the condition for a sign to be sign (Derrida 1978, 374). Furthermore, this expression being *written* permits the manipulation of those iterable units of sense in their usage, thanks to the spacing or cesura required to organize the meaningfulness of inscriptions spatially (Derrida 1978, 87).¹⁵¹⁶

This arithmetic of the entity as individuality, as singular and distinct from the many is not just one parameter of the question, or a distinct field of knowledge, external to the opposition between ontology and representation; its structure is embedded in metaphysics as metaphysics of presence. In "White Mythology" (Derrida 1982, 247-8), Derrida recalls how, for Aristotle, and in fact for the dominant lines of philosophy, there is meaning only as singularity of meaning. Aristotle proclaims, in *Metaphysics* Θ, that "not to have one meaning is to have no meaning" (quoted in Derrida 1982, 248). The same necessity seems to impose itself on us, when trying to include madness in (the) language (of reason): "to make a sentence is to *manifest* a possible meaning" (Derrida 1978, 65). The challenge is the same, experientially, perhaps phenomenologically, in our quotidian life, whether in classical Greece or in the early years of the third millennium, and no repeated warnings of an entire generation of 'post-structuralists' can prevent that deeper

¹⁵ See *Of Grammatology* for the claim that writing, and specifically linear writing, permitted "discreteness, difference, spacing" (Derrida 1976, 86). See also the claim that "Signification is formed only within the hollow of difference: of discontinuity and of discreteness, of the diversion and the reserve of what does not appear" (Derrida 1976, 69, corrected translation).

¹⁶ See also Ong for the hypothesis that pre-written language was virtually only noise, speakers having no possible means to identify and constitute portions of utterances as units of meaning (Ong 1982, 59). Beyond the 'broader' claim of the *textuality* of metaphysics as explored in this section, the specific hypothesis of the dependency of metaphysics on writing, in its historical development, would have to explore the neuro-historical hypothesis of Previc. He suggests that the emergence of philosophical ideation, in Ancient Greece, was possibly related to recent excesses in dopaminergic levels (Previc 2011, 123-54) – and we may speculate that the capacity of written repositories to contain information across time could have found a new usefulness then. See also Ong's repeated claims that writing allowed us to think of language as structure, then as a closed system, permitting the creation of logic (Ong 1982, 164-6). For instance, according to Ong, the sight-dominance brought on by writing and further intensified by print could have played a role in the form that took Kant's distinction between noumena and phenomena (Ong 1967, 74).

expectation. Hence Derrida's insistence on the question of the metaphor. If there was a single metaphor at the heart of our symbolic order, it would not be a metaphor but the "assured legibility of the proper" (Derrida 1982, 268): the reality of plurality *as such* opens to the possibility of metaphors, and to the possible constitution of metaphysics as a discourse – and as a metaphorical discourse, necessarily. There is a metaphoricity of metaphysics only because there is a multiplicity of interdependent metaphors, that is, because there is a text. This reticular structure, the structure of a network or net is required for the concept of a sign, or any acceptance of the existence of a language, to prevail – and this happens at the cost of challenging the most fundamental expectations of metaphysics: "There is no sign as such. Either the sign is considered a thing, and it is not a sign. Or it is a reference, and thus not itself" (Derrida 1976, 204). It is plurality rather than metaphoricity that has determined this history of metaphysics. And with plurality comes textuality, since the very idea of plurality implies a holding together of differences, which constitutes *de facto* a network, a fabric, a textile, a cobweb or text. It is the encounter of plurality that calls for the 'symbolic' shift to an (impossible but necessary) grammatology, and, retrospectively, metaphysics can still repeat its claim of having done justice to plurality, even in the form of totalizing ambitions, only by admitting to its metaphoricity and its founding textuality. "(M)etaphor would be the emergence of language itself. And philosophy is only this language" (Derrida 1978, 140). This translates into each 'individual' concept of metaphysics. Having explored the impossible but necessary challenge of determining the name "différance", Derrida concludes along broader lines, seeing the horizon of another relation with names and plurality that invokes, once again, a familiar shadow: "There will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being. And we must think this without *nostalgia*, that is, outside of the myth of a purely maternal or paternal language, a lost native country of thought. On the contrary, we must *affirm* this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance" (Derrida 1982, 27).

Affirming the game, with laughs and dance: building an acceptance, and more, a *practice* of the plurality of names, of each name, onto the joy of one's partaking in metaphysics as language. Recalling the vital source of all thinking, of all the sublimations of materiality into those immaterial traces that are the words. The apotheosis of Derrida's study of the metaphoricity of metaphysics reveals the sun, in Plato and in Aristotle, as the ur-metaphor that permitted their very understanding of reality and thought, as, more than a metaphor, the *precedent* of clarity and opacity, of knowledge and ignorance (Derrida 1982,

268). Example and concept start to merge when the 'phenomenon' of light cannot be *explained* without the metaphor of the sun: a *phainómenon* not only allegorizes, but also *designates* the appearing to view of a thing, which is dependent upon the light of the sun in our case. Ideas were already, in fact, absent points in a textual network including the supposedly immutable parts of our environment. Two millennia later, Heidegger's grounding of Dasein in temporality, notably in the task of measuring time (Heidegger 1962, 464-72), also relied upon the sun as the empirical precedent of our transcendents: as the transcendental consolidation of contingency. Metaphysics was never too shy to discourse on reality far beyond materiality, and yet it is not just a metaphoricity, but the very sublimation, the internalization, the repression of the material universe. However, of course, this Derridean sentiment still gives in to the epoch-changing demonstrations of Kant and phenomenology: we can think of reality as an object, as 'the material universe', only since we are already in that sublimation. Sublimation is what gives anything a name and a concept, that singularity we mentioned as vital for thinking and action, and which is best found in writing.

But metaphysics doesn't write; humans write. The historicity of philosophy is only, *in concreto*, each time the historicity of each instance of writing, in a portion of that history, in an existential parenthesis. Philosophy "betrays itself as thought" (Derrida 1978, 75). This grounding of ideas on the contingency of a universe and of an existence, should suffice to shake the prevailing naivety of expecting a discourse of impersonal truth from metaphysics. However, as an anthropological tradition that sustains itself, it can be seen, and even defended, as a meta-tradition or meta-discourse, a tradition attempting to legitimize traditions and a discourse trying to regulate discourses, by defining or recalling the traditional 'rules' to be followed (according to that community) to satisfy the existential need for the creation of meaning. Metaphysics is the match-maker of spirits: it is a setup, organized between each mind and its preceding heritages, to allow it to 'freely' encounter the words that will satiate its individual desires, under the regulation of individuals and institutions granted the transmission of authority. Hence Derrida's Nietzscheanism: the start and end of it all is *felix*, joy, the *felicity* of finding a word, an opacity of shadows, that seems to match a desire, a will: what we mean, what we '*wanted* to say' (*vouloir-dire*, *bedeuten*). And this grounding of metaphysics on felicity, of meaning on the libido, is there both for the thinker and for the regulating institutions, themselves only constituted by individual desires and libidos.¹⁷ Even

¹⁷ In a recent study, Ian James suggested that we may read the emergence of such elements, across the works of 1968-1972, as indicative of a crossroads of two axes, and as a turn in the trajectory of Derrida's project: from an economy limited to consciousness, after phenomenology, to one broadened to the entirety of life (James 2024, 369) – or, symbolically, from Husserl to Nietzsche

the sciences cannot avoid this irruption of drive through the very fabric of its being expressed. And naturally, this must be denied for science to pretend being science:

Theory, therefore, is the name of that which can neither dispense with objectification in the medium nor tolerate the slightest deformation in its subjection to the medium. There is no scientific sense (*Sinn*) without meaning [French: "vouloir-dire"] (*bedeuten*), but it belongs to the essence of science to demand an unequivocality without shadow, the absolute transparency of discourse. Science would need what it needs (discourse as pure meaning) to be useless: it is only to preserve and to glance at the sense which science confers upon it. Nowhere else can discourse simultaneously be more productive and more unproductive than as an element of theory. (Derrida 1982, 167)

Finding a word, that mundane and exhilarating experience that metaphysics and science never mentions, is the tip of the iceberg of our *linguistic nature*, of the fact that the flesh and blood of our being conscious and thinking, is always already, directly and necessarily, in language, traversed by language. Language starts bending the contingency of existence: if we need meaning to survive, to unify action in a minimal thread of coherence, this meaning has to be in words, and those words are always borrowed, encountered. In the terms of existential philosophy, language grounds existence, because it permits the unification and the becoming-meaningful of any experience in time, as constituting one's existence as being one's own. There is no concept and even no experience of existence to start with, without such an implicit coherence. "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs*" (Derrida 1978, 50). Language irrigates consciousness by giving it the structure of mastery: it provides the initial non-identity that opens the field of representation, as the founding conditions for meaning, since meaning presupposes a signifier that is different from the signified. But it is also the condition of possibility of action, as this inner separation is implicit in the phenomenological concept of intentionality, as the split-function of consciousness between itself and its objects (leading to Sartre's nihilation, see Sartre 2003, 34). Language, as the mesh, the textile or text of a massive network of *organized opacities* (each word), is the basis for the objectifying nature of the relation of consciousness with the world. Every word is already a noun: a contingent and continuous reality that has already been invested by an interplay of separations, permitting attempts of

and Freud. Our focus on the *vouloir* aspect of Derrida's study of *bedeuten* in Husserl, combined with the following unveiling of libido as operating 'behind' any metaphysics, rejoin this line of thought: the most consistent method to bring together all the claims of Derrida in that period, in all their variations, may be to consider that they fit in a broader Nietzschean cosmology of power balances, that is, in materiality and in life.

mastery and control, and opening up to agency. Each word sets a tone, but in virtue of being a word, it is 'out there', leaving its vulnerability bare and ready to be contested. Metaphysicians have only added text to text, that visible mastery-oblivion that is the written, to this structural textuality of language. Metaphysics is brought back within its text, its textiles and its textuality, in the *bedeuten* that hides behind its *Sinn*. All along, metaphysics did not say truths, it performed actions of a linguistic nature, partook in fields of power, rejoining some of its moving forces. Hence the recourse to writing; hence writers and their drives, their hopes and dreams.

"Utilité"? Writing and empowerment

Rousseau's *dream* consisted of making the supplement enter metaphysics by force. But what does that mean? The opposition of dream to wakefulness, is not that a representation of metaphysics as well? And what should dream or writing be if, as we know now, one may dream while writing? And if the scene of dream is always a scene of writing? (...) [Derrida cites Rousseau's *Emile, or On Education*:] "The dreams of a bad night are given to us as philosophy. You will say I too am a dreamer; I admit it, but I do what others fail to do, I give my dreams as dreams, and leave the reader to discover whether there is anything in them which may prove useful to those who are awake." (Derrida 1976, 315-6)

These very last words of *Of Grammatology* show Derrida ventriloquizing Rousseau to encourage us to play with metaphysicians and their fantasies. We should, and perhaps we must indulge in the dreams of words¹⁸ – but, as Derrida concludes, we must do so inasmuch they may be useful to us. This switch from a criterion of truth, to one of usefulness, as prescribed or at least observed by Derrida, emerges also in his understanding of metaphors, and their evolution (or deconstruction?) through the course of metaphysics: towards being always "more refined and more powerful in a given field and at a determined phase of the scientific process" (Derrida 1982, 264). Such a shift in Derrida's discourse is noticeable: choosing to end with this concept what he probably knew would be seen as his masterwork could give the impression of a prescriptive undertone on his part. Gone are the days of undecidability, with Derrida returning to another classical metaphysics: not truth, but usefulness. Is this

¹⁸ Notice also the concept of dream, in "Force and signification": Derrida calls for a "dream of emancipation" from the language of metaphysics, which would not be an *attempt*, but indeed a *dream*: we cannot do without this language, and we would in fact suffer from losing "the light of meaning". Maintaining this dream is already a way to offer "resistance to it, as far as is possible" (Derrida 1978, 33).

different kind of instrumentality decried by Derrida, or encouraged as a lesser evil? Derrida was evasive and ambiguous enough on this central question, and the statements quoted above can always be interpreted as *only* describing motifs in Rousseau or other traditions. That is what demands of us to think beyond his letter, to actually ask ourselves how Derrida can be *of use* to us today – and what we can do with his implicit criterion of usefulness. Instrumentality is still the word, then, but the rationale has seemingly been reversed. The first hypothesis, the ontology of the trace, risked pushing, at least apparently, the schema of an ontological order prior to its representation, and thus, possibly, the devaluation of (restricted) writing to just being a conveyor of the message of this ontology. This more subtle take at the second strategy, when *utility* emerges as the guiding principle in Derrida, invites us to consider another type of relation. What if metaphysics was, along with the paper and the pen, institutions and cultures, just another tool, another material the writer would have to pick from, borrow, manipulate and betray, only as long as it is useful? What if metaphysics was at the service of writing?

This motif of utility as a final priority, surprising at first on Derrida's part,¹⁹ recalls the familiar concept of *Zuhandenheit* or availableness, by which Heidegger designated the systematic logic of our relation with the *Zeug* or equipment, tools, in the world that we inhabit.²⁰ This strong Heideggerian heritage would have to be placed within a larger corpus of passages where Derrida's project seems to presuppose and prolong several fundamental propositions of existential philosophy. One can always contend that, for instance, Derrida's statement of finitude as the condition for meaning (Derrida 1982, 123) is, again, just a description, and not a confirmation of existential theses. And this contention could seem justified by Derrida's explicit association of humanism with metaphysics. But, as we already saw, Derrida cannot free his project from a humanist ambition. This suspicion of a thorough opposition, of deconstruction as an exhaustive toppling of all that preceded it, becomes a tenacious obstacle when one tries to estimate the utility of Derrida's philosophy, through and beyond his letter. It would be repeating a core process of logocentrism, that of essentialization, to reduce a thinker to a single thought, and therefore to assume that a punctual disagreement of Derrida with an author would imply his explicit rejection of the rest of their propositions. The embedding of a vision of humanity in general, in any individual action; instrumentality as our guiding relation to objects of the world, a world that we "inhabit"

¹⁹ Constanze Baron remarks a similar switch to embracing utility in the evolution of Sartre, as he too progresses from a descriptive to a more prescriptive approach: objectivity goes from being seen as harmful, in *Being and Nothingness* to useful in *Notebooks for an Ethics* (Baron 2001, 54).

²⁰ Joan Stambaugh suggested to translate *Zeug* directly as "useful things" (Heidegger 1996, 64).

(Derrida 1976, 291); the structural dependency of meaning on human finitude and on the "temporalization of a *lived experience*" (Derrida 1976, 65); the necessity of personal engagement for the constitution of meaning-making²¹; or the grand thesis of the contingency of situations and choices²²: the parallels are many. We can consider that some of the original contributions of Derrida could be compatible with certain cardinal theses of existential philosophy, especially for lack of explicit statements against them, accompanied with alternative propositions to resolve these very problems differently.²³ Inversely, this would invite us to see a number of precursor concepts to Derrida's in the existential works of Heidegger and Sartre.²⁴

Desire and the practice of writing

Indeed, this opening of Derrida to existential philosophy works both way. It consists in asking how his 'operations' may provide *useful* answers to the explicit questions of Heidegger and Sartre. But it also demands of existential thought, in return, the effort to integrate writing, both as trace and as practice, in its larger frame. That is, asking for the specific function or potentiality of writing in the human condition, as a prerequisite

²¹ "(O)ne never explains anything except by explaining oneself with or engaging oneself in the explanation" (Derrida 2020, 50). See also "the engagement and the appurtenance that encompass existence and writing in the same *tissue*, the same *text*" (Derrida 1976, 150).

²² "We must begin *wherever we are* and the thought of the trace (...) has already taught us that it was impossible to justify a point of departure absolutely. *Wherever we are*: in a text where we already believe ourselves to be" (Derrida 1976, 162). See also in that text Derrida's explanation for the choice of the term *trace* as having come to Derrida from historical and strategic compromises (Derrida 1976, 70).

²³ One of the counter-arguments to existential thought which Derrida makes explicit has to do with phenomenology's reliance upon consciousness. Derrida considers that any *experience* is necessarily experience of the present (see for instance Derrida 1976, 60), therefore condemning, seemingly, any philosophical discourse centered on that concept. This calls for a deeper, renewed interpretation of both traditions, which will be the object of later publications.

²⁴ Besides the extensively discussed question of Heidegger's critique of onto-theology and his *destruktion* as a precursor of Derrida's deconstruction, see the numerous works, specifically on the transformation of Sartrean motifs in Derrida, from Christina Howells (1982, 1988, 1989, 1992, 2005), Daniel Giovannangeli (1979, 1992, 2001), Tilottama Rajan (2002), Nik Farrell Fox (2003), Bruce Baugh (1999, 2003), Steve Martinot (2006), Josh Toth (2007) and Gavin Rae (2017). We may also mention how Heidegger's discussion of reference and sign (*Verweisung und Zeichen*), in § 17 of *Being and Time*, confirms that he integrates them in the realm of equipments. He goes one step further in the direction of writing that Derrida will invest, when he proposes that "The sign addresses itself to a Being-in-the world which is specifically 'spatial'" (Heidegger 1962, 110).

to asking about metaphysics as a genre of writing that can be observed as the form of meaning-making invested by certain individuals. But this confrontation of Derrida with existential concepts also requires us to find how we can resolve the double nature of writing as encountered in his thought: as a practice producing artefacts, which populate human culture; and as the broader ontology of the trace, as already explored. That is, as *restricted* or *general writing*. If we take *writing* as designating this larger frame, then restricted writing is only a specific case of larger sets of traces and texts. In existential philosophy, the equally impossible-but-necessary ontology is rather anchored on the irreducibility of experiences as being individual, individuated around one consciousness (the 'in-itself-for-itself' structure of Sartre). At first glance, only writing as restricted writing could 'fit' within another ontology that would take the human individual, and not traces in general, as the structural format of reality. But no obvious reason warrants this reduction of Derrida's concept. What is the 'place' of restricted writing, within generalized writing? *When* did restricted writing start – and how can we avoid this question of the origin, which Derrida highlighted as both the risk posed by writing, and the occasion it offers us to bypass it for good? (Derrida 1976, 74, 1982, 6-7) If it is just "one of the representatives of the trace in general" (Derrida 1976, 167), what is the specificity of restricted writing?

Understood in its common sense, writing is a specific form of human expression, but not all expression is in writing, of course, or even in the form of a *conceptual* language. Unlike a dance move (an expression as trace, in the larger sense), certain movements of the body and its organs will be categorized as expressions in the mediums of orality and writing if they comply with the creative constraints of a conceptual language. And, amongst these, writing provides new technical limitations – and therefore, new possibilities, having to do with the history of writing techniques in each culture and civilization, but also with phenomenological and technological aspects. As I have suggested elsewhere, we may rely upon the concept of *reprise* to insist upon Derrida's understanding of writing as always being a process of editing (see Buchoul 2024). More than orality, writing permits the *reprise* of my expression through a conceptual language, inasmuch as the materiality of the surface inscribed allows me to revisit and transform my claims, before they are submitted to the world. Sartre thought of action as always already implying the consent of the agent in doing each act (our actions are ours to the extent that they partake in our value-system – Sartre 2003, 117-119). The material artefact of writing, in the restricted sense, provides a technological support to deepen and experiment with the acts of expression that I consent to, and it stretches the

potential effects of agency by allowing me to rewrite my conceptual experimentation, before they come out to the world and become received as my contributions. What we could call the *interlude* of writing, that period between the first inscribed word of a draft and the publication of its final form, is a space of agency 'squared'. It concentrates or slows down²⁵ the general challenges of agency, which punctuate our existence from start to end, by stretching, for once, the *duration* of choice into a span of time opened up by a technology. It confirms and intensifies, here through the medium of language, how agency consists in a power struggle of extant units, individualized and valued culturally (here, words), and *not* in the exertion of some free will:

This attempt to say [*vouloir-dire*], which is not, moreover, the antagonist of silence, but rather the condition for it, is the original profundity of will [*vouloir*] in general. Nothing, further, would be more incapable of regrasping this will than voluntarism, for, as finitude and as history, this attempt is also a first passion. (Derrida 1978, 75)

The writer attends, alone, to the emergence of each word as it imposes itself against all others, fueled by the desire of expression and informed by all the accumulated experience that has peaked in that very instant. And even the logic of correspondence, from experience to words, which is at work here, is itself encoded by my lived experience.²⁶ "(T)he access to writing is the constitution of a free subject in the violent movement of its own effacement and of its own bondage" (Derrida 1976, 132), since my "speech" [*parole*] can only "speak alone" [*parler toute seule*] in writing (Derrida 1978, 85). By the time the written text is finalized and proposed to the world, as a publication, it has necessarily passed the test of satisfaction. Since the initial act was explored through the medium of writing, first, it could come about – as per Sartre's understanding of action as embedding consent – only in the form of the initial satisfaction of a desire (writing). And if certain words survived the process of verification and elimination (which writing fundamentally is, as rewriting), they constitute the material evidence for higher levels

²⁵ Derrida already notes in *Of Grammatology* how the description of restricted writing in quantitative terms prevents its consolidation around an essence: "'Facilitate,' 'favor,' 'reinforce,' such are the words chosen to describe the operation of writing. Is that not to forbid every essential and rigorous determination of principle?" (1976, 338). Is it the blame of an insufficient approach, or could it be an admission of impossibility?

²⁶ This process, which is precisely that of agency, could be seen as an instance of the "'active', moving discord" which Derrida traces back to Nietzsche's *active interpretation*, and which he proposes to call *différance* (1982, 18). Deeper parallels could also be drawn between this proposition and Heidegger's concept of *Wiederholung* (repetition, *reprise*).

of satisfaction, as felicity, on the part of the author in their effort of meaning-making. This interplay of lack, frustration or pain, and satisfaction, is the libidinal economy of this interlude of writing, as a special milieu for our agency (thus recalling, again, profound motifs of Sartre: lack as the implicit 'structure' of intentional consciousness, for all its activities – Sartre 2003, 104). And amongst the sea of written texts that make up our cultures, a subgroup expresses a specification of this desire, the drive to constitute their meaning-making efforts through the form of an attempt to name 'things' 'as such'. Metaphysics, understood now as a body of 'metaphysical texts', is understood as 'just' one form amongst others, of a desire for meaning.

This line of interpretation would imply that, more than truth, desire would be the guiding force of philosophy. Numerous passages of Derrida's – amongst others his recurring discussions with Freud —, allow us to consider this hypothesis. *Of Grammatology* invites us to "to think the originary appurtenance of desire to discourse, of discourse to the history of the world, and the already-three-ness of the language in which desire deludes itself" (Derrida 1976, 139). Desire would be at the heart of philosophy's very identity: its hope to become the *relève* of the metaphor is its "irrepressible (...) desire" (Derrida 1982, 269), an insatiable desire (Derrida 1976, 143) as desire of presence²⁷ that will always keep us writing.²⁸ However, such a statement should not be seen as dismantling the possibility and the very value of reading or writing metaphysics. Rather, it invites us to appreciate the desire that is embedded in its nature as a literary genre: metaphysics, as this impossible fantasy that will never be met, but which remains forever an interesting object of meditation, and more, of practice for the travail of our individuality. Just like with a psychoanalysis, it is narrative and not truth that matters. Truth can come about, secondarily, as a type of narrative called for by certain other desires, but these are not required for the deeper function of writing to be met, and of any action within a human existence, in fact: to experiment with the values that bring and sustain meaning for one's life. An author's desires override his intentions – and we have seen this often enough from artists and thinkers, including, clearly, Derrida, as a quick look at some items of his bibliography confirms.

²⁷ See "La parole soufflée" for Derrida's claim that any discourse attempting to destroy metaphysics must still "inhabit the structures they demolish, and within them they must shelter an indestructible desire for full presence" (Derrida 1978, 244). He recognized in his interview with Janicaud that he too still experienced that desire for presence all along (Janicaud 2015, 379).

²⁸ A genealogy of this claim could be traced back to Heidegger's "What is Metaphysics?" and his *Reflexion* on the moment, in history, when science became our *passion* (Heidegger 1993, 94).

But this sway between the biographical and the conceptual is how we have been reading Derrida, and reading in general, all along. The book has its own antinomy: either each text could be fundamentally logical and coherent in its progression, and then there would be no point in reading it, once we know its starting point; or, it may not, but then its progression would consist in the contingent jumps from one arbitrary point to the next, following an idiosyncratic narrative that only the writer could experience fully. "[E]very writing is aphoristic. No "logic," no proliferation of conjunctive undergrowth [*liane*] can reach the end of its essential discontinuity [...]. The fragment is neither a determined style nor a failure, but the form of that which is written" (Derrida 1978, 86-87). Even the reader expecting the least bit of logic could grow sceptical over a poetic passage, when unable to make out a minimal amount of coherence, and thus meaning, from the phrases proposed. But we tolerate those gaps, as their very openness responds to a desire that we share with the writer, which is satisfied by the text written and read (Derrida 1976, 245). We read texts, and we enjoy doing so, because we have grown to appreciate the kind of connections that those specific minds draw, in their unjustifiable idiosyncrasy, in the wild wager of every word. Through the minute scale of a written trace – a letter being perhaps amongst the smallest material units on which humans can apply their individual agency – writing reveals the infinitesimal reach of our being in the world as agents who co-constitute it. It gives us a chance to overcome the impression of passivity, the illusion of our position as spectators of the world, which keeps getting propelled by the very form of our consciousness at every instant. Instead, it allows us to leave a trace and thus soothe "the need of feeling that we are essential in relationship to the world" (Sartre 1988, 49). Derrida theorized writing as always mas-turbatory, but with Sartre (Sartre 1988, 51), he agrees that no writing could come to be if it was just made for oneself: "If writing is not a tearing of the self toward the other within a confession of infinite separation, if it is a delectation of itself, the pleasure of writing for its own sake, the satisfaction of the artist, then it destroys itself" (Derrida 1978, 92). Writing *proposes* something, submits something necessarily positive to the world, accepting the theatrical play of pretending that meaning can be halted and contained in contingent signifiers. It is not just metaphysics which may have an "fictioning essence": being in the world consists already in tackling the unavoidable task of acting at every instant of our existence, in a state of almost complete ignorance as to the

ground or effects of our initiatives.²⁹ Metaphysics as a type of sublimation only exemplifies this broader challenge of agency. While writing just incarnates a certain desire, following the form of a specific tradition that has been part of a battle of material forces in history, it *is* always metaphysical as it gives in to what Martinot sees as the fundamental process of metaphysics: it transforms names into signs (Martinot 2006, 239). We can then think of metaphysics as a tradition (see also Heidegger 1990, 2), a community passing through the ages and brought together by the formal similarity of their sublimation: an over-investment of their desires onto the negotiation and debates of those transformations. A pleasure found in transforming experiences into names, and names into signs.

Flipping metaphysics back on its head: from the content of a discourse, to the form of a desire. How is this not falling back into relativism? And, indeed, how is it not rejoining the forces of relativism, now political, that have spread over conservative governments and communities since Derrida's times? We can and we must recall, with Derrida, why metaphysics is necessarily textual, how this enables its complex process of forgetting, how meaning takes shape through the unavoidable illusion of lexical singularities, and why no writing can escape the sublimation of its writer. As he often recalled, Derrida's critique of metaphysics was not a return to "a relativist or skeptical empiricism" (Derrida 1981b, 105), for the very reason, fundamentally, that holding a discourse against truth, or reason, or science, or metaphysics, would be impossible: as a discourse, it has a meaning, it pretends to truth. The libidinal nature of metaphysics must be recalled: we should understand truth as "the normal prototype of the fetish"; we cannot "do without it" (Derrida 1981b, 105). Precisely because we cannot *not* discourse, and *not* act (all the more since a discourse is already an act, and all acts are already seeped in our linguistic and symbolic world), the question is no longer how to go beyond metaphysics, but how to invest it more meaningfully. But all these demonstrations do not reduce the risk for deconstruction to slide into relativism, or to be easily recuperated by the wrong sides of today's power balance. The fascistic forms of contemporary relativism agree with *this Realpolitik* of metaphysics, in their very passion for propaganda: they have understood how so much power lies in the hands of the first person who poses a word, the first who "literalizes the metaphors" (Martinot 2006, 241). By that fundamental act, he imposes not only a theme but also the language of that theme to everyone else – even and especially to those who will contest it.

²⁹ See Sartre's invitation to become aware of the inefficiency of one's words (Sartre 1992, 82).

It is no grand scheme of morality, of humanism or of some spirit of democracy that may prevent us from falling in that other camp. All these moral ideals still presuppose that old metaphysics that both sides of our power struggle have outgrown. No more grounding on actual transcendentals can be reclaimed to guarantee our safety. As always, only our genealogy guides us – but a genealogy understood in a broader sense: it includes this enmeshing of roots that Derrida proposed as an image of the general textuality that we are in, or perhaps, that we *are*. If it so happens that I write – since this is more a discovery than a decision –, and that I write philosophy and metaphysics, I must further refine that practice and keep writing, for it is where the value-system of my life-world may find its tipping points to inflect the existing balance of power. It is our table of negotiation with other forces – with other metaphysics, as theorized by other writers, and, more importantly, as encountered, implicit in the actions of everyone.

But one thread, from Derrida, may be helpful to guide the direction of our texts *marginally*. The very fact that our metaphysics is 'out there', in the world, that it has passed the ideological filters of dominant orders, proves it as inoffensive: "That a declaration of opposition to some official policy is authorized, and authorized by the authorities, also means, precisely to that extent, that the declaration does not upset the given order, is not *bothersome*" (Derrida 1982, 114). But the filter is more than an institutional or ideological one: it has to do with writing itself, as a technology of negotiation of forms. Writing, of all possible kinds of actions, and, more precisely, of all the technologies of expression, may offer us a unique practice to respond for our need for meaning, and for new meaning. The moment of writing places us at the edge of the possible, of the imaginable: through it, we accept, again and again, the hopeless dream of satiating our desire for singularity and change, while knowing that it will do so only by rejoining the existing forms of words – of words known, accepted and thus already controlled. Here is, perhaps, the alternative to the old dream of truth, and an eternal inspiration for action: trying to walk always a little closer to the edge, pushing our passion to reach the margins, the frames, the borders. And, to do so, letting all their voices write through us.

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