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It was forty years ago today ...

Of Grammatology 1967-2007

SANS MOT

‘My god, already fifty years!’ Derrida exclaims in ‘‘Dead Man Running’’: Salut, Salut,’ marking the fiftieth anniversary of *Les temps modernes*. How does one mark an anniversary? Where to begin? How does Sartre begin? *La nausée* begins *without* a date. ‘The first page’ of Antonie Roquentin’s notebooks, the editors tell us, ‘is not dated.’ ‘It would be best to write about events from day to day’, the notebook begins, ‘to keep a journal to see clearly’. Roquentin wants to write events from day to day in the hope that he will, one day, see clearly. It’s a wager on the clarity-to-come of writing from day to day that begins *sans date*. As Derrida suggested in *Shibboleth* (1986), the date at once marks a quasi-private anniversary of a secret meeting, of a meeting of the secret, and a date that can only *give itself* to another date, to the *other* of the date. This is even more apparent when I write *today*, this very day, here and now in a work, and when you read or hear of this *today*, on another day, on any and every day. And perhaps most of all when I write: ‘it was forty years ago today.’

In 1964, as Derrida was publishing ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’ and ‘Violence and Metaphysics,’ Sartre was publishing an autobiography, *Les mots*, the death-knell of most writers and thinkers, at least until Derrida began to take seriously Nietzsche’s insistence that all works of philosophy are a kind of unconscious and involuntary memoir. If one didn’t know that Albert Schweitzer was Sartre’s uncle, the first few pages of *Les mots* could be mistaken for a biography of Schweitzer. At least, Sartre’s refusal of a Nobel Prize in 1964 makes more sense: why should he accept an award that had already been given to his uncle?

For Sartre, no doubt because his father died soon after he was born, when one begins with the genealogy of the father, one begins *sans mot*. Sartre writes about his father’s parents, his parental grandparents, who married under mistaken financial assumptions and – for forty years – never spoke to one another. Sartre’s father, and Sartre’s paternal genealogy, Sartre’s name, were conceived and produced *sans mot*, in forty years of silence. *It was forty years ago today!* How does one mark such an anniversary?

The early loss of his father has made Sartre have no sense of a father figure that limits or prohibits the question of freedom. In spite of multiplying substitute fathers, Sartre keeps insisting that he is a child *without* fathers, *sans pères*. For himself and on his own, he finds words without a father, without the *rights* and *duties* of a father. ‘I never stop creating myself; I am the donor and the receiver’, he writes. Starting *sans mots*, Sartre creates himself, *and never stops becoming his own father*.

In *De la grammatologie*, Derrida suggests that, contrary to Sartre, the *sans mot* – in this case of Heidegger – can *neither* simply restore the father *nor* liberate the son or daughter (as his or her own father): one is always somewhere in between containment and transgression:

It is thus that, after evoking the ‘voice of being,’ Heidegger recalls that it is silent, mute, insonorous, wordless [*sans mot*], originarily *a-phonic*. The voice of the sources is not heard. A rupture between the originary meaning of being and the

word, between meaning and the voice, between ‘the voice of being’ and the ‘*phonè*,’ between ‘the call of being,’ and articulated sound; such a rupture, which at once confirms a fundamental metaphor and renders it suspect by accentuating its metaphoric discrepancy, translates the ambiguity of the Heideggerian situation with respect to the metaphysics of presence and logocentrism. It is at once contained within it and transgresses it.

A decade after *De la grammatologie*, and twenty years before Derrida’s long-awaited letter on Sartre, it was not Sartre, but Blanchot who provided Derrida with the chance to explore the *sans* of *sans mot*, of the *sans père* that always ends up re-identifying the son or daughter with the father or, indeed with the *mother* – and Derrida’s legacy will always leave him *somewhere in between* a ‘father’ and a ‘mother.’ In ‘Pas’ (1976), a text that was published the year that *Of Grammatology* was published in America, Derrida explores Blanchot’s strategic use of the ‘x *sans* x,’ in which the same *as* the same marks itself, re-marks itself and is marked *by* the wholly other. This could also be read as Derrida’s own anguished and critical response to the ‘fathers’ of French philosophy and to the ‘sons and daughters’ of his generation. Each generation re-marks itself as it hands itself on, and is marked by the gaps that deviate and diverge in any genealogy, lineage or anniversary. This response was always marked not by the *sans mot* as much as the *sans cap*, by a heading out, by a going ahead that always loses its head, its head of the family. As Derrida writes in ‘Dead Man Running’ ‘when he recalls first reading *Les temps modernes* as an adolescent in Algeria:

I especially remember the ruptures, having intimately felt myself to be a convinced ally of both (Merleau, Camus, to cite just the most spectacular), but the others that followed were also important for me. Such a genealogy! Such

lineages! Such a family without a father and without a leader and without a head!

[*sans père et sans chef et sans cap!*].

How does one celebrate the fortieth anniversary of *De la grammatologie*, without reconstituting the head of the family? *It was forty years ago today that Derrida taught the band to play ...*

ESSAI

One can perhaps begin to mark the anniversary of *De la grammatologie* by starting with *two* anniversaries: 1967 and 1976. One could also begin with *two* temptations, namely to speak of only one date, of *one* history of publication, reception and translation, which hides a more profound temptation – to speak without the date.

One could begin by saying that *Of Grammatology* (1976), Spivak's translation of *De la grammatologie* (1967), marks at once an indispensable part of the history of Derrida's work in America and the English speaking world, and is also perhaps indicative of a remarkable Hegelian *Aufhebung* of *De la grammatologie*. Spivak's long introduction, frozen in 1975, and, most remarkably, the direction from The Johns Hopkins University Press to put the book in the 'Literature' section of the bookshops, are all traces of the extraordinary introduction and reception of Derrida's work to the English speaking world thirty years ago. My God, already thirty years!

De la grammatologie, a book warning of the traps and ruses of the Hegelian *Aufhebung*, of the colonisation and appropriation of the other, to some extent underwent this very process in its translation and reception in departments of English Literature as it was caught up in the anxious institutional battles over catching the next wave of the now in a discipline that is in

perpetual crisis, and more often than not, in the aftermath of its reaction against the influence of F. R. Leavis has been of late very moral about not being moral.

De la grammatologie, first published in Paris on 20 September 1967, was already one-of-three, the third in a trinity of publications in one year in France. In America, in contrast, there was *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), and then *Of Grammatology* (1976), and finally, *Writing and Difference* (1978). 1967 in Paris, 1978, 1973, 1976 in Illinois, Maryland and Chicago: two remarkable and inextricably intertwined histories, where the American translations transformed the dates and sequence of the French publications. Already, when it comes to thinking that it was forty years ago that *De la grammatologie* was first published, it is not a question of the ‘history’ of one book, nor even of three books that all appeared in the same year, but of six books published over twelve years in four different places: *De la grammatologie/Of Grammatology* (1967-1978).

Opening, yet again, *De la grammatologie* the first thing I noticed was that while the opening words of the translation read, ‘The first part of this book ...’, the French reads, ‘*La première partie de cet essai ...*’ (lxxxix; 7). In other words, *De la grammatologie* is not a *book*. It is an essay, an attempt, a try, a testing out, a preliminary gesture that has no assurance of becoming a ‘book.’ *De la grammatologie* is no more and no less than an *essai*.

As Derrida’s first footnote on the first page emphasizes, *De la grammatologie* is an essay developing an essay. While the French edition says that the first part of the work is ‘the development’ of an essay published in *Critique* late 1965 and early 1966, the English translation merely says that this first part ‘may be read as an essay published in the review *Critique*,’ as if the first part is either simply a republication of an early essay or that this ‘book’ itself somehow has no relation to an ‘essay’ (323). *Of Grammatology* is *more* than an essay: it is a *book*. This is all the more strange, because in her preface Spivak quotes

Derrida's own well known comments on the publication of *De la grammatologie* in an interview with Henri Ronse from December 1967, in which he says:

In what you call my books, what is first of all put in question is the unity of the book and the unity of the 'book' considered as a perfect totality, with all the implications of such a concept ... One can take *Of Grammatology* as a long essay articulated in two parts (whose juncture is not empirical, but theoretical, systematic) *into the middle* of which one could staple *Writing and Difference* (3-4; 11-12).

Derrida goes on to discuss this 'strange geometry' in relation to *Speech and Phenomena* (4-5). Already, forty years ago today, in 1967 there is *plus d'un*, a 'strange geometry' that is always more and less than the geometry of a book, if there is such a thing: not one book, not three books, but a *series* of essays that can cut into or interrupt the apparent linear sequence of each work.

At the same time, the need in 1976 for *De la grammatologie* to be a book, to be *the* book, seems overwhelming. When Spivak quotes a later passage from the 1967 interview, she makes a very odd ellipsis: 'Conversely, one could insert *Of Grammatology* in the middle of *L'écriture et la différence*, since six texts of the latter are anterior, in fact and in principle, to the publication ... in *Critique* of the articles announcing *Of Grammatology* (lxxix). Why does Spivak delete the seemingly insignificant point that *two years* elapsed between the essays in *Critique* and the *essai* of *De la grammatologie*? I think this is not so much a question of simplifying the dates from 1965-1967 in the 1976 translation, as of Spivak's need for *Of Grammatology* to be a book, to be received as a coherent, serious, even if preliminary, book on 'de-construction'. When she discusses the relation between the 1965-1966 'review articles' and *Of Grammatology*, it is to emphasise that we are now dealing with a *book*: 'It is

fascinating to study the changes and interpolations made in the text of the review articles as they were transformed into *the book*' (my emphasis) (lxxx).

Spivak seems to need Derrida's work to be a book *for* America, *for* the English Departments of America. And Derrida's work of course became part of the vanguard of a vastly complex Anglo-American institutional warfare between the fathers and sons, the mothers and daughters, the professors and patrons of 'English Literature.' One could almost see this as an example of the 'recourse to literature as [a] reappropriation of presence,' which Derrida warns about in *Of Grammatology* in his reading of Rousseau (144). Perhaps Derrida the philosopher still has to be read in English departments.

The *Collection 'Critique'* also seems an eminently French, Parisian context in which to place the publication of *De la grammatologie*. However, it is also important resist the temptation to reduce the history of *Of Grammatology* back to its pure and authentic source. In a 1966 issue of *Critique* devoted to Blanchot there is an essay by Paul de Man. De Man would publish another essay on Georges Poulet in *Critique* in 1969, and Samuel Weber had an article in the following 1969 double issue devoted to Walter Benjamin. In other words, even in the midst of the *Collection 'Critique,'* the history of *De la grammatologie* is *already* transatlantic.

De la grammatologie was part of a *series*. From his earliest work on Husserl, Derrida had warned that one must be very attentive to the temptations of simply embracing either a diachrony or a synchrony. In 'At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am,' Derrida writes of a 'dia-synchrony,' which he describes as a 'serial *at once*, the 'many times' that will have taken place only once' that mark at once the possibility *and* the ruin of any pure diachrony or synchrony (30). *De la grammatologie/Of Grammatology*: is a remarkable *series* of publications and translations in France *and* America and it is also a singularity that cannot

help but give itself to be read, to be translated, again and again, to *give* itself to the other, to another day, to the day of the other. *It was forty years ago today...*

MORE OR LESS: THE TRUTH

Derrida insists in the opening of his work that a grammatology must run the risk ‘of never being able to define the unity of its project or its object’ (4; 13-14). Whether he was already thinking of his later critique of Heidegger’s *Die Versammlung des Denkens* is hard to say, though Derrida clearly has the metaphysical epochs of Heidegger in mind. Today, forty years ago today, Derrida argues, the history of metaphysics ‘more or less covertly’ determines concepts of science and writing (4). A few pages later he reiterates this point: ‘all the metaphysical determinations of truth ... are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos’ (11; 21). We perhaps have to be attentive to a certain rhetorical strategy in *Of Grammatology* that is always more and less than a rhetoric: *plus ou moins secrètement* and *plus ou moins immédiatement*. Derrida is bracketing (in a quasi-Husserlian sense) and unbracketing the determination of the concepts of the secret, the immediate and the implicit. The force of this (un)bracketing is apparent some pages later when Derrida both asserts and qualifies the domination of the *Aufhebung*: ‘the *Aufhebung* is, more or less implicitly, the dominant concept of nearly all histories of writing, even today’ (25; 40). Always more *or* less implicit, never merely self-evidently implicit or *not* implicit, the *plus ou moins* more or less outdistances and exceeds the labour of the *Aufhebung* to harness what is not stated but understood and what is reserved but present.

Derrida constantly evokes the *plus ou moins* in *Of Grammatology* to disrupt the temptation to define the unity of both his project and its object, to create a totality to-be-refuted. On at least one occasion, he is more or less explicit about this strategic importance of dislodging

the *plus ou moins* from a determination of *the* ‘more’ or of *the* ‘less’. In his reading of Levi-Strauss, he writes: ‘It is precisely the property of the power of differance to modify life less and less as it spreads out more and more’ (131; 191). Derrida takes care here to differentiate *differance* from both Aristotelian potentiality and Cartesian extension. But his aim, more or less, is the great either-or of ontology. The supplement, he argues in the last pages of his reading of Rousseau, is ‘less than nothing and yet, to judge by its effects, much more than nothing. The supplement is neither a presence nor an absence. No ontology can think its operation’. *Of Grammatology* is more *and* less than a book, and this is perhaps nothing less and nothing more than Derrida’s recasting or retranslating (the history of) the truth.

LA BIZARRERIE

On the back cover of *De la grammatologie*, the write-up begins with a quote from Rousseau: ‘Languages are made to be spoken, writing is only used to *supplement* speech ... Writing is nothing but the *representation* of speech; it is *bizarre* that one gives more care to the determining of the image than to the object’. After the quote, *someone* has commented: ‘*Ce livre est donc voué à la bizarrerie.*’ This book – or this *essai* – is therefore devoted to the bizarre. Derrida himself quotes these lines from Rousseau to link Rousseau and Saussure on the unavoidable oscillations of representation and the bizarre relation between speech and writing. The movement of the supplement is *bizarre*, he later suggests, ‘because it is neither presence nor absence’ (154). It is bizarre because it gestures to an interlacing oscillation that cannot be reduced to the *alternative* of *either* presence *or* absence that has maintained the onto-theological tradition. Nor can it be reduced to a Heideggerian ‘presence sheltered in absence’. *It was forty years ago today ...* that Derrida left metaphysics and its ends limping.

It was also forty years ago today that Derrida began his great *circonfessions* around auto-bio-graphy, and the drama of the first five books of Rousseau’s confessions are interweaved

in his rereading of the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. In the *Confessions* Rousseau gives *la bizarre* a prominent role in the fault lines or extreme outcrops of his confessions, leading from his first disturbing confession in Book One to the ‘dangerous supplement’ of Book Three, and the admission that he felt he had ‘committed incest’ in Book Five. Rousseau’s work never stops having to endure, to reason *with*, to reason *from*, the visitations of *la bizarrerie*. Perhaps everything starts not with Sartre, but with Rousseau, that other philosopher as novelist and autobiographer.

AN UNAVOIDABLE HOSPITALITY

In *De la grammatologie/Of Grammatology* Derrida gestures to a hospitality that has already taken place, taken the place, before the *good conscience* of any invitation. Between nature and itself, he argues, there is always a gap ‘naturally welcoming its outside into its inside,’ a moving gap that marks an unavoidable hospitality (41).

De la grammatologie/Of Grammatology: the histories, and narratives and anniversaries of an unavoidable hospitality that has begun neither *with* the father nor *without* the father. And in marking a posthumous anniversary in the work of Jacques Derrida, the sons and daughters of this inheritance are left with neither the comfort of a paternal or maternal blessing, nor with the ease of a patriarchal or matriarchal dismissal. This anniversary is therefore devoted to *la bizarrerie*, to a terrible inherited dis-inheritance of the moving gap, of ‘this sad time’ that gives itself neither to the presence nor to the absence of the name that is inscribed on the front cover of *De la grammatologie/Of Grammatology*.

