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Tropics of Desire: Freud and Derrida

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In an essay entitled “To Speculate—on ‘Freud,’” collected in The Post Card, Derrida entertains the hypothesis of a death wish as proposed by Freud in his Beyond the Pleasure Principle. There Freud toys with the possibility of a drive towards death as fundamental to human psychology as the already established drive for pleasure. The ambiguities in Freud’s text have given rise to diverse interpretations of the psychoanalytic project. Derrida’s essay, however, resists the temptation of offering yet another reading of Freud and instead traces what in Freud’s text is, for structural reasons, illegible.

In particular, Derrida turns, not to implicit or explicit theses of Beyond the Pleasure Principle, but to what he calls the “scene” of Freud’s writing. Derrida argues that this scene testifies to a force that is more originary than pleasure-seeking desire. This more originary force does not simply oppose desire as would a drive towards death. On the contrary, such a force precedes and renders possible the opposition between dismembering death and the unifying urges of desire. Derrida names this fundamental force ‘life death’. Life death disperses desire from its first conception and deprives it of proper object or orientation. Consequently, desire forever drifts after anonymous chains of substitute objects that can never satisfy.

Derrida’s analysis does not offer a new, or nontraditional, paradigm of desire but rather deconstructs the traditional psychoanalytic model of desire and invites the reader to affirm the fragmentation that ensues. Implicitly within Derrida’s reading of Freud, however, lies a model of desire that borrows from the remnants of the traditional notion and yet survives the dispersions of deconstruction. In this paper I draw on a quasi-metaphoric notion of borrowing, or what Derrida sometimes calls “tropic movement,” in order to locate a post-deconstructive notion of desire.

The Game of Death

Freud’s hypothesis of a death wish arises in response to observing his young grandson at play. Something drives the child to repeat a bizarre game of scattering toys around a room and then collecting them. Concurrently, the child, who is on the verge of learning to speak, utters sounds that Freud hears as the German words “fort—da.” “Fort” signifies motion away from the speaker and “da” signifies motion towards the speaker. The compulsion to repeat a gesture of dispersing prompts Freud to reconsider the ubiquity of the pleasure principle. It is not clear that the child’s game exhibits the minimal effect of mastery or pleasure necessary in order to secure psychoanalysis on the pleasure principle and its subsidiary, the reality principle.

Derrida observes that the infant’s absurd game of rejection and retrieval bears an uncanny resemblance to Freud’s own ambivalence towards the death wish. Freud, like his grandson, plays a game of fort—da as he alternates poses and takes back the thesis of a death wish. Beyond the Pleasure Principle is implicated in the game of death that it describes. Therefore, it does not suffice to search the text for what might be gathered together as its theses and countertheses. Rather, Derrida insists, the rhythm of Freud’s writing alludes to a force that precedes any subjective drive. Moreover, since the child’s utterance, “fort—da,” renders the origin of subjective drives simultaneous with that of speech, Derrida infers that Freud’s text mimes not only the origin of desire but also the beginnings of language. The movement of Freud’s text traces an originary force of dissemination. Thus, Freud’s text resists the gathering required for interpretative reading (or, legein) and intimates what is beyond the pleasure of reading for any text.

So too Derrida’s own “pièce à thèse,” as the French term “problem plays,” or “pièce athèse,” as might be said of a fragment of writing that lacks a thesis, repeats the game of fort—da. Derrida’s speculation on Freud moves to the rhythm of a force that produces and dislocates language and desire. But if this absolute other is at the origin of language and desire, and if what is sometimes called the death drive, sometimes more originally life death, does not oppose desire but divides desire at its origin, then nothing in human experience could exceed the morbid cycles of reversal and repetition of the same.

Thus, deconstruction comes close to collapsing every mode of affirmation, every desire, into the paralyzing ambiguities of the primordial force of death,
or of what Derrida renames more equivocally life death. Stories come and go, theses and arguments are exchanged, but nothing, Derrida insists, eludes what he calls the "drift of the athesis."

**Curious Asymmetries**

If Freud's grandson would have left the game of *fort—da* whole and intact, then the game could have exemplified the modulation of the pleasure principle in the reality principle. That is, the game could have related how the child encounters the resistance of the external world and learns to defer pleasure in order to master both himself and the world. Human beings would simply be more or less frustrated creatures of desire.

From time to time, however, the child repeats the first gesture of *fort—da* as a game by itself in apparent disregard for the satisfaction of having his toys returned. As Derrida argues, it is the asymmetry of the game that definitively challenges the pleasure principle. A theory of wish-fulfillment cannot explain what could drive the child to disperse repeatedly his playthings without any promise of recovery. Therefore, Derrida concludes, the human psyche moves to a fundamental compulsion to repeat gratuitous to any economy of libidinal pleasure.

The fact of this fundamental repetition signifies that philosophy today can no longer claim that its primary task is to argue for or against statements of a thesis. That is, if Derrida is right, a philosophy of origins necessarily repeats an uneasy rhythm that turns away—*fort*—from any attempt to establish a position while nonetheless leaving in its wake countless arguments and narratives. In Derrida's essay on Freud, these stories and theses recount the dialectical path that leads from the father of psychoanalysis, through the psychoanalytic movement, and thirdly, to the project of science. In this recounting a certain fourth term—sometimes called "life death," sometimes only referred to by the number four, or again only indicated by a certain turning away, or "*fort*"—a certain fore-play, comes to inhabit the project of psychoanalysis in such a way as to disorient once and for all the various triangles of desire.

My interest, however, is not simply to encourage the reader to allow him- or herself to be pulled along by the strange and mute rhythm to which Derrida repeats the task that he inherits from the father of psychoanalysis, the task of describing the whole of the scene of writing from within that scene. Rather, I want to return to the beginning of Derrida's essay. All of Derrida's gestures could be found already in a certain part of the text that is entitled to name the whole of the text, the four words that comprise the English title of Derrida's essay: "To Speculate—On 'Freud.'" The title of the essay signals, by the device of citing Freud's name, the necessity by which Freud must risk his particularity to both the danger and the power of repetition in order to return to himself in idealized form, that is, as the universally recognized scientist. I will examine this triadic process in more detail in the next section. Here it is important to note, however, that according to Derrida, the traditional project of establishing a science of universal knowledge presupposes a force of repetition that is more originary than the power to repeat that defines scientific mastery. Life death entangles every attempt at scientific mastery in a movement of repetition that is absurd.

The title, "To Speculate—On 'Freud,'" alludes to the hollowing effect of originary repetition by a mute indicator of distance, the dash. The dash at once breaks apart and binds together speculation and its object: "To Speculate—On 'Freud.'" Derrida is playing *fort—da* with Freud, or with Freud's name, in such a way as to recall the game of Freud's grandson. Derrida thereby places himself in the family of Freud and inherits a game of death from the father of psychoanalysis.

A curious asymmetry, however, appears between the game of the child and that of Derrida. In one of the versions of *fort—da*, the grandson alternately tosses and retrieves his most suggestive toy—a spool attached to a string—into a curtained bed. Derrida notes that Freud is bewildered as to why the child does not simply drag the thing behind him like a train. If the child would only play train with the spool of thread, Freud speculates, then the thing would be displaced at the rhythm of the boy's own awkward and uneven gait. Freud's bewilderment, Derrida observes, indicates that he would prefer his grandson not to become involved with the curtained bed. The curtained bed, of course, suggests a woman, in this case the little boy's mother who is also Freud's daughter, Sophia. The spool of thread recalls the fetish that would bind son and mother. In other words, Freud plays the part of the Oedipal father who would prefer that the little boy turn away from desire.

Then, what does it mean if Derrida attaches a string in the form of a dash to "Freud" and pulls that name behind him? The configuration of the title of Derrida's essay suggests that Derrida plays the good little boy, the father's idealized son who refuses to mess with the bed of desire. That is, Derrida plays the role that the father of psychoanalysis sanctions for his heirs and rivals. Derrida's uncommitted speculation on Freud keeps desire at a safe distance behind him. Because deconstruction envelops every affirmation, every posting, of desire in a fold of equivocation, I wonder if the deconstruction of psychoanalysis does not participate in the traditional repression of desire. In other words, does not Derrida's deconstruction of psychoanalysis in fact perpetuate rather than deconstruct the Oedipalization of desire?

Derrida remarks that Freud had a phobia of trains. He does not mention that Freud considered the image of the train to signify the death wish. If
Derrida plays “train” with Freud’s name, perhaps it is because Derrida has more interest in the death bed than in the bed of pleasure. Clearly the deconstruction of desire borrows heavily from this vehicle of death.

Although a deconstruction of psychoanalysis requires the strategic privileging of death drive over eros, deconstruction would aim to render that difference undecidable in life death. If, however, deconstruction cannot exceed its own textuality, then I would claim that the strategy of deconstruction necessarily preserves the traces of its awkward and uneven borrowing, in this case of death over eros. The figuring of life death in terms of the game of death upsets the symmetry required for the logic of undecidability. In general deconstruction requires the strategic privileging of one term, usually a traditionally subordinate term, over another opposed term. This strategic privileging, however, undoes the abysmal inversions of the logic of undecidability. Derrida’s technique of deconstructing psychoanalysis—not just tentatively but finally—inclines more towards death than life.

Moreover, I claim that the deconstructive strategy of favoring one member of an opposed pair is itself erotic in its structure. That is, deconstruction implies a subjective inclination to favor one thesis or position over another. This fundamentally erotic inclination serves to orient a mode of writing that otherwise claims to go nowhere. An erotic inclination need not recede to a metaphysics of final ends nor to a psychoanalysis that rests on assertions of pleasure and mastery. The “tropic movements,” or “turns,” of artistic writing continue to twist out of and displace any thesis or any affirmation that would be attached to a thesis. Nonetheless, the asymmetry of Derrida’s writing involves a turning, or an inclination that not only divides but also implicitly directs desire.

Four Accounts of Repetition

Derrida sometimes uses the term “reiteration” in order to signify a repetition that disperses. In this sense, all of Derrida’s work could be read as a reiteration of the opening move of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit. The opening of the Phenomenology in sense-certainty inaugurates a dialectical model of repetition. In sense-certainty the repetition of a particular generates the abstract and finally the concrete universal. For example, the triadic dialectic of sense-certainty moves from the assertion of the particular “I,” through its abstract repetition in an empty universal “I,” to the concrete universal which brings together the totality of individuals in a collective “we.” Analogously, at a higher stage of dialectic an independent consciousness will surrender its claim to self-sufficiency in order to secure mastery at the level of a structure of universal significance. As long as the movement of repetition works through the power of a speech whose full meaning can be brought before consciousness, the negative power of repetition does not disrupt the mastery that it engenders.

Derrida’s notion of “reiteration” is more originary than dialectic, or any triadic model of repetition. For Derrida’s notion operates prior to consciousness and its power of speech. Let us return to the example of Freud. According to a traditional and triadic model of repetition, Freud must risk his proper name in a movement of psychoanalysis in order to establish a universal science that can be practiced by anyone. However, inasmuch as the proper name—indicative sign of a particular ego—is reiterated through writing, and not through fully conscious speech, that power of reiteration generates the mastery and the pleasure of the universal “we” only by way of a loss that cannot be fully recovered. Language originates, not in an active and conscious subject that could master the universe for his pleasure, but in the pathos of a repetition that is less tragic than grotesque.

Originary repetition is grotesque because it does not merely defer but disorients the attempt to secure pleasure or mastery. Reiteration breaks open and dismembers every triangular economy of desire, Oedipal or dialectical. However, because the concept of reiteration is more than an empty and abstract repetition, because it repeats, for example, the Nietzschean doctrine of the eternal return of the same only by displacing the circle of a return, Derrida’s concept shares with Hegel’s the power of generation. Reiteration, like its dialectical counterpart, is creative. It is creative because it displaces what it would claim simply to repeat. That is, repetition is creative by accident.

In The Post Card Derrida describes this movement of repetition and displacement as the “proper name effect.” The proper name effect refers originally to that which cannot be repeated, that is, cannot be translated, from one language to another without suffering the effects of displacement and loss. Because of the nature of originary repetition, however, any single language is subject to the proper name effect. That is, language, as real and singular as any thing, resists the attempt to reduce it to an ideal system of concepts. Repetition displaces. It is this process of othering, or dissemination, that is traced by the strategies of deconstruction. Deconstruction has the effect of undoing systems of mastery by contextualizing or, better, “textualizing” any system in a scene of writing that it cannot control.

If every affirmation of a thesis is hollowed in its repetition, if every “yes” is doubled and divided, this process of division gives rise to effects of displacement that are creative. It is the affirmation of this originary glissement in language and desire that Derrida finds, for example, in the style of Nietzsche’s writing and that allows him to announce at the opening of his work, Spurs, that deconstruction will affirm a repetition beyond the values of metaphysics (37).
The ethic writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* enfolds the projects of consciousness in a logic of equivocation. Therefore, the author must affirm, not the project of a universal science, but the dissemination of a dubious psychoanalytic movement. Because the psychoanalytic movement occurs as a novel event in history and, moreover, because this movement claims a priority to metaphysics, philosophers cannot return to the traditional task of thinking except by way of Freud. That is, if Derrida is correct, the postmodern thinker can no longer be innocent of the ethic drift that engenders and displaces any work. Because the ethic drift tracks an originary temporality that reverses and repeats every projected movement, every oriented configuration of development stalls. Or, as Derrida writes, the thesis paralyzes every gesture of historical advance by dislocating every step in advance; every step forward, every *pas*, negates itself. The tragic labors of the wounded Oedipus—paradigmatic figure of psychoanalysis—repeat in a grotesque and Beckettesque game of ending. For the repetitions or répétitions (as the French refer to rehearsals of a play) that dislocate action go nowhere.

Deconstruction invokes a rhetoric of symmetry that renders not only positions and oppositions but also differences of orientation and tone reversible. For example, Derrida hears in Freud’s text what he calls a double tone: On the one hand, Freud resists the force that would fragment the science of psychoanalysis at its conception. On the other hand, Freud affirms the absurdity of a universally recognized science of the unconscious and throws himself into the forgetfulness of play. Of this “double tonality,” Derrida writes, “insolvency and irresolution—perhaps these words also call upon what might be called the binodal economy. Economy of the tie or the bond (bind, band, double band, double bond, contra-band)” (PG, 389).6

The double band is a symmetrical structure that ties and unites every affirmation of a bond. If every play of repetition involves displacements, these displacements do not add up to a history or narrative of consequence. Just as every story is entangled in the equivocations of ethic writing, so too history can never be said to make an advance.7

I would insist, however, that it is also the case that the asymmetries of reiteration render time irreversible.6 Freud’s text does not simply repeat and randomly displace metaphysics. The so-called ethic writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the writing of a certain *fort* or *forte*, could only have come after the triadic theses of Hegel. That is, repetition not only loses and displaces but also accumulates meaning in a movement that is irreversible. Future and past moments cannot be reversed at random. In some sense, then, there are temporal and historical advances. The notion of a repetition that accumulates meaning, or what I elsewhere term “incremental repetition,” moves beyond the equivocations of ethic writing. Incremental repetition occurs as the possibility of a beyond that is not equally, or symmetrically twisted by its impossibility.

The Aesthetic Turn

The writer of *The Post Card*, like the crippled Oedipus, drags one leg behind him. In a section entitled “Legs de Freud,” or in English, “Freud’s Legacy,” Derrida alludes once again to an imbalance in the game played by Freud’s grandson, a child who like the young Oedipus, is abandoned by his mother. The child responds to his abandonment by playing “fort-da.” Derrida writes: “If the mother’s departure is necessarily disagreeable, how can it be explained according to the PP [the pleasure principle] that the child reproduces it [i.e., the gesture of his mother’s departure], and even more often in its disagreeable phase (distancing) than in its agreeable one (return)?” (PC, 324).

Derrida proceeds to locate the motive of the child’s game in what he calls a psychic zone of “indifference.” Derrida notes “the apparent indecision of this belt [between conscious and unconscious, between every opposed pair] or [of this] detached lace [or string]; such is the concept of repetition which agitates this entire text” (PC, 351). The game of “repitition between pleasure and pain” (PC, 301), between what Freud defines as the pleasure of stability and the pain of agitation, recalls what Freud locates as a “certain margin of aesthetic indifference between the limits of pleasure and pain” (PC, 281). Derrida asks,

is this not like a free zone, a place of free exchange for the comings and goings of speculation? An agency that I will call ‘duty-free’ providing, with a general equivalence, the means with which to pass, as authorized contraband, an always ideal border, and in both directions? More or less ideal. (PC, 281)

Aesthetic writing borrows its most forceful metaphors from the language of aesthetics. If such a strategy of deconstruction risks having neither practical nor theoretical effects, it is, not because deconstruction claims to lie neutrally outside of both realms of discourse, but because it aims to define the possibility of both.

In the attempt to name the origin of this difference, deconstruction must engage in a process of tropic borrowing that is not traditionally metaphorical but involves the creative and interactive—although not unifying—structure of “cataphresis.” That is, the tropes borrowed from aesthetics indicate what could never be conceptualized or systematized in language. Because these tropes can never be reduced to a domain of proper discourse—either practical or theoretical—they are essentially improper. Moreover, the effects of
interaction change the original domain of the borrowed terms. The debt to aesthetics becomes both “infinite” and “null” and thus could never be absorbed. Derrida explains:

...an economy in which the principle of equivalency would have been violated. All the movements in trans—[the transport of the train, of death, of translation, and of tropes in general]—have violated this principle, and along with it everything that can insure a payment, a reimbursement, the adequation of the signified to the signifier. This infraction...would have rendered debt both infinite or unpayable, and therefore null. It is the economic space of the debt which finds itself overturned, immensely enlarged and by the same token neutralized. Whence the double tonality of a writing: at once grave, discouraging, sighing over the task or the inexhaustible debt, and simultaneously carefree, cavalier, affirmative. (PC, 389; emphasis mine)

Inasmuch as strategies of deconstruction claim to release the “absolute other,” and in such a way that “the distinction between the feigned and the serious would escape us totally,” I wonder if deconstruction borrows from metaphysics a rhetoric of totality (PC, 281; emphases mine). Like every debt, deconstruction’s debt to metaphysics is, Derrida must insist, “infinite and null.”

At the end of the third section of the essay, a section entitled “Paralysis,” Derrida begins to conclude his remarks on Freud by citing some of the final remarks in Beyond the Pleasure Principle:

...borrowings [from biological science] increase “by degrees” the uncertainty of our speculation: for the possibilities of biology are infinitely open and in several years the entire landscape of these questions and answers might be overturned...“unser ganzer künstlicher Bau von Hypothesen”...can be “blown away” (umgeblasen), deconstructed... (PC, 385).

It is important to note that Derrida adds the word “deconstructed” to a standard translation of Freud’s text. Derrida proceeds to postulate Freud’s intent: “...this is how I hear Freud’s answer resonate, at my own risk and peril, and I translate it: go look for yourself, as for me I like it, the beyond of the PP is my rightful pleasure. The hypothesis of the death drive: for myself I like it, and above all it interests me.” (PC, 385).

Derrida’s translation of Freud, however, is not innocent. If translation, transfers of speech in general, always play on an originary glissement in language that is more metonymic and random than any traditional catastrophism could unify, this slippage nonetheless advances, I believe, with a sense of direction. Where Freud writes “künstlicher Bau,” Derrida plays on the French translation, “house of cards”; “An interesting metaphor,” Derrida writes, “a significant transposition or transference which translates aptly the necessarily ludic characteristic of this speculation for there is no house of cards in the original” (PC, 385). Freud writes “our speculation,” “unser ganzer...Hypothesen,” which Derrida loosely translates “I like it.” If both Freud and Derrida agree that “[t]o borrow is the law” (PC, 384), what does it signify if Freud borrows more from the language of science and Derrida translates Freud into the language of aesthetics?

Earlier in the essay, Derrida notes that Freud tentatively locates the drive to destruction in the ego. Freud asserts that the pleasures of the particular ego should be sacrificed in order that the life of the community, the “we,” may prosper. Narcissism occurs when the libido, which normally is directed outward, turns inward and protects the solitary ego. Yet Freud must realize, Derrida concludes, that inasmuch as every venture from the “I” to the “we” is disrupted by a death drive, every universal project, including the project of a psychoanalytic science, suffers the proper name effect, or the abnormalities of narcissism. The project of science may always lose its way in a speculation that borrows more from the fragmentations and divisions of death than from unifying life. As with any serious enterprise, Beyond the Pleasure Principle threatens to collapse into nothing more than the game of a narcissistic ego.

But if Freud’s project of psychoanalysis strives to be science and thereby risks collapsing into autobiographical statement, deconstruction turns Freud’s project around and inclines towards death. Derrida intensifies the threat of fragmenting science by translating Freud’s “we,” or “our,” into an “I,” an “I” that is directed toward its own rightful pleasure.” Derrida plays on Freud’s fears.

Because Derrida takes his interest from the ludic and aesthetic, while Freud inclines towards the grave and serious, because Derrida brings the game of fort—da close to the forgetful child and thus also to the final metamorphosis in Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, and finally because Derrida places his task in a zone that he characterizes as “duty-free,” Derrida cannot locate an affirmative mode of deconstruction except in absolute proximity to what is forgetful and without responsibility. Thus he comes close to reinforcing the worst of metaphysical prejudices, that aesthetics does no work but rather disengages serious endeavors of theory and practice. If Derrida locates the latter endeavors in a scene that is aesthetic, this aesthetics effects simultaneously the work of death and the play of affirmation. There is, however, no work of affirmation. “Duty-free” is not equal to, but implicates itself in, all that would elude responsibility.

The project of addressing the originary scene of writing necessarily exceeds the normal economies of consciousness and traditional notions of responsibility as long as the scene is traversed by a force that originates outside of thought or desire. But the symmetrical counterpart of responsibility, irresponsibility, belongs equally to the system that Derrida attempts to dislocate. Both concepts would be displaced in the catastrophetic effects of deconstruction.
It is interesting, however, that Derrida’s ethic writing retains the traces of having borrowed less from the side of responsibility and more from what is “duty-free.” If this structure of borrowing could never be reduced to any model of teleology, it does serve to orient deconstruction.

Excessive or one-sided borrowing becomes especially suspicious given Derrida’s reference to a notion of responsibility drawn from Nietzsche. Derrida expresses a considerable debt to Nietzsche,

who has awakened us to responsibility for the very things for which we believe ourselves not responsible. One can be guilty of that which one believes oneself to be essentially innocent, and in debt for that which one always feels oneself in advance “acquainted.” Nietzsche dared to link responsibility, debt, and guilt to the unconscious. ... You are willing to be responsible for everything, cries Nietzsche, except for your dreams, and the name of Oedipus soon will be sounded. (PC, 264–65)

Derrida, Nietzsche, and Freud demonstrate that desire is not simply ruined by the throw of the dice—fort, the gesture of the forgetful child in Nietzsche’s Zarathustra. Desire is not originally whole and only subsequently is divided by all that has come to be called death. Desire is originally partial, catachrestic, and constituted in the play that marks desire by alien cravings and accidental effects. If desire is partial, however, it cannot be neutralized by the forces of death. Nietzsche’s model of the forgetful child who plays the game of chance is not adequate to his more powerful notion of responsibility. Derrida’s borrowings are not innocent. It is not that one must resolve to take responsibility in the face of just any accidental effect of action. One cannot be held accountable for any configuration of dice that occurs. The notion of responsibility ought to be constituted from one’s inclinations. These inclinations, though in part product of accident and unconscious, define one’s interests.

If deconstructionists are trapped in an endless play of equivocation, they have not yet discovered the power of interest. The notion of interest does not draw its account from a metaphysical notion of desire as mastery or completion, nor from any proper fund, but from relentless borrowing. The asymmetry that structures the act of borrowing constitutes desire. If desire is underwritten by death, desire nonetheless sustains an inclination. The borrower remains indebted, and this debt grants him or her the power of responsibility.

More or less, Derrida would concur with my construal of the asymmetry of tropic borrowing. Of that duty-free zone, that “place of free exchange for the comings and goings of speculation,” Derrida writes that the borders are only “more or less ideal” (PC, 281). “Everything seems to be played out, or rather knotted, in the more or less loose stricture of energy, in the more or less dissolved, detached, resolved, absolved (aufgelöst) ties or bonds” (PC, 389, emphasis mine). But if this rhetoric of more and less is loose enough to allow for the novel pleasures of speech, it is also tight enough to twist those pleasures around an equivocal bind of death. The rhetoric of the “more or less” plays around a double bind, a cycle that abysmally suspends.

The strategy of deconstruction that Derrida owes to Freud, ethical writing, privileges death over desire in order to trace the originary movement of life death. This borrowing from death, however, implicates the product, life death, in an asymmetry, an unbalanced turn towards death. The structure of such a one-sided interest is itself erotic. Certainly, ethical writing never aimed to be neutral but only to take place more or less between life and death. My fear is that the silence of ethical writing, the blank space between life and death, would disengage the deconstructionist from their quarrel. Silence, however, I insist, is never innocent.

In an article where Freud addresses the enigma of Shakespeare’s Cordelia, daughter of King Lear, and a figure whom he identifies first of all with his own daughter and finally with all of the silent women of tragedy, Freud suggests that silence is the equivocal speech of death. Death is mute. Derrida attempts to elude the Oedipal rivalry for possession of the woman, Sophia, and instead deconstructs repressive triangles of possessive desire. In fact, however, I believe that Derrida “takes possession behind” and identifies his own writing with Sophia’s silent speech.

This partial identity of the author of The Post Card with Sophia is suggested by a number of coincidences. For example, both Derrida and Sophia are identified with the number 7. Seven is the number of letters in Derrida’s name as well as one of the punes that occurs in Derrida’s signatory closure of every agreement with “j’accepte.” As Derrida’s translator notes, “j’accepte” recalls “Jacques” as well as “Je sept” (PC, xiv). Derrida mentions that Freud calls Sophia his “Sunday child,” the child of the Sabbath. Seven is the day of the Sabbath, of rest, of vacation, and what Derrida sometimes calls “vacancy.” Moreover, 7 is the sum of the numbers 5 and 2, the numbers that compose the puzzling 32 blank spaces that repeatedly interrupt the postcards preceding Derrida’s piece on Freud. Seven is also the most probable number to occur in a game of dice, that is, as long as you play with more than one die.

Like the silence of Cordelia, Derrida’s inclination towards silence kills. But if King Lear’s attraction towards his favorite daughter finally reveals itself to have, at least according to a Freudian interpretation, an overwhelmingly erotic component, so too Derrida’s inclination towards death betrays a desire. In Endgame, Samuel Beckett, dramatist of grotesque repetition, has one of his characters claim that it is the duty of the artist, not to cover over grey reality with the deceptive colorings of imagination, but to portray reality for the abyss that is. Derrida, Nietzsche, and Freud, however,
have given us reason to believe that perception is originally an effect of the tropics of desire. The failure to see is the failure to desire. The artist does not simply describe a reality that is empty. Every perception and so, too, every reading is part of desire. If, as Derrida argues, the text in general is catastrophic and thus divided from any rightful claim to a proper meaning, then this catastrophe calls not for a reader to fill in the blanks with some excess of so-called “masculine” imagination, nor for a detached reading, but for a partial reading, a reading that, between silence and complete speech, engenders an interest.

NOTES

I wish to thank Irene Harvey for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.


3. The awkward and uneven gait of the boy recalls the limping Oedipus, whose bound feet were to keep him away from the mother and out of the path of the father. If Freud's interest is to restrain the drives of the boy and protect the fundamental laws of psychoanalysis, Derrida's aim is to trace in the game of the child what cannot be contained by any law.

4. I use the word "uneven" in order to recall the "awkward and uneven gait" of the little boy. I wonder if the deconstruction of psychoanalysis is not complicit in the Oedipalization of desire.


6. Deconstruction opens the "bindinal economy" to "insolvency and irresolution." Therefore, the definitive effect of the atesis is not to bind but to unbind psychic drives. I wonder, then, if Alphonso Lingis does not misread Derrida when he emphasizes that dimension of difference that names "the displeasure of the bound processes, compulsively repeated in order that they be bound, and the pleasurable processes diminished by being bound." Deconstruction borrows much, I believe, from what Bataille, and first Nietzsche, called a solar economy, of expenditure without recompense, without restraint." See "The Pleasures of Postcards," in Hermeneutics and Deconstruction, ed. Hugh J. Silverman and Don Hale (Albany: SUNY, 1985), 163–64.


