

Part I

Fundamental Themes and Concepts in
Derrida's Thought

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Truth in Derrida

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1. Truth and Writing

At one time, and not so long ago, anybody writing on the topic “Derrida and Truth” would most likely have felt obliged to begin by asserting (and then making good the claim through lengthy citation of the relevant passages) that it didn’t amount to a downright absurd, indeed a near-oxymoronic coupling of name and noun. Of course there are plenty of quotable passages where, so far from rejecting or denouncing the notion of truth, Derrida can be found insisting on its absolute indispensability to philosophical enquiry in general and – more specifically – its crucial pertinence to the project of deconstruction (LI, 162–254). In fact they became more frequent in his later texts and interviews where he went out of his way to controvert the widespread belief (put about chiefly by detractors in the mainstream analytic camp) that deconstruction amounted to nothing more than an update on ancient sophistical themes or a bag of crafty rhetorical tricks with absolutely no regard for reputable, truth-apt standards of debate (Searle 1977). All the same Derrida’s reiterated protests – asserting his strict and principled allegiance to just those criteria of valid argument, logical rigor, and conceptual precision – are often dismissed, by those so minded in advance, as a routine show of respectability designed to conceal his indifference to truth in whatever commonplace or technical guise.

On this view Derrida’s work can best be set aside for all serious philosophic purposes by treating it as a kind of modish anti-philosophy designed to seduce certain credulous types – literary theorists mainly – into thinking that they might be advantageously placed (by reason of their own special gifts or training) to score easy points

off Plato and his progeny. That is, they might count themselves better (i.e., more attentive and meticulous) readers of philosophic texts than the official, academically accredited custodians of those texts and their veridical content. Thus Derrida's notion of "writing" as in some sense ubiquitous – as marking the absolute horizon of intelligibility or the precondition for whatever is to count as "real," "true," "factual," "self-evident," "veridical" – has typically been taken by misinformed admirers and detractors alike as an instance of extreme anti-realist or ultra-"textualist" thinking whose logical consequence was a solipsistic outlook that counted the world well lost for the sake of the new-found descriptive or creative freedoms thereby opened up. On this reading of Derrida, advanced by "post-analytic" philosophers like Richard Rorty and by not a few literary acolytes, the "descriptive" versus "creative" distinction is one that should no longer be regarded as possessing any more than a culture-bound, conventional, or merely discipline-specific force (Rorty 1982). However, what both parties – the "analytical" foes of deconstruction together with its "literary" admirers – ignore is the irreducibility of writing to any such narrowly (albeit customarily) restricted scope.

I must refer readers back to his own intricate and nuanced treatment of the topic for a full-scale exposition of *arche-écriture* ("primordial" or "generalized" writing) as Derrida conceives and deploys that term throughout his early texts on Rousseau, Hegel, Husserl, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Austin, and others (*Voice and Phenomenon*, *Of Grammatology*, and *Writing and Difference*). Sufficient to say that, so far from condemning us to a prison-house of language, textuality, or Peircean "unlimited semi-osis," it serves to make a very reasonable point and one quite consistent (as I have argued elsewhere) with a robustly realist epistemology and ontology (Norris 1997a, 1997b). That is, it amounts to a particularly striking – and to that extent perhaps misapprehension-prone – means of putting the case that our truth-claims though not our ultimate conceptions of truth must always acknowledge, whether overtly or not, their dependence on some given system or structure of representation. That Derrida should choose to articulate this point through recourse to the term "writing" along with its sundry analogues and derivatives ("trace," "graft," "mark," etc.) has understandably given rise to much confusion and to both of the above-mentioned partisan responses, namely its literary-critical uptake as a license for unending textualist "freeplay" and its cursory dismissal by many philosophers as merely a warmed-over version of long familiar skeptical or ultra-relativist themes. However, this ignores his constant emphasis on the non-restriction of "writing" to its commonplace (graphic or alphabetical-phonetic) usage, the usage to which it has mostly been confined by that deep-laid logocentric/phonocentric bias that Derrida tracks with such extraordinary zeal and tenacity in its multiform manifestations down through the history of Western thought (OGC). Such readings fail to register the way that "writing" comes to stand as a more encompassing and adequate term for those various intermediary figures and devices – "ideas," "concepts," "intuitions," "impressions," "sense-data," "stimuli," and so forth – that philosophers across the whole

range of doctrinal attachments from rationalism to empiricism and even radical naturalism, physicalism, or materialism have called upon by way of closing the gap between mind and world, subject and object, or knowledge and object-of-knowledge: “encompassing” insofar as it includes and subtends all those diverse particular idioms, and “more adequate” insofar as it shows them all to partake of a representationalist model of mind that is itself chronically unstable since forever suspended between the different orders of priority entailed by those various epistemological conceptions.

This is one aspect of the undecidability that Derrida seeks to communicate by way of his most famous neologism, the portmanteau term *différance* with its calculated slippage of signification between “difference” and “deferral” together with “deference” as a third, less prominent but far from marginal constituent sense (VP). Thus the word – not a full-fledged or unitary “concept,” as Derrida insists – serves on the one hand to indicate “difference” as that which (following Saussure) renders meaning a product of the contrasts, distinctions, or differences “without positive terms” endemic to the endlessly elusive “structure” of language (Saussure 1983). On the other it serves to connote “deferral” as that which ensures the non-positivity, i.e., the lack of any one-to-one relation or punctual correspondence between signifier and signified while none the less making communication possible, despite all the resultant problems for any systematic philosophy of language or project of structural linguistics. This it does through what Derrida terms the “iterability” of speech-acts conceived on the generalized model of writing rather than the human voice as a locus of meanings that somehow bear within themselves the authentic mark of expressive, sincere, and (to the speaker) transparently accessible first-person utterance (MP, LI).

I cannot here offer a detailed account of his critical engagement with this logocentric conception as it typifies the discourse of thinkers from Plato and Aristotle to Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and (especially) Husserl and Austin. Nor shall I dwell on the various ways that it continues to haunt the thinking of those – most notably Wittgenstein and his legion of disciples – who count themselves mercifully free of any such lingering attachment to bad old Cartesian notions of privileged first-person epistemic access. What I do wish to emphasize – since it bears so directly on the topic of my essay – is the fact that writing (*arche-écriture* or “proto-writing”) is precisely what allows the maintenance or conservation of sense from one context of utterance to the next at least in the minimal degree that is required in order for communication to occur. Thus it stands as the figure *par excellence* of that which remains and continues to exert a certain signifying function despite and against the fugitive, evanescent character of an utterer’s meaning, intentional purport, or expressive (as opposed to indicative) sense (VP). Hence the error of those – Searle chief among them – who take Derrida to deploy “writing” in its conventionally narrow usage and then, by a perverse (or plain muddle-headed) twist of argument, to vastly over-extend its scope so that every speech-act is thereby exposed to endless reinscription within any range of no matter how far-fetched contexts, situations, or imaginary scenarios. This

characterization is not so wide of the mark when applied to some of Derrida's more intemperate or less philosophically informed disciples in the literary-theory or cultural-studies camps. However, it comes nowhere close to describing the complexity – always a truth-functional or truth-related complexity despite its provenance in textual close reading – of Derrida's engagement with philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to the recent past. Thus “writing” is not only his favored term for that which enables the sense and the truth-value of statements or propositions to be communicated from one context to the next but also, as he argues in quasi-Kantian vein, the necessary and transcendently deducible condition of possibility for any such process to occur (Gasché 1986; Norris 1987, 2000a).

Exemplary here is his early Introduction to Husserl's essay “The Origin of Geometry” where Derrida shows how a certain, structurally requisite though largely implicit recourse to the *topos* of writing is precisely the means by which Husserl accounts for the periodic stages of advance – or, so to speak, of punctuated equilibrium – that have characterized the history of mathematics and the other formal sciences to date (IOG). Thus it is wrong – a very definite misreading or, more likely, the result of not reading at all – to suppose that the ubiquity of writing as Derrida conceives it is such as to consign truth to the dustbin of outworn “metaphysical” notions or else (pretty much the same thing) to a limbo of wholly indeterminate textual significations without any remnant of logical, conceptual, or referential bearing. Indeed, if there is one deep-laid prejudice that his work seeks to dispel it is the idea that a close, even minute attentiveness to matters of textual detail must go along with an indifference to truth or a belief, as per the widespread but false understanding of Derrida's notorious claim that quite simply and literally “there is nothing outside the text” (OGC, 158). On the contrary, such a reading is uniquely well equipped to discover the anomalies, aporias, logical dilemmas, or hitherto unlooked-for complications of sense that an orthodox approach has expelled to the margins of commentary or beyond. Moreover it is by way of them that reading/thinking encounters those kindred moments of referential slippage, uncertainty, or aberration that signal a corresponding problem with regard to some aspect of the relevant topic-domain.

2. Reading as an Argument: The Logic of Deconstruction

Most importantly in the present context, this realist outlook goes along with – indeed depends directly upon – a commitment to the classical requirements of bivalent logic right up to the stage where that logic confronts an insuperable block to its continued application or a textual aporia that cannot be resolved by any means at its disposal (Norris 2004, 2007). According to Derrida, this is the sole mode of thought that is able not only to respect the validity-conditions for determinately true or false statements but also, by its holding fast to those conditions for as long as possible, to take due stock of the particular resistance encountered when a text (or the portion of

reality to which it refers) turns out to harbor anomalous features of just that recalcitrant kind.

To phrase the matter thus is of course to invite yet further resistance – even downright incredulity – amongst philosophers trained up on the dominant view of how things have gone over the past century in terms of intellectual, historical, and geocultural affiliation. They will be apt to take it, understandably enough, that the formative background to Derrida's thought lies squarely on the mainland-European side of a strong and well-buttressed (if not quite impermeable) barrier between the “continental” and “analytic” (i.e., principally Anglo-American) lines of descent. Moreover they will have good warrant for this on straightforward textual-evidential grounds since by far the greater portion of Derrida's work is devoted to thinkers – chief among them Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and Levinas – of whom Kant alone can plausibly be claimed as common property by both camps, albeit property to which they attach very different exegetical-descriptive labels (Norris 2000b). On one schematic yet suggestive story this parting of the ways can be traced right back, via sundry intervening episodes like the Russell/Moore repudiation of Hegel and the Frege versus Husserl debate, to deep-laid rifts in the Kantian-idealist aftermath and even to the different, arguably incompatible projects pursued in the “Transcendental Analytic” and “Transcendental Aesthetic” sections of the first *Critique* (Beiser 1987; Braver 2007; Norris 2000b). Although that particular version of the tale has come in for a good deal of qualification and revision during recent years it is none the less likely to prompt skepticism with regard to my presenting Derrida as a stickler for truth, logic, and the typecast analytic virtues.

In his case, moreover, the apparent incongruity is heightened by the fact of Derrida's having engaged so persistently with certain *topoi* – such as the structure/genesis antinomy in Husserl or the Heideggerian thematics of being and presence – which belong very much to the tradition of thought with its source in the “continental” Kant and its genealogy very firmly on the “other” side of the English Channel. There can be no denying that when Derrida raises the question of truth it is often in just this context, with overt or implicit reference to a certain primordial “metaphysics of presence” that has been in place throughout the long reign of Western post-Platonic logocentrism, that is reaffirmed (though subject to intensive critical scrutiny) in the thought of Husserl, and that finds its most powerful though acutely problematical rendition in Heidegger's brooding existential meditations (OGC). It would clearly be unwise to ignore the repeated assertions that his thinking would never have taken the direction that it did without Heidegger's example or indeed, more specifically, Heidegger's lessons in the “deconstruction” (*Destruktion* or *Abbau*) of truth as heretofore conceived (Heidegger 2010; OS). Just as clearly, there is a strong Heideggerian influence when Derrida examines those varied inherited conceptions – from Plato's doctrine of forms to Aristotelian *homoiosis* (truth-as-correspondence), and thence to their diverse progeny in Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Husserl among others – that make up what might be called (from a more

Nietzschean-Foucauldian perspective) a history or genealogy of truth. However this would be a highly misleading characterization, as becomes very plain in his early essay on Foucault (“Cogito and the History of Madness”) where any such “radical” move to historicize truth or reason is shown up as both philosophically naïve and procedurally self-defeating (WD, 31–63). His point is not at all the obsolescence of truth-talk or the need to replace it with a Nietzsche-inspired genealogy of power-knowledge. Rather it is the failure of logocentric thinkers from Plato down to make good on their express or implicit claim for a pure, unimpeded access to truth through a range of candidate items (concepts, ideas, primordial intuitions, sense-data, and so forth) that might ideally be relied upon to grant such access by reason of transparent *rapport-à-soi* or intrinsic self-evidence.

As I have suggested already, Derrida’s way of bringing this out is a procedure of linguistic-conceptual-logical analysis that has a lot more in common with certain forms of analytic philosophy than has so far been acknowledged on either side of the (no doubt much exaggerated) Great Rift. In fact a better grasp of Derrida’s precise placement in this regard would itself be a large step toward grasping just how much exaggeration has gone into that widespread idea and how far the “two traditions” have in fact – *contra* the orthodox chroniclers of intellectual history – traveled a common path. Thus Derrida’s repeated and handsome acknowledgments of Heidegger as a source of philosophic inspiration should not be allowed to outweigh or obscure his equally insistent critique of Heidegger’s nostalgic harking-back to themes of origin, presence, and primordial Being (OS). After all, that way of thinking can be seen to have played a decisive role – at whatever “philosophical” remove – in his commitment to National Socialism and his belief, very forcefully expressed for a while and never explicitly renounced, that it alone might have brought cultural renewal on the scale or at the depth required by the current situation. However my point, less dramatically, is that despite Derrida’s close and long-lasting engagement with Heidegger’s thought he always maintained the kind of critical distance from it that also sets him very firmly apart from the company of signed-up Heideggerians. More than that, his readings – early and late – exhibit a degree of conceptual and logical precision, along with a resistance to what Adorno (less politely) labeled the “jargon of authenticity,” which again leaves Derrida ambiguously placed as regards the “analytic” versus “continental” fault-line (Adorno 2002).

What emerges most strikingly here is the propriety of using the term “analytic” in connection with Derrida’s work, or the clearly marked convergence of aims between an immanent critique in the deconstructive mode and the kinds of critical exegesis that analytic philosophers very often pursue when treating canonical texts with a view to their present-day interest or relevance. If this convergence has tended to escape notice then one likely explanation – quite apart from their failure (or refusal) to read Derrida – is the widespread idea amongst many analytic philosophers that their “continental” *confrères* are one and all in hock to a conception of knowledge or truth as ultimately tied – with whatever doctrinal nuances or

refinements – to a notion of first-person privileged epistemic access. Such was the gravamen of Frege’s objection to Husserlian phenomenology, the main (ostensible) reason for Gilbert Ryle’s losing his erstwhile interest in Husserl and Heidegger, and the limit-point of various attempts, like that of Michael Dummett, to review the Frege/Husserl exchange and ask whether maybe the “two traditions” had more in common than generally supposed. (See Norris 2000b and 2006 for more detailed discussion.) In each case – and in numerous others – the assumption is that phenomenology, even in its transcendental guise, must finally amount to a form of covert psychologism or a subjectivist appeal that dare not speak its name. However this ignores a large weight of evidence to the contrary, including (most directly to the point here) that whole dimension of Husserl’s thought with its source and model in the formal procedures of mathematics and that equally central part of Derrida’s project that involves the conceptual analysis and critique of logocentric assumptions such as (precisely) the idea of truth as involving some lucidly self-present state of conscious awareness. That is to say, in both thinkers there is a major concern with shaking off, overcoming, or moving beyond the Cartesian fixation on philosophic problems that result from just that narrowly (if not exclusively) first-person epistemic purview.

More than that, both thinkers – along with many other continentals, French and German alike – offer grounds for rejecting the commonplace account wherein that entire history of thought is deemed to have taken successive wrong turns through its failure to achieve a decisive break with the myth of privileged access. Indeed, they give strong reason to doubt the very idea of those “two traditions” as involved in some kind of stand-off or running feud. On the continental side it fails to take account of a different and closer-to-home dichotomy, namely that between two distinctively “French” but otherwise disparate tendencies, the one having to do with experience, perception, and subjectivity and the other with logic, conceptual analysis, and structures of thought. As Alan Schrift has pointed out, these movements have a shared source in Husserlian phenomenology though the former points back to *Ideas I* and the *Cartesian Meditations* while the latter found its inaugural texts in the *Logical Investigations* and *Formal and Transcendental Logic* (Schrift 2006, 38). Where the one led on to a broadly hermeneutic understanding of phenomenology, notably in the work of Paul Ricoeur, along with various critiques of its grounding premises, Derridean deconstruction included, the other had its chief influence on developments in philosophy of science (Bachelard and Canguilhem) and philosophy of mathematics (Jean Cavailles). Moreover, it left a deep imprint on the thought of those first-generation structuralists – Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, and even (despite his vigorous disavowals) early Foucault – who were equally determined to oust the subject from the privileged position it had hitherto enjoyed under the auspices of existentialism and “a certain” phenomenology (Dosse 1997). For there remained that other, incipiently structuralist component which had its place in Husserl’s mathematically and logically oriented works, and which then became a major point of

reference for those with a primary interest in developing an adequate theoretical approach to the history of the natural, formal, and (in Foucault's case) the social and human sciences.

It was here that Derrida entered the scene with the body of work that finds its most succinct formulation in his classic early essay "'Genesis and Structure' and Phenomenology" (WD, 154–168). The genesis/structure antinomy is one that shows up not only as a fault-line throughout Husserl's own writings but also throughout their reception-history as an unresolved aporia between, on the one hand, a phenomenological foregrounding of subjectivity or lived experience and, on the other, a countervailing stress on those *a priori* structures that he took to constitute the conditions of possibility for thought, judgment, knowledge, and experience in general. Thus Schrift cites Husserl as referring to certain "laws of thought" that have to do with "categorical concepts," and which "are so abstract that they contain no reference to knowledge as an act of a knowing subject" (Schrift 2006, 38). However, this anti-subjectivist outlook in philosophy of the physical, formal, and social sciences was something quite distinct from that more flamboyant post-humanist rhetoric that took hold in many quarters of literary-cultural theory from the mid-1970s on. It was driven not so much by a strong though vaguely formulated wish to break with existing modes of language, discourse, and representation but rather by a striving for greater conceptual precision and a surer means of advancing from common sense-intuitive or experiential to scientific modes of knowledge. So it was that phenomenology gave rise not only to a "philosophy of consciousness" but also to "a philosophy of the concept which can provide a theory of science" (Schrift 2006, 64). Only by ignoring this second line of descent from Husserl has the belief taken hold among analytic types that "continental philosophy" remains in thrall to a subject-centered, hence "psychologistic" and naïve, conception of knowledge as tied to individual states of mind.

Indeed so far from the truth is this idea that thinkers in both lines can be seen to have devoted much of their effort to resisting its delusive appeal, whether (line one) by engaging it critically through a deconstruction of the various discourses in which it figures or else (line two) by adopting a radically alternative "philosophy of the concept" modeled on mathematics, logic, and the formal sciences. Derrida belongs to both in so far as his work – especially in its earlier (pre-1980) phase – involves on the one hand a meticulous critique of the "metaphysics of presence" (or the myth of privileged epistemic access) in thinkers from Plato to Husserl and Heidegger, and on the other a decisively articulated break with all such residual Cartesian notions. The latter is most evident in those passages where he offers a relatively formal statement of deconstructive procedure, sometimes with reference to Gödel's incompleteness theorem, to the self-predicative paradoxes of set theory, or to various likewise problematical results that have emerged in the course of mathematical and logical enquiry. (See especially MP, 219.) The former requires no documentation since it constitutes in many ways the philosophic heart of his project and also the aspect

most familiar to those – whatever their view of it – who take him to have been primarily engaged with the issue of truth “continentally” conceived, that is, as it has figured in the wake of phenomenology rather than in the wake of proto-analytic thinkers like Frege and Russell.

Of course the sheer tenacity of that engagement, especially in his writings on Husserl, has yielded some hostages to fortune by allowing his opponents in the analytic camp to claim that only a philosopher still very much in hock to certain deep-laid Cartesian or subjectivist notions would feel the need to expend so much effort on the business of “deconstructing” them. However this ignores two main points that Derrida’s detractors are apt to overlook in their zeal to show that his “radical” claim is really no such thing but in truth just a re-run of bad old ideas that have long been laid to rest on the analytic side. First is the point that those notions are indeed deep-laid, and that they actually require just such a vigorous and sustained effort of exorcism if they are not to re-emerge with all the more captivating power for their having been expressly denied or disavowed. Second is the point that Derrida’s deconstructive readings of Husserl – and, more generally, his critique of logocentric (first-person-privileged) ideas of truth, knowledge, or epistemic access – themselves require a kind and degree of critical detachment which cannot be achieved except by way of that “philosophy of the concept” developed by thinkers in the other, non-subject-centered line of descent. Deconstruction as defined by Derrida’s exemplary procedures is a critique not just of “Western metaphysics” or the “metaphysics of presence,” in some vague since all-encompassing sense of those terms, but of the more specific form that such thinking takes when conjoined with an epistemological doctrine of knowledge as vouchsafed through some uniquely intimate *rappor-t-à-soi*.

That these ideas are hard to shake off, that they may be not so much illusions as strictly inescapable though often misleading or seductive tendencies of thought like those diagnosed by Kant in the first *Critique*, is evident enough from their continuing hold in so many quarters of present-day debate (Kant 1964). Nowhere is the evidence plainer to see than in Wittgenstein’s and various Wittgenstein-influenced attempts to lay to rest the Cartesian ghost by showing how “certainty” can never be more than assurance according to the epistemic norms of some given language-game, discourse, or communal “form of life” (Wittgenstein 1958). For this is to set the issue up in terms that construe all truth-talk – unless hedged around with some such qualifying clause – as just another instance of the bad old idea of first-person privileged access. It is to assume that, on any but a Wittgensteinian (linguistic-communitarian) conception, truth must be a matter of indubitable knowledge while such knowledge must itself depend upon the mind’s having direct, immediate access to a realm of “clear and distinct ideas” beyond reach of skeptical doubt. However, that Cartesian way of thinking has been subject to a range of powerful challenges – including, most recently, arguments mounted from an externalist or reliabilist standpoint – which flatly reject this forced dilemma and which instead locate truth in a mind- and language-independent domain that knowledge is able to track, if at all,

only in so far as it latches onto various constituent features, structures, attributes, or properties thereof. Thus truth is conceived, in objectivist terms, as always potentially transcending or eluding the scope of present-best knowledge, and knowledge as accountable to normative standards beyond those that happen to characterize some given (communally sanctioned) state of best belief (Norris 1997a, 1997b).

For Wittgensteinians, conversely, it can make no sense to think of truth as objective – or “epistemically unconstrained” – since that would involve the absurd, indeed self-contradictory claim that one possessed knowledge of certain truths that one didn’t (couldn’t) know (Dummett 1978; Tennant 1997). But this is a travesty of the realist/objectivist position, which holds rather – with plentiful warrant from the history of scientific progress to date – that we are perfectly justified in claiming to know that the best state of knowledge at any given time (including the present) will fall short of truth in certain unknown or yet-to-be-discovered respects. These debates have run high in recent analytic philosophy, with anti-realists mostly putting their case in logico-semantic terms, as a matter of requisite conditions for the utterance and uptake of truth-apt (or assertorically warranted) statements. At which point realists typically respond by asserting that we had much better trust to scientific knowledge – or knowledge that has resulted from methods and procedures developed over the long course of human scientific and other kinds of enquiry – than to anything so highly contentious and inherently dubious as a language-based theory that affects to cast doubt upon all and any truth-claims in that regard (Devitt 1991; Norris 2004). It is my contention that Derrida’s work, or those parts of it most relevant to this essay, should be seen as having strong realist implications, or as always allowing for the possibility that truth will turn out to have eluded the grasp of present-best knowledge. In the case of a deconstructive reading – more specifically, a reading of the kind exemplified in many of Derrida’s texts – the discrepancy is that which might always open up between truth conceived according to dominant (logocentric, ideological, or common sense-intuitive) norms and truth conceived as what might potentially emerge as the upshot of a more attentive, rigorous, and logically consequent perusal.

It is precisely the openness to this possibility that enables such a reading to break with ideas like those of self-present intentionality or privileged first-person epistemic access that would otherwise pass unquestioned owing to their force of seeming self-evidence. My point, to repeat, is that Derrida is thereby engaged in a critique of certain deep-grained assumptions that are also subject to challenge in numerous quarters of current analytic debate even if his way of conducting that critique through a practice of sedulous textual close reading is one that strikes most analytic philosophers as needlessly roundabout, oblique, or long-drawn. When he sets out to diagnose the symptoms of a “metaphysics of presence” in thinkers such as Plato, Rousseau, Husserl, Heidegger, Freud, and Saussure his project has that much in common with various attempts – like those of Wittgenstein and Ryle – to exorcize the “ghost in the machine” or finally lay to rest the myth of privileged access (Ryle

1949; Wittgenstein 1958). However, I would argue, it differs from theirs in making more adequate allowance not only for the sheer tenacity of these beliefs as items of (supposedly) plain, self-evident truth but also for the need that their seeming self-evidence be countered by something altogether stronger than Wittgensteinian linguistic therapy or Rylean advice to stop thinking in that bad old way. This additional strength comes from Derrida's practice of reading as a mode of immanent critique, or immanent critique as a mode of reading that involves the utmost vigilance concerning any conflict between the orders of overt and covert, manifest and latent, or express (intended) and strictly entailed or logically implicated sense.

Analytic philosophers have been prone to misrecognize this intensive engagement with issues in the subject-centered post-Cartesian mainstream of continental philosophy as an allegiance to it on Derrida's part, and therefore as a sign of his failure to learn one major lesson on offer from their own side. For this reason they have also been apt to ignore those aspects of his work – especially his earlier work – that have a great deal in common with analytic methods and procedures, not least in his rigorously argued as well as textually detailed way of pointing up the various aporias or blind-spots of logocentric prejudice. However, their attitude has found a mirror-image in the tendency of some Anglophone “continental” types to take for granted that Derrida's thought belongs squarely on their own elective home-ground, so that any claim for its relevance to issues of a more “analytic” nature must surely be missing the point through some distorting special interest or *parti pris*. In what follows I shall further contest that assumption – one with its own very marked distorting effect – by looking more closely at truth-related aspects of his work that raise large problems for the whole idea of a continental/analytic split. This they do through a detailed and rigorously argued process of conceptual analysis, one that shows how that work must count as “analytic philosophy” on any proper (non-partisan or non-parochial) usage of the term. Moreover, they serve to emphasize how the treatment of his better-known topics or preoccupations – such as the deconstructive critique of “Western metaphysics” from Plato to Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and beyond – is always and inseparably bound up with the issue of its cogency on just such analytic terms.

To this extent Derrida is fully in agreement with his erstwhile colleague and friend Paul de Man, who wrote that “[r]eading is an argument . . . because it has to go against the grain of what one would want to happen in the name of what has to happen; this is the same as saying that reading is an epistemological event prior to being an ethical or aesthetic value” (de Man 1978, xi). To be sure, de Man continues, “[t]his does not mean that there can be a true reading,” in the sense of a definitive interpretation or work of textual-conceptual exegesis that would obviate the need – or exclude the possibility – of further reading and debate. Rather it is to say that “no reading is conceivable in which the question of its truth or falsehood is not primarily involved” (ibid.). It seems to me that the idea of reading as an “argument” – an argument sustained in, by, and through the practice of textual analysis – is one that takes us to the philosophic heart of Derrida's work.

3. Deconstruction, Truth, and the Realist/Anti-Realist Debate

This argument-oriented interpretation of Derrida entails that there is simply no grasping the project and the practice of deconstruction as Derrida conceives it without the commitment to a realist (i.e., in logical terms, a classical or bivalent and ontologically speaking an objectivist or recognition-transcendent) conception of truth. Moreover, the close alignment of these latter positions is brought out by contrast through their joint repudiation by anti-realist thinkers, that is to say, philosophers who deny the intelligibility of any claim to the effect that there exist truth-conditions for certain statements – those of the “disputed class” – whose truth-value we are unable to discover, prove, or ascertain by the very best methods available to us in this or that field of enquiry (Dummett 1978). The realist holds that such statements, so long as they are well formed, are objectively true or false quite aside from our present-best or future-best-attainable state of knowledge concerning them. The anti-realist holds that they are epistemically constrained, or that ascriptions of truth (more aptly, on this view, ascriptions of assertoric warrant) must always be subject to the scope and limits of whatever we can justifiably claim to know or discover through some presently conceivable advance in our investigative methods, explanatory powers, or capacities of formal proof.

It seems to me – on the evidence of a good proportion of his writings, but especially those of his earlier (pre-1980) period and, above all, his intensive studies of Husserl – that Derrida must be counted a realist as defined by this currently prevailing idea of what constitutes the main point at issue. For were that not the case – if he subscribed to the anti-realist thesis advanced by Dummett and company – then deconstruction could not possibly achieve the critical purchase to which it lays claim, such is its capacity to detect, draw out, and make explicit those signs of logico-semantic or conceptual strain that in turn serve to indicate the presence of certain unresolved issues regarding the particular theme or topic in hand. Thus the upshot may indeed be to complicate matters to a point where the text under scrutiny proves incapable of any coherent exposition on classical (bivalent) terms. In which case the only choice of exegetical procedure consistent with its multiple or downright contradictory trains of implication may be the resort to some alternative, deviant, or non-bivalent (e.g., three-or-more-valued) logic that offers a means to make room for their otherwise nonsensical (since mutually destructive or reciprocally canceling) claims (Haack 1996; Priest 2001). However – crucially – this is a stage arrived at only by dint of a reading that satisfies the two basic conditions on any deconstructive exegesis *stricto sensu*, as opposed to readings in the more free-wheeling, rhetorically permissive, or “literary”-deconstructive vein. These latter, for all their occasional interpretative brilliance and flair, cannot properly be said (as can Derrida’s essays on, for instance, Plato, Rousseau, Kant, or Husserl) to exhibit a distinctively philosophic acumen as distinct from a striking, novel, or ingenious way with texts. If they are to

count as philosophical-deconstructive readings – in some other than merely notional sense – then they will have to do more than respect the call for a close, meticulously detailed engagement with the text in hand along with its rhetorical structures of ambiguity, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, semantic displacement, condensation, and so on. They will also need to acknowledge the requirement for a rigorously argued analytic account that perseveres in applying standards of bivalent truth/falsehood right up to the point (one determined by just such a mode of textual exegesis) where those standards prove incapable of offering the requisite conceptual or logico-semantic resources.

Of course I used the term “analytic” just now not in its narrowly proprietary sense (“concordant with the methods, procedures and professional ethos of mainstream academic philosophy as practiced over the past half-century and more in Anglophone university departments”) but rather in the probative sense that applies to any self-respecting or properly conducted philosophical project. Thus I meant by it “concordant with standards of logical precision and truth that may encounter certain limits when deployed in the deconstructive reading of certain texts but which cannot be abandoned except in consequence of discovering just those limits through the rigorous and consistent application of just those standards.” Which is also to say – against a sizable weight of prejudice to contrary effect – that Derrida is indeed an “analytic” philosopher to the extent that he practices deconstruction in this logically exacting mode, one that predominates in much of his early and middle-period work. Moreover, it is still deeply involved as a presupposed background or conceptual resource when it comes to his later, on the face of it less closely argued or (at times) more discursive or quasi-anecdotal writings. Such are Derrida’s reflections on the gift, on hospitality, and on “auto-immunity” as that which leads certain biological, environmental, or social and political systems to self-destruct through the over-activation of precisely those protective means or measures that are aimed to preserve them from harm. As he puts it:

I am trying to elaborate a logic, and I would call this a “logic,” in which the only possible *x* (and I mean here any rigorous concept of *x*) is “the impossible *x*.” And to do so without being caught in an absurd, nonsensical discourse. For instance, the statement according to which the only possible gift is an impossible gift, is meaningful. Where I can give only what I am able to give, what it is possible for me to give, I don’t give. So, for me to give something, I have to give something I don’t have, that is, to make an impossible gift. (AD, 55)

This argument is no less rigorous for producing the kind of paradoxical consequence that typifies Derrida’s later work. At any rate he is clear that deconstruction cannot do without such adherence to a classical (bivalent) conception of truth since it is only by applying that standard so far as can possibly be achieved with respect to the particular text or subject-matter at hand that thinking is enabled to probe the limits of some given ideology or dominant mode of representation.

Indeed – a crucial point in the present context – if Derrida’s project is to claim any real critical purchase then the kinds of logical anomaly turned up in the course of a deconstructive reading must always be taken to indicate some corresponding error, confusion, or failure of adequate conceptual grasp as concerns that particular subject-matter. That is to say, deconstruction strictly *has no choice* but to stake its authority as a critical discourse on the prior claim of being able to expose the gap between truth and various, more or less partial or distorted representations of truth. Furthermore, if this claim is to be made good, then a deconstructive reading must respect not only the formal validity-conditions for statements of distributed (bivalent) truth/falsehood but also the requirement that language be construed as typically – though of course not in every case – involving a dimension of extra-linguistic (i.e., referential or denotative) import. After all, it is only by way of that dimension that any given discourse, whether spoken or written, can achieve both the necessary measure of real-world cognitive-descriptive purchase and the necessary measure of semantic stability for those statements to signify and have a fair chance of communicative uptake or success (Norris 1997a).

As I have said, this goes flat against the received view of deconstruction as founded on the ultra-textualist premise that truth-talk, along with reality-talk, has now gone the way of all other such outmoded or delusive “metaphysical” ideas. However, as concerns Derrida at least, that view is so grossly distorted – so heavily based on the constant recycling of a few passages taken out of context – that it can only derive from a second-hand or at best very snippety acquaintance with his work. As soon as one returns to that work with anything like an adequate degree of attentiveness one must surely be struck by the way that such charges of textualist “freeplay,” hermeneutic license, interpretative irresponsibility, and so forth, rebound straight back on the detractors’ heads. That is, they go to show how the received account itself very strikingly exemplifies the process whereby certain kinds of ingrained prejudice – in this case the fixed idea of deconstruction as belonging more to the province of rhetoric or literary theory than to that of philosophy proper – may well produce readings of a markedly myopic character.

Nor is that claim in any way compromised by the fact that the upshot of Derrida’s analyses is most often to bring classical (bivalent) logic up against its limits when confronting some strictly unignorable instance of textual aporia or – what amounts to the same thing given his priorities in this regard – some strictly irresolvable case of conceptual or logico-semantic impasse. On the contrary: a deconstructive reading of this type (a “philosophical” reading, let us say, as opposed to one that explores the outer limits of hermeneutic license) has a genuine title in that regard just in so far as it inhabits a zone – however complex or difficult to map – where language retains both a referential function and a basic allegiance to the axioms of classical (bivalent) logic as laid down in the first-order predicate and propositional calculi. If such readings always lead up to a point of aporia or insoluble dilemma beyond which an alternative logic comes into play – a deviant, non-classical, non-bivalent,

“differential,” “supplementary,” or “parergonal” logic – then, as I have said, that point is arrived at only by dint of an argument conducted in accordance with the strictest standards of logical accountability as well as the tightest constraints on what counts as a sufficiently detailed and attentive exercise in textual exegesis.

Deconstruction thus reveals certain highly specific anomalies or conflicts of overt and covert sense brought about *on the one hand* by certain likewise specific complexities pertaining to the topic in question, and *on the other* by various attempts by commentators of a more orthodox persuasion to bring that text into line with their own fixed ideas of interpretative fidelity and truth. Or again, in somewhat more Kantian terms: it is precisely the aporetic nature of those topics – their inbuilt tendency to generate just such contradictory modes of reasoning – which produces all the symptoms of unresolved logical tension or conceptual strain that mark other, more conservative or fideist readings.

In this context I would cite Derrida’s by now canonical readings of Plato on the role of writing *vis-à-vis* speech as it relates to a range of wider philosophical issues; Rousseau on the topics of language, music, civil society, and personal (autobiographical) truth-telling warrant; or Kant on the question of aesthetic judgment as a problematic *topos* that reaches into various likewise problematical areas of his thinking about epistemology, ethics, and politics. His later work often tends to adopt a more directly thematic approach – an address to topics such as death, the gift, friendship, hospitality, terrorism, auto-immune disorders (in the context of post-9/11 world politics), the prospects for a federal Europe – but always with a view to their inherently aporetic or paradoxical character and mostly, as before, through a close reading of salient passages in some pointedly relevant text. If these works seldom offer the kind of intensive yet remarkably sustained or long-range exegetical engagement to be found in his early readings of Plato, Rousseau, or Husserl they are none the less conducted with a care for precision of statement and logic together with a strength of conceptual analysis that saves them from appearing lax, indulgent, or merely anecdotal by comparison. Indeed their conciseness and their singular evocative as well as argumentative power are such as to invite application of the nowadays much-debated concept “late style,” despite the clear risk – especially in Derrida’s case – of our thus falling prey to the fallacious providentialist wisdom of hindsight (Said 2007). At any rate it is wrong to suppose that these writings signal a falling-off in terms of philosophical acumen or depth of critical-conceptual grasp. At no stage, early or late, does Derrida’s work bear the least resemblance to the account of it routinely given by his detractors in the “analytic” camp whose pronouncements very often belie that designation by exhibiting a singular lack of analysis – indeed a patent failure (or obstinate refusal) to read let alone analyze his texts – and hence a marked contrast to Derrida’s own practice.

This was the main burden of his second-round response to John Searle on the topic of Austinian speech-act philosophy, where he is able to show without too much difficulty that Searle’s accusations (his casting of Derrida as a latter-day sophist or

perverter of reason) in fact apply more aptly to Searle on his own professed terms of debate. Thus Searle charges Derrida with having deliberately muddied the philosophic waters by holding Austin's speech-act taxonomies subject to standards of strictly classical or bivalent truth/falsehood that are out of place here since the relevant conditions of speech-act "felicity" – of what properly counts as a binding, valid, or successful performative in this or that context of utterance – cannot be specified with anything like that degree of logical precision (Austin 1962). At which point Derrida can quite justifiably retort (although not without a certain mischievous pleasure in thus turning the tables) that this leaves Searle in no very strong position to lay any such charge. After all:

[f]rom the moment that Searle entrusts himself to an oppositional logic, to the "distinction" of concepts by "contrast" or "opposition" (a legitimate demand that I share with him, even if I do not at all elicit the same consequences from it), I have difficulty seeing how he is nevertheless able to write [that] phrase . . . in which he credits me with the "assumption," "oddly enough derived from logical positivism," "that unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise, it is not really a distinction at all." (LI, 123)

Searle gives up too quickly or readily – with a kind of breezy pragmatist shrug – on the "legitimate" demand that philosophic arguments, even those put forward in the context of speech-act theory and concerned with matters of "ordinary language," should aim for a greater degree of conceptual clarity and logical precision than would normally be found in everyday parlance. By contrast, deconstruction, at least in so far as it claims philosophical pertinence or warrant, not only presupposes a default commitment to the axioms of classical (bivalent) logic but applies that logic with maximal rigor and consistency until it confronts its limit in some particular instance of textual aporia or some obdurate (classically irresolvable) conflict of logical implications.

So when Derrida twits Searle in this way, effectively retorting "call yourself an analytic philosopher!", it is not just a nose-thumbing gesture on his part. Nor again should it be seen (as Searle chose to see it, along with those other analytic philosophers who have taken their cue from that somewhat ill-starred exchange) as just a piece of maverick pseudo-philosophical sport. Rather it is a perfectly serious point about the way that thinkers with certain kinds of fixed preconception, when confronted with a novel or unlooked-for challenge to their powers of logical grasp, may react by leaning so far in the opposite direction as to leave themselves bereft of some strictly indispensable concepts, categories, or distinctions. Chief among them are those pertaining to the basic apparatus of modern, post-Fregean first-order quantified logic along with the classical requirements of bivalence and excluded middle. Nobody who has carefully read (as distinct from read about) Derrida's more extended texts on, say, Plato, Rousseau, Husserl, or indeed Austin could entertain serious or reasonable doubts concerning his acute and highly developed powers of logical

analysis. Nor could that reader remain unaware of his joint determination to respect those requirements so far as logically possible and yet make room for the distinct possibility – one borne out in the process of close reading – that they may not be able to accommodate certain anomalous passages or long-range logico-semantic complexities beyond such a classical (bivalent) accounting. This is where Derrida most emphatically parts company from anti-realists like Dummett or logical revisionists like Quine and the later Putnam (Quine 1961; Putnam 1983). Their readiness to suspend, modify, or abandon the classical ground-rules has the consequence – whether aimed at or more or less willingly taken on board – that they must also give up certain bivalence-dependent conceptual resources such as arguments by *reductio ad absurdum*. For if bivalence goes then so does the procedure of double-negation elimination, in which case – as with Dummett’s intuitionist philosophy of mathematics and his anti-realist outlook generally – one can no longer mount any form of argument based on the uncovering of entailed contradictions and hence the necessity of restoring logical order by renouncing one or another premise (Dummett 1977, 1978).

While convinced anti-realists welcome this consequence and revisionists live with it happily enough, there is no room in a deconstructive reading for any such over-willing allowance that bivalent truth-values might always drop out in response to some recalcitrant item of empirical data (Quine) or some unlooked-for textual aporia (as with other, less rigorous modes of self-styled deconstruction). Rather it is required of such a reading not only, as I have said, that it sustains those values to the utmost of their applicability in any given case but also that it keeps them firmly in mind even at or beyond the crucial point where they meet with some strictly unignorable token of textual resistance. Bivalent truth/falsity is no less an absolute desideratum when following out the *logical* implications of any contradiction, dilemma, or anomaly such as those that Derrida brings to light across a great range of philosophical texts. This is what places deconstruction in the realist camp, at any rate on the logico-semantic understanding of realism (i.e., as entailing the existence of objective, non-epistemic, or recognition-transcendent truth-values) which has characterized most debate on the topic in analytic circles since Dummett’s decisive intervention. Or again, it brings out Derrida’s firm and principled allegiance to what might perhaps be called anti-anti-realism (with more than a nod to the procedure of double-negation elimination) on account of its resistance to any idea that truth might be exhausted by some notional appeal to present-best or even best-attainable human knowledge.

The kind of realism here in question – precisely what is rejected *a priori* from the standpoint of Dummettian or logico-semantic anti-realism – is also precisely what enables Derrida to infer certain substantive truths about language, music, history, and civil society from his deconstructive reading of Rousseau or certain likewise substantive and far-reaching truths about the relationship between genesis and structure in mathematico-scientific thought from his deconstructive reading of Husserl. That possibility is rejected out of hand by any approach, such as anti-realism

or the more “literary,” less rigorous or disciplined modes of deconstruction, which takes it as read (supposedly with good Derridean warrant) that the appeal to truth-values or truth-conditions is nothing more than a symptom of adherence to the outworn “metaphysical” or “logocentric” paradigm that readings of this sort are out to expose. I hope to have shown why such ideas are misconceived, since if this were indeed the case then deconstruction quite simply could not work. That is to say, it could not do what it demonstrably manages to do through a close critical engagement with various texts and moreover – by the same token – with the various themes, subjects, or topic-areas which those texts themselves critically engage, albeit most often in a symptomatically complex and oblique way. This requires not only a mode of analysis premised on a logic of bivalent truth-falsehood but also, what anti-realism flatly denies, a conception of language as intrinsically truth-involving and *ipso facto* of truth as intrinsically world-involving. That Derrida’s work has so often been taken to espouse just the opposite position – that it has attracted such a deal of praise or blame as the *ne plus ultra* of “textualist” anti-realism – is a measure of its highly distorted reception-history and of the need for more careful and rigorous protocols of reading.

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