

Misreading Generalised Writing: From Foucault to Speculative Realism and New Materialism

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ABSTRACT

Misreadings of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* were prevalent from the time of its debut (Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari), up to the present day (Speculative Realism and New Materialism). For fifty years, Derrida's generalised textuality has been misread as though he meant there was nothing outside text in the traditional sense. This misreading always serves to re-institute notions of linear temporal progress, either among self-styled avant-garde authors who would like to break with past traditions, or among self-styled conservatives who hope to repeat them. If the binaries that divide these works from past texts are undecidable, the ground for such temporal progress disappears, along with the divisions by which we create linear narratives of history. The misreading of Derrida is an attempt to exorcise this undecidability and regain the intellectual and market value of novelty or repetition.

The Age of Grammatology—does it have a birth date?¹ Would it be so simple as to say 1967? Or must we heed Derrida's caveat, delivered in the wake of Lacan's witticism about an agency of the letter *avant toute grammatologie* (prior to any grammatology), that Derrida never authored a grammatology, but rather a work *Of* or *on* grammatology, properly speaking on its impossibility?² It would then be ageless, unborn yet defeated, perhaps living on. Of course, the Age of Grammatology could name an epoch, an age we live in or lived through, one defined to some indecipherable extent by Derrida's work. But here an impossibility gives us pause, one first thought through, or rather *diaporoumenon*, in that very work. What is an age? What is an intellectual movement, a school of thought, a field of study? What decides that one is current or outdated, avant-garde or reactionary? What if every conceptual and temporal marker necessary to make these determinations was immobilised by deconstructibility? The simultaneity that identified us with our contemporaries as well as the temporal progress that distinguishes us (that is, all identity and all difference) become undecidable due to the deconstructibility of any conceptual opposition we would employ to draw an epochal boundary. Yet who would deny that deconstruction had its moment, and that it is not exactly what it used to be? A fittingly impossible event: a work that challenged all foundations founded something like a school of thought, and one that undermined any certainty about historical stasis or progress seemed to inaugurate a new period in intellectual history. I call this an event to acknowledge that the impossible happened, and that, as Derrida never tired of reminding us, only the impossible truly happens.

A further complication haunts any effort to delimit such a period. *Of Grammatology* was so pervasively misread, almost from the day it was published, that from certain vantages it rather appears as though the work never had its day, let alone its epoch. Though no term can be claimed

as most fundamental from this work that discovers difference at the origin, it is on account of this misreading that I choose to focus on generalised or arche-writing when attempting to define the age of this text. For it was this term that was perhaps being misread by those who claimed that Derrida thought there was nothing outside the text *in the traditional sense*—if, that is, they read him at all. Certainly, Derrida used generalised writing to refer to *something like* writing, whose predicates (being the signifier of another signifier, absent from its author and severed from context, etc.) could be found in every aspect of existence. And arche-writing referred to *something like* writing, present in absence at the origin, prior to speech with a priority that is no longer merely logical or chronological. If the origin of writing is imagined as the break with the self-presence of the idea in thought or speech, arche-writing names this break without a prior presence or self-presence from which to derive it as a fall. It is this generality that deconstructs all oppositions, that prevents any rigorous conceptual distinction between this entity and that, or this time and the next. My hypothesis is that the pervasive misreading emerged to attempt to make the feeling of progress possible again—not only to make the step outside deconstruction as easy as a dismissive sentence written in passing, but to pretend that the self-assured decision of historical advance (or conservatism) was possible for the sovereign subject.

To take up the relation of novelty and repetition in Derrida's work, one might most naturally look to 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other' or follow the theme of iterability in *Limited Inc*, but it is no less pertinent to any deconstruction, including those in *Of Grammatology*. Derrida reads Rousseau's denigration of writing as an attempt to secure a certain kind of progress, one which ties human liberty to natural generativity. Speech represents an 'interior spontaneity', a capacity for innovation that ties its creativity back to the individual and to nature, whereas writing represents the exteriority that perverts and corrupts natural history. Of course,

the desire to tie this inventiveness always back to nature demonstrates the relationship of novelty to a form of repetition. Deconstruction will leave neither term intact. Derrida shows that, within Rousseau's own account, writing, exteriority, death and every force of alterity are necessary at the origin in order to make the re-appropriation of 'good' progress possible. 'Rousseau, *who would like to say that this becoming-writing comes upon the origin unexpectedly*, takes it as his premise, and according to it *describes in fact* the way in which that becoming-writing encroaches upon the origin, and arises from the origin.'³ This deconstruction of a representation of language has immediate consequences for the notion of progress: 'But Rousseau *describes what he does not wish to say*: that "progress" takes place *both* for the worse *and* for the better. At the same time. Which annuls eschatology and teleology, just as difference—or originary articulation—annuls archeology' (229). If one cannot preserve internal spontaneity separate from external corruption then all progress and repetition lose their foundation.

Interestingly, Saussure's expulsion of writing from the science of semiology operates primarily in service of repetition or historical stasis. The synchronic tranche isolated for the sake of structuralist analysis must be a stable, self-repeating totality in order to justify its role as the foundation of a linguistic science. As Derrida says, 'it is indeed history that one must stop in order to protect language from writing' (42). Of course, any linguist is forced to acknowledge that language in fact changes, and Saussure's goal of synchronic stasis is no less an effort to ensure a natural development of language, uncorrupted by writing. Derrida glosses Saussure as saying, 'Writing, like all artificial languages one would wish to fix and remove from *the living history of the natural language*, participates in the monstrosity' (38, my emphasis). Again, the effort to secure both repetition and natural progress proves deconstructible, leaving us with the impossibility of progress due to a difference at the origin, 'Deconstructing this tradition will

therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing' (37). If writing or difference is present at the origin, there can be no corruption, any more so than 'good,' 'natural' progress. There can be no development or invention identifiable in a positive, conceptually delimited way, nor can there be a pure repetition (which would depend on the pure ideality *arche-writing* disallows), but only ceaseless difference and dissemination.

Everywhere that this generalised writing was read as writing in the traditional sense, the misreading propped up these unstable notions of repetition and progress. Foucault, in his 1969 lecture 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?' was one of the first to start this chorus. His analysis of the 'concept' of *écriture* 'as currently employed' probably intends several of his contemporaries, certainly including Derrida.⁴ Foucault describes *écriture* as a reified, theological subject-position that supplants the 'extremely visible signs of the author's empirical activity' (120). He writes, 'To say that writing, in terms of the particular history it made possible, is subjected to forgetfulness and repression, is this not to reintroduce in transcendental terms the religious principle of hidden meanings (which require interpretation) [...]?' (120). He casts *écriture* off into an ahistorical transcendentalism in order to re-historicise it as a product of nineteenth-century idealism. Perhaps this is a response to Derrida's observation, in 'Cogito and the History of Madness', that Foucault confused historicity with the historical.⁵ Nonetheless, he restores the same deconstructible logic: Foucault attempts to posit generalised writing (without which, how to inherit a history in the first place?) as a historically conditioned event within history. Derrida (and others), so Foucault claims, seek to understand the disappearance of the author 'within the historical and transcendental tradition of the nineteenth century' while Foucault counts himself

among those who, since Mallarmé, ‘liberate themselves, once and for all, from this conceptual framework’ (120).

Foucault’s misreading of generalised textuality as a transcendentalism places it back within the confines of writing in the traditional sense. His description of *écriture* as the ‘general condition of each text [*la condition en général de tout texte*],’ and an *a priori*, may be his attempt to gloss Derrida’s notion of generalised writing.⁶ By tying this ‘general condition’ to the text (or even all text, in the traditional sense), he has already reinstated the concept to be deconstructed, while the notion of condition or *a priori* is precisely the sort of transcendentalism that deconstruction would render impossible—because there is ‘no outside-text’, one never reaches a transcendental signified. One is forced always to deal with something like the particular, the singular, though a singularity that can never be subsumed as the particular of a logico-conceptual universality. Thus, a condition of historicity is not such because it governs all of history from outside like a sovereign, self-identical God; rather, it is only ever discovered in its complication and contamination with ‘history’, as that on the basis of which we place in question our received, empirical concepts (writing, author, etc.), without ever being able to ground them in a higher power. As for Foucault’s claim that generalised writing could be circumscribed as an outmoded historical position, I would argue, in a fashion I believe is more honestly Derridean, that the disappearance of the author does not come along one fine day, for example when this or that author writes something meta-textual.⁷ It is always already in process, even if it is never guaranteed. This ‘always already’ is different from a transcendental or *a priori* ground; it is not the supplanting of the place of author by another presence, universally and conceptually self-identical, but the contamination of authorship by all of its not-quite-absent others.

In 1972, responding more explicitly to Derrida's deconstruction of *History of Madness*, Foucault further oversimplified generalised writing:

I would say that it is a historically well-determined little pedagogy, which manifests itself here in a very visible manner. A pedagogy which teaches the student that there is nothing outside the text, but that in it, in its interstices, in its blanks and silences, the reserve of the origin reigns; that it is never necessary to look beyond it [...] A pedagogy that inversely gives to the voice of the masters that unlimited sovereignty that allows it indefinitely to re-say the text.⁸

This would not be the last time that this misreading would be deployed in order to link Derrida with the dire sin of bookishness. Of course, deconstruction did not restrict itself to the inside of a text but placed in question the limits of inside and outside. Foucault's misreading has the effect of securing his own self-certainty of the sovereign decision that advances beyond the text, into the real world outside. Furthermore, this misreading is invoked in the service of maintaining a historical periodisation between the renaissance and the Age of Reason, in their different treatments of madness.

Also in 1972, Deleuze and Guattari made a similar gesture to similar ends in *Anti-Oedipus*. Though they acknowledge a difference between 'writing in the narrow sense' and 'writing in the broad sense' in Derrida, they shift the definitions of each in order to preserve something like periodisation.⁹ They treat 'writing in the broad sense' as though it were logocentrism itself, a regime of representation 'subordinating itself to the voice' or 'always and already' with 'an alignment on the voice' (203). Between this and the 'self-validating' territorial sign, they claim there is 'a break that changes everything in the world of representation' (203). Their goal seems to be to grant some sort of free play as substitutability to the 'territorial sign',

while keeping it pure of any hierarchy or subordination, the violence that Derrida must remind Levi-Strauss cannot be ascribed to any particular writing system's emergence within history. Without being able here to thoroughly deconstruct the terms that separate 'territorial representation' from 'imperial representation', it is enough for our purposes to notice that this misreading of Derrida serves as a hinge between two epochs.¹⁰ Of course, the sort of archetypal periods theoretically sketched by Deleuze and Guattari have a far different significance from the more literal historicism of Foucault, even though 'savage' and 'barbarian' are articulated with relentlessly orientalist characteristics. Still, in order for change to be possible, whether as progress or decline, its conceptual articulation must be secured by the suppression of undecidability.¹¹

This misreading is noteworthy for the supposedly disparate camps it seems to unite. One finds it among analytic¹² and continental philosophers, from Marxists¹³ and poststructuralists, from conservatives and the self-styled avant-garde. It even appears among those who count themselves as practitioners of deconstruction.¹⁴ Whether one hopes to uphold a tradition or dispense with it, it is necessary to know where the limits of that tradition lie. If one acknowledges the undecidability of inside and outside, it is no more possible to guarantee that one has allowed for a pure repetition than a transgressive step outside the boundaries. The misreading of generalised writing has found its most vocal proponents today among New Materialist and Speculative Realist authors. With its latest instantiation, the desire for progress in a discipline, attributable to the sovereign act of the individual scholar, comes to the fore. It is rare to find a work from this field that does not open with an invocation of something like Meillassoux's correlationism, the claim that all philosophers and theorists of the past X years have been too enmeshed in anthropocentric forms of representation to access being, matter, or

things in themselves. The appeal of this claim is not the insight it offers into past or future philosophy but its ability to create the semblance of progress. In order to justify this simple binary and the step beyond it seems to make possible, Derrida must be misread.

To make Derrida fit this Procrustean bed, it is necessary to reinforce, in an autoimmune and ironically conservative fashion, the distinctions deconstruction destabilised. While explicitly reactionary authors attacked deconstruction no doubt in part because they sensed the threat it posed to the traditional, institutionalised boundary lines of academic departments and the notions of expertise on which they depended, New Materialist and Speculative Realist authors reinstate these borders in order to be more certain of crossing them. Though Derrida placed in question the possibility of identifying a distinct field of linguistics, Graham Harman in *Guerrilla Metaphysics* attempts to contain Derrida within its most traditional boundaries, while trying to corral deconstruction within the academy:

We will now see that it is only Derrida's tacit antirealist bias, typical of phenomenology and its French inheritors, that allows him to equate the being of a thing and the meaning of its name. The infinite inward depth of candles, stars, and moons is far more interesting than the supposed infinite complexity of multiple meanings — an increasingly academic notion...¹⁵

And Rosi Braidotti repeatedly uses deconstruction as a straw man in her New Materialist critique:

With the demise of postmodernism, which has gone down in history as a form of radical scepticism and moral and cognitive relativism, feminist philosophers tend to move beyond the linguistic mediation paradigm of deconstructive theory and to work instead towards the production of robust alternatives.¹⁶

She also makes curious reference to a ‘critical deconstruction’ that stops short of the ‘active production of alternatives’ (22). Of course, deconstruction is not criticism any more than it is trapped within the academy or its linguistics department. Undecidability makes any critical (from *krinein*, to separate and choose) project impossible, and whatever we imagine the limits of the academy and of language to be, deconstruction will always be what opens them onto their others. This sort of self-assured, dogmatic, positional progress (the past said language, the present says not-language, etc.) shares its essence with the conservatism that hopes to repeat the past.

The effort to cast Derrida as textualist in the traditional sense always implies for these thinkers an accusation of humanism. According to Meillassoux, ‘We do not know of any correlation that would be given elsewhere than in human beings’, Brassier adds ‘critical theory, hermeneutics, and post-structuralism’ to the list of philosophies upholding ‘man’s manifest self-conception as a person or intentional agent’ and both Harman and Bogost specify that philosophies of access are philosophies of ‘*human access*’ (GM 1).¹⁷ All of these works cast a temporal or thematic net for their critique broad or vague enough to include Derrida and deconstruction. The tenacity of their correlationist gesture can be explained by the illusion of progress and transgression it grants to those who would like to believe they can get outside of a tradition, or outside of themselves, with a simple denial or denegation.¹⁸

Levi Bryant shows a precaution that other Speculative Realists or Object-Oriented Ontologists ignore when he specifies that ‘most of the positions referred to as “anti-humanist” would still, from the standpoint of the Principle of the Inhuman, be counted as humanisms insofar as while they “split the subject” or demolish the Cartesian subject, they nonetheless shackle all beings to human related [*sic*] phenomena such as the signifier, language, culture, power, and so on’.¹⁹ He at least acknowledges that there was a purported ‘anti-humanism’ in

some of the work Speculative Realist authors fold into their correlation, if only to dismiss the same as a crypto-humanism. Immersed as they were in textuality, his argument runs, these anti-humanists thought they were ‘demolishing’ the human when in truth they only demolished the Cartesian subject. We should first recognise that the pure negativity implicit in ‘demolishing’ corresponds to no valid philosopheme and is a misreading if it attempts to gloss the careful displacement implied by *Destruktion* or deconstruction. As for his list of master-terms, the claim that they are ‘human related’ must be considered from two sides:

1. There is no concept or word we can invoke, above all that of the ‘Inhuman,’ that would remain pure of any contamination by the history, language and conceptuality of humanity or humanism.
2. Nonetheless, every concept will exceed a simple delimitation by this figure. Precisely the logocentric humanism that Levi Bryant means to question grounds his discourse if he pretends that ‘power’ (‘and so on’) is exclusively a ‘human related’ phenomenon, without an analogue or excess in the relations of animals, machines and gods.

It seems that Speculative Realism would like to equate the avoidance of certain texts with the avoidance of *textuality*. Bryant makes the claim, ‘The Derrideans and Lacanians tell us that we must analyze the manner in which language produces the objects of our world’ (262).²⁰ Such a construction would only be possible if language and world were separate and secure substances, one with a sovereign power over the other. The undecidability of both demonstrated by Derrida proves rather that one never knows how to assign agency or even identity to either. For Speculative Realism, the claim that Derrida reduces reality to language is meant to justify the accusation of correlationism, as well as an accusation of humanism, since language is here understood as a uniquely human phenomenon. Ironically, this implies and imposes, on their own

discourse as well as on Derrida's, the most humanist and logocentric concept of language, the very one they claim to transcend. A deconstruction that severs language from the intentions of a conscious subject present-to-itself inevitably finds that self-exteriority is constitutive of both 'human' and 'animal' language. In fact, the very difference between human and animal breaks down, given the classic definition of human being as the animal with language/speech/reason (*logos*). Derrida frequently returned to the theme of animality, to show the necessary co-implication of a deconstruction of logocentrism and a deconstruction of carnophallogocentrism:

Of course, if one defines language in such a way that it is reserved for what we call man, what is there to say? But if one re-inscribes language in a network of possibilities that do not merely encompass it but mark it irreducibly from the inside, everything changes. I am thinking in particular of the mark in general, of the trace, of iterability, of differance.

These possibilities or necessities, without which there would be no language, *are themselves not only human*. It is not a question of covering up ruptures and heterogeneities. I would simply like to contest that they give rise to a single linear, indivisible, oppositional limit, to a binary opposition between the human and the infra-human.²¹

It is enough to point out that Derrida, in 1968, responded to these accusations of humanism, to show that Speculative Realism bases its advance on a misreading, while also drawing into question the novelty of their generation. His essay 'The Ends of Man' distinguishes two 'periods' of philosophical thought and philosophical reading in 'France' (his reservations regarding the ethno-geo-politico-linguistic implications of the latter, which he calls 'the nonempirical site of a movement' (114), and the generational or epistemic implications of periodisation, which he reassures us is 'never exhausted' by the 'dominant traits' or '*dominant*

motif' isolated (117), show that he would like to deconstruct these progressivist binaries even as he creates them).²² The first period has as its major index Sartre and existentialism, and is characterised in part by the misreading of phenomenology (including Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger) as humanist, in order to celebrate its own inheritance of that humanism. Though the period that followed denounced the humanism of the existentialists, it largely accepted the interpretation of phenomenology as humanist, in order to denounce that purported humanism.

Derrida notes the irony:

After the tide of humanism and anthropologism that had covered French philosophy, one might have thought that the antihumanist and antianthropologist ebb that followed, and in which we are now, would rediscover the heritage of the systems of thought that had been disfigured, or in which rather, the figure of man too quickly had been discerned.²³

Nothing of the sort has happened [...] (118)

It is tempting to add an addendum to this narrative, not quite a third period because it is almost identical to the second. Speculative Realism has taken this generation of antihumanist authors, adopted their humanist misreading of past thinkers, while subsuming those quondam antihumanists within the humanist miscategorisation. And, without demonstrating any awareness of the irony, they have subsumed deconstruction, which did not simply *criticise* humanism but *deconstructed* the possibility of distinguishing humanism and anti-humanism, within this corral as well.

These thinkers, who cast themselves as our contemporaries by first generating the violent rupture with the past meant to define a contemporary moment, give the clearest example yet of the need to misread Derrida in order to uphold such a form of generational progress. This advance of a discipline or institution resembles the most traditional, Oedipal form of individual agency, sacrificing the father to win one's own identity and authority. The counterexample

offered by deconstruction may remain somewhat obscure, in no small part because it has been so consistently and aggressively obfuscated by critics since its first appearance. At the very least, we can note that the return to ‘past’ texts made necessary by deconstruction, the imperative that we seek to discover the undoing of a declared purpose in a text’s own operations, guarantees that these texts are never simply past. The possibility for something new, something that surprises us and disturbs our conceptuality or our law, can be found in the no-longer-simply-past work. And the position of the deconstructive reader is not that of transgressive advance, but of the recognition of impossible simultaneity; we are contemporary with the past in that, like any text, we are out of sync with ourselves. The resistance to the event or advent of a past text is a resistance to reading. It dominates any project that dismisses centuries of thought as an opening gesture, without giving those texts the chance to surprise us. Their re-iteration always harbors some difference, which is neither static repetition nor sovereign invention.

Deconstruction also taught us, as much by lesson as by example, that it is impossible to avoid speaking the language of metaphysics, of these binary oppositions that structure texts and periods of thought. Derrida has a vexed relation to epochality and messianicity even within *Of Grammatology*. Gayatri Spivak, in her ‘Translator’s Preface’, points to the awkwardness of some of Derrida’s historicising language (and even notes it as a conflict within the text, between the review articles that formed its first part and the longer second part). She describes the tension well, ‘In a text where he elaborately launches a theory against teleological patternings of history and thought [...] why does Derrida fabricate so strong an argument for historical necessity? Why is the opening chapter—“The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing”—full of a slightly embarrassing messianic promise?’ (lxxxix).²⁴ Spivak is correct that these claims of necessity and messianism jar with the rest of the work. Thinking without these lures, though, is an

impossibility that reinstates something like necessity. One could claim that when Derrida invokes the necessity of phonocentrism, he merely asserts the necessity of every name given to difference obscuring the withdrawal of the trace. However, insisting on *this* name and *this* history brings Derrida dangerously close to giving difference a proper name, and to adopting a Hegelian or Heideggerian concept of history.²⁵ We can even say that the erasure of the trace must produce, in its withdrawing, something like a promise, the allure of an outside to come. All of Derrida's later writing on a messianic without messianism, the *a-venir* and the event, shows the ineluctability of a futurity that he came to understand was most open when we could claim no positive knowledge of its content or filial relationship with its causation. Thus one could say, against Spivak's reading, that he invokes or succumbs to the inevitability of an apocalyptic tone only to deconstruct it. When he refers to the future as an 'absolute danger', an absolute break with 'constituted normality', and a 'monstrosity', Derrida renders the messianism of his own discourse undecidable (5).

His invocation of epochality is just as double-edged. His *exergue* speaks of 'our epoch', 'today', in which something that was dissimulated appears 'as such' (4). But the epochality of logocentrism is shown to exceed and deconstruct the Heideggerian historicity of being.²⁶ Strange epoch, that would encompass everything that has been and ever could be, save the impossible. Derrida himself notes the excessiveness of this 'epoch not of history but as history' (286). In his words, 'What exceeds this closure *is nothing*: neither the presence of being, nor meaning, neither history nor philosophy; but another thing which has no name, which announces itself within the thought of this closure and guides our writing here' (286). These two oddly cohesive gestures, declaring the logocentric to be all-encompassing and acknowledging its outside, do not offer a simple alternative or a choice for the voluntaristic subject.

Such formulations paradoxically even date this work, suggesting a periodisation of Derrida's oeuvre, in which only the earliest texts speak of logocentrism in the language of epochality. Perhaps it was inevitable that in their first articulation his thoughts would seem a revelation or apocalypse, that a sort of youthful exuberance would feel certain it was approaching, breaching and broaching, making possible a new freedom. The morning after brought about a marked sober-mindedness, the need to question this and every apocalyptic tone and to recognise the ineluctable return of logocentrism, the forces that renew it at every turn. Nonetheless, the avoidance of such phrasing or framing does not guarantee that one has avoided the implicit conceptuality of progress. Rather, the framework that allows a tradition to repeat itself while the individual (text or author, theoretician or practitioner, etc.) transgresses it can insinuate itself everywhere. There is only the tireless effort to allow the same to return as different, what I suggested above could be called reading or deconstruction. To which age does *Of Grammatology* belong—that of the logocentric closure, or of the greatest loosening of its strictures? Were the decades that followed *Of Grammatology* defined by it and its semblables or by its always co-present misreadings? Do we hold out the possibility of giving or receiving the most, to or from the text, if we think of it as a canonical work whose import must be preserved, or as a marginalised unknown, still awaiting its first true reading? It will remain, now and always, more impossible and yet more pressing than ever to decide which of these two possibilities leaves the greatest chance to the text, to us, and to the future.

¹ The present essay owes much of its clarity to the generous attention it received from the organisers and participants of the conference ‘1967 + 50: The Age of Grammatology’, especially Geoffrey Bennington, Peggy Kamuf and Sarah Wood. I thank them for their thoughtful readings.

² Jacques Derrida. ‘For the Love of Lacan’, in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998), 52.

³ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 229.

⁴ Michel Foucault, ‘What Is an Author?’, in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, translated by Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977), 119.

⁵ First delivered as a lecture in 1963. Jacques Derrida, ‘Cogito and the History of Madness’, translated by Alan Bass, in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1978), 31-63.

⁶ Michel Foucault, ‘What Is an Author?’, translated by Josue V. Harari, in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology* (New York, New Press, 1998), 208.

⁷ Even Barthes, another implicit target of Foucault’s critique, realised this, despite his attempts to re-historicise it. ‘The Death of the Author’ opens by saying of the loss of identity of subject (author) and writing, ‘No doubt it has always been that way’. Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’ in *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (New York, Hill and Wang, 1978), 142.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, translated by Jonathan Murphy (New York, Routledge, 2006), 573.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen Lane (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 203.

¹⁰ It would be possible to show that the ‘plane of consistency’ of territorial representation is already a ‘plane of subordination,’ that it is in a necessary relationship to its own exterior and that the ‘transcendent object’, ‘the mute voice’, does not come along after the fact to make a ‘jump outside the chain’ (205). Nonetheless, Deleuze’s texts have a canny ability, when they appear most dogmatic, to deconstruct themselves in a fashion that brings them much closer to Derrida and requires a much more patient reading than is possible here.

¹¹ Outside of his published work, Deleuze relied on a more traditional conceptuality to distance himself from Derrida, without any of the nuance (or legerdemain) of *Anti-Oedipus*, ‘I really don’t set myself up as a commentator on texts. A text, for me, is simply a small cog in an extra-textual practice. It’s not about commenting on the text by a method of deconstruction, or a method of textual practice, or other methods, it’s about seeing what use it is in the extra-textual practice that extends the text’; qtd. in Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, translated by Andrew Brown (Malden, Polity, 2012), 242. These binaries, text/extra-text (inside/outside), commentary/use, are precisely the ones Derrida showed the difficulty of clearly delineating, which are here treated in their most traditional forms in order to pretend one has surpassed Derrida. The representation of deconstruction as a ‘method’ of ‘commentary’ is untenable.

¹² John Searle's 'Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida' bases its argument on the unfounded notion that Derrida argues in 'Signature Event Context' that writing in the traditional sense has predicates speech does not. Derrida demonstrated this misreading in excruciating detail in 'Limited Inc a b c ...', along with Searle's fundamentally conservative motive of reclaiming the legacy of Speech Act Theory in order to position himself as its rightful heir. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, translated by Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1988).

¹³ Terry Eagleton offers a suitable example in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*: 'Anglo-American deconstruction largely ignores this real sphere of struggle, and continues to churn out its closed critical texts. Such texts are closed precisely because they are empty: there is little to be done with them beyond admiring the relentlessness with which all positive particles of textual meaning have been dissolved away. Such dissolution is an imperative in the academic game of deconstruction [...] That his [Derrida's] own work has been grossly unhistorical, politically evasive and in practice oblivious to language as "discourse" is not to be denied: no neat binary opposition can be drawn up between an "authentic" Derrida and the abuses of his acolytes.' Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Malden, Blackwell, 1996) 127-28. The Marxist animosity toward Derrida and deconstruction seems to stem from the need to secure the border between theory/praxis, text/world, the academy/politics, in order to always be certain of having crossed to the politically engaged side.

¹⁴ 'Deconstruction is an investigation of what is implied by this inherence of figure, concept, and narrative in one another. Deconstruction is therefore a rhetorical discipline', J. Hillis Miller, 'The Critic as Host', *Critical Inquiry*, 3:3 (1977), 443. Defining a field of study proper to

deconstruction can lend a comforting sense of intellectual and institutional identity to a practice that started out by placing all of these borders in question. The acceptance of deconstruction in American departments of English and Comparative Literature goes hand in hand with this attempt to domesticate it as a rhetoricist discipline.

¹⁵ Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago, Open Court, 2005), 110. Hereafter GM.

¹⁶ Rosi Braidotti, 'Interview with Rosi Braidotti', in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies*, edited by Rick Dolphijn and Iris Van Der Tuin (Ann Arbor, Open Humanities Press, 2012), 25.

¹⁷ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, translated by Ray Brassier (London, Continuum, 2015), 11; Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 6-7; Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, Or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 4.

¹⁸ It shows as well the value of contemporaneity in the academic marketplace. While I focus here on the rhetorical strategies for feigning innovation, a full study would require an examination of all the university presses, departments, conferences and journals that play a reciprocal role in granting and receiving this value.

¹⁹ Levi R. Bryant, 'The Ontic Principle: Outline of an Object-Oriented Ontology' in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, edited by Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne, Re.press, 2011), 268.

²⁰ It may not be irrelevant to point out that deconstruction is a non-positional discourse—that is, it cannot amount to a set of theses that say yes or no to these or those subjects and predicates, because it demonstrates the undecidability of every conceptual opposition. Thus, it could never amount to the form or formula of a doctrine one could name *Derridean*, any more than a deconstructionist could ever appear in the light of day, except perhaps at high noon. For the same reason, it cannot simply be reversed, and so those who would like to do so to create the illusion of progress must first misread it as a thetic doctrine.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, “‘Eating Well,’ or the Calculation of the Subject’, translated by Peter Connor and Avital Ronell, in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, edited by Elisabeth Weber (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995), 284-5.

²² Jacques Derrida, ‘The Ends of Man’ in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982), 109-37.

²³ Alan Bass’s translation leaves out two sentences from Derrida’s French text here: ‘N’allait-on pas opérer un retour à Hegel, à Husserl, à Heidegger? N’allait-on pas entreprendre une lecture plus rigoureuse de leurs textes et en arracher l’interprétation aux schèmes humanistes et anthropologistes?’ Jacques Derrida, *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 141.

²⁴ In later work, she even attributes misreadings related to those we are tracking here in part to this tone in Derrida’s early work, ‘It is my suspicion that Anglo-U.S. critics such as Jameson, Terry Eagleton, and Frank Lentricchia insist so specifically on the de-centering, and on a narrative of de-centering, because the first and last Derrida they read *carefully* was “Structure, Sign, and Play” and the first chapter of *Of Grammatology*, where there is some invocation of

“our epoch”.’ Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1999), 322.

²⁵ ‘These disguises [of ‘a primary writing’ by ‘the Western concept of language’] are not historical contingencies that one might admire or regret. Their movement was absolutely necessary, with a necessity that cannot be judged by any other tribunal. The privilege of the *phonè* does not depend upon a choice that could have been avoided’ (7). The dance Derrida must perform around the name of Leibniz (beginning with the parenthetical on the first page of his text: ‘even including Leibniz’) is evidence of the awkwardness of this ‘necessity’. If phonocentrism merely means that something like self-identity inevitably obscures difference-from-self, then a strange necessity can indeed be attributed to it, one with no proper name, a necessity of the contingency of this name and this history. If, as Derrida seems to say, it is meant as the privilege of the *phonè as such*, then Leibniz, who tied the universality of the idea to a universal writing system, stands as a straightforward counterexample to its necessity.

²⁶ One of the best-known criticisms of *Of Grammatology*, which, unlike the others we have considered thus far, involves a sustained reading of Derrida’s work, focuses on the narrative form Derrida gives to these aporias. Paul de Man’s ‘The Rhetoric of Blindness’, and the debates it considers and provokes between Derrida, Rousseau, Gasché and Gearhart, merit a study that will have to be undertaken in full elsewhere. De Man begins by questioning the structure of Derrida’s reading of Rousseau: Derrida identifies conflicting strata in Rousseau’s text, the desire for an original presence and the recognition of its impossibility, and describes the latter as something Rousseau would like to conjure out of existence or which imposes itself upon him. This narrativises a structural problem, claims de Man, just as does Derrida’s story about a

logocentric epoch drawing to a close. In other words, de Man claims that Derrida has already performed the re-domesticating operation we have seen so many of his critics undertake, of fitting his deconstructed terms back within historical and historicising concepts. In turn, de Man seems to hold out the promise of a purely generalised textuality of which even Derrida fell short. Of course, Derrida acknowledged this problem as structural when he referred to declaration and description in Rousseau's text not as natural landmarks but as 'structural poles' (218). That is, what we attribute to the author's intentions (declaration) and what we see as working against them (description) are never simply there to be discovered, but their polarity is produced by our reading. Had de Man merely hoped to point this out, he would have been correct, albeit in agreement with Derrida. However, he goes further, claiming that Rousseau's text frees itself of this structural opposition by 'account[ing] at all moments for its own rhetorical mode' (Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida's Reading of Rousseau', in *Blindness and Insight* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 139). It is unclear what this could even mean, given that what is at stake is not a self-identity but the difference-from-self of literary or rhetorical language. In fact, de Man cannot posit Rousseau's text as pure origin without generating a narrative in which it is betrayed by the deluded tradition of commentary which follows it, and which culminates in Derrida's supposed misreading. Dissimulating a structural polemic by giving it a narrative form, what de Man calls allegory, is inescapable even for him. De Man's first attempt to show that Rousseau's text has no blind spots, but only a 'mistake', proved unsatisfactory even to its author, as can be surmised from his quite different return to the theme in the essay 'Metaphor' from *Allegories of Reading*. Here, the figure of metaphor undergoes a peculiar 'dédoublément' as Gearhart terms it. A primordial metaphor inaugurates a

field of tropological substitutions, while a second, deluded metaphor operates on the basis of this dissimulation, believing it can sort literal from figural, intra- from extra- textual. That is, de Man has created exactly the narrative structure he denounced in Derrida's reading of Rousseau, allowing a single figure to enlighten and delude itself, to be by varying degrees self-aware or ignorant. De Man does so to allow figural language to bring itself forth from itself, so that it will have no outside and will justify the privilege he grants to literature. Though, in this sense, he bears a resemblance to the other misreaders of Derrida who take 'no outside-text' in the traditional sense, literary language is for de Man self-contained only in the sense that it is most open on its other. He grants it an impossible privilege, making it the proper name of differance. See Paul de Man, 'Metaphor', in *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1979) and Suzanne Gearhart, 'Philosophy Before Literature: Deconstruction, Historicity, and the Work of Paul de Man', *Diacritics* 13.4 (1983), 63-81.