

"DERRIDA'S 'TRACE': FROM THE EFFECT OF
WRITING TO GRAMMATOLOGY"

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Jacques Derrida is one of the more controversial figures in contemporary continental philosophy. Though better known as a literary critic than as a philosopher, his favorite objects of criticism are philosophical texts.

Throughout his work, and especially in his earlier books on Husserl, Derrida identifies various ideas and presuppositions that characteristically appear in and underlie the texts of Western philosophy. Among these are the beliefs that writing is secondary to spoken language and that knowledge is founded upon an intuitive presence of the experiencing subject to the speaking subject. This would mean that the philosophical value of writing is derived from that of speech and that absence and the nonintuitivity of self-awareness have no positive philosophical value. We will see how Derrida undermines these beliefs, or at least attempts to neutralize them, by means of his notion of the 'trace.'

Derrida claims that since the time of the pre-Socratics truth has been taken to originate in a supreme or divine *logos* that is presented to man through man's own auto-affective voice--thus the designation 'logocentrism,' whose more strictly linguistic counterpart is 'phonocentrism,' emphasizing the proximity of the voice. Derrida uses 'logocentrism' and 'phonocentrism' interchangeably to refer to the tradition of metaphysics insofar as it holds intuitive self-awareness to provide things with purely intelligible, or ideal, meaning.

In the course of his critical endeavors Derrida proposes a variety of his own innovative ideas and techniques in an attempt to better conceptualize the problems of critical reading, and to help pry apart and delimit the conceptual cornerstones of traditional metaphysics. Among these are the device of writing under erasure and the notion of the trace, both of which can be understood in reference to Derrida's method of criticism, which has come to be known as 'deconstruction.'

The process of deconstruction involves, first, reversing the order of priority between the terms of a dichotomy (e.g., the priority of speech over writing) that is contained in, or presupposed by, the text under consideration, and second, displacing the conventional meaning of the newly elevated term (e.g., writing), so

that, through its graphic shell a new concept may be introduced.

But this new concept, if it is to be communicated, must be elicited and conveyed by means of old concepts. It is not ready-made. If it were, it could simply be presented, and there would be no need for the ploy of reversal and displacement. Displacement then leaves a semi-void, since a meaning, but not a graphic sign, has been "erased." The desired meaning is then slowly educed in the prepared semantic space. This process is that of writing under erasure. With its completion the work of deconstruction comes to an end.¹

The purpose of reversal and displacement, at least as applied to philosophical texts, seems primarily to expose an unreflective or uncriticized value-choice, where one term of a metaphysical distinction is valued and the other disvalued. Such metaphysical distinctions are often simply adopted from naively accepted common sense distinctions. But their philosophical employment tends to increase their credibility to the point of elevating what was originally a casual descriptive distinction to the status of a norm with ethical implications (e.g., mind/body, rational/irrational, speech/writing).

The notion of the 'trace' arises through the reversal of the logocentric value of speech over writing and the displacement of the meaning of 'writing' for that of the 'trace.' Writing, after the reversal, becomes more fundamental than speech, and, under erasure, becomes writing. The reversal of priorities suggests that the concept to be educed has a radical significance, while the retaining of the displaced term, though under erasure, stresses the associative, or metaphorical, tie which it maintains with the desired concept. If this is kept in mind, the graphic sign 'writing' has served its purpose and can be exchanged for the more traditionally acceptable device of simply introducing a new, or different, term. Thus Derrida employs the term 'trace' (and analogously, in other contexts, he uses 'gramme,' 'grapheme,' 'differance,'² and a variety of other terms).

The notion of the trace is developed from being understood as a signifier to being understood as an irreducible synthesis of a signifier and signified, or of what is absent and what is present in an act of signifying. The trace, then, may be conceived as the hidden and unsurveyable "point" at which sign and meaning (or, more generally, body and mind) are as yet undifferentiated.

According to Derrida, the trace must precede all conceptual oppositions, since it is that hypothetical moment in which differentiation emerges. The trace expends itself through the elaboration of oppositions. It refers us from sign to sign; and since we cannot locate, or objectify, any origin of the trace (for it is only by means of the trace that things can originate, and become instituted), we cannot escape from signs into a pure signified. There is no signified thing that can be strictly presented, since

"[T]he thing itself is a sign."³ "From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We think only in signs."⁴

The detour by way of writing under erasure emphasizes a general problem of criticism. Derrida claims that every purely theoretical critique of commonly accepted linguistic understanding faces the seemingly paradoxical task of transforming what gives itself as being the unique and opposing thought of the individual subject, the critic, into the terms of a network of linguistic thoughts which systematically resists any such critical intrusion. This network is, again, just that of linguistic understanding in general, sustained through a general communal acceptance. But it is also the only linguistic understanding to which the critic himself has access.

Thus Derrida borrows the term 'writing,' already in use, but takes it out of its usual context, and uses it as a focus around which to constitute, gradually, a new context, or a new matrix of uses. This new context will then support the new term, here, 'trace.' A historically sedimented conceptual structure is best deconstructed by inhabiting it in this way and drawing a different structure, or system of metaphors, out of its history.

The notion of the trace appears to be offered in an attempt to render more comprehensible an observation that Derrida makes early (p. 3) in *Of Grammatology* about the nature of the history of Western knowledge. This observation is elaborated in terms of three moments.

These moments are: (1) the elevation of speech as stemming from the indestructible internality of ideation, through which truth, as *logos*, is deemed accessible; and the debasement of writing, insofar as it is unlike speech (or non-phonetic), and thus merely external, sensible, and perishable; (2) the challenge that science poses to this esteem for the phonetic by making central use of non-phonetic writing (e.g., as in the symbolic formalization and mathematization of the "hard" sciences); (3) the emergence of this purportedly non-phonetic writing as a further contribution to the phoneticization of truth, and of writing, which thus "dissimulate[s] its own history as it is produced."⁵

This three-part cycle says that when the limits of phonetic language, as representative, or as expressive of subjective experience, begin to be felt, non-phonetic devices are offered as remedies. And, insofar as these "succeed," they are incorporated into the phonetic, logocentric, intuitivity of language; or rather, their degree of incorporation constitutes their degree of success. What delineates the internalization, or the becoming intuitively acceptable, of linguistic markers or signs is precisely their success in becoming incorporated into the phonic medium of expression. The privilege claimed for spoken language, as being originally intuitive, is owing, according to Derrida, to the auto-affection of speech, which he also refers to as 'the event of hearing

(understanding)-oneself-speak (*s'entendre-parler*).'

The effect of the signifier (as trace) precedes any reflective understanding, in terms of a signified, of what the basis is upon which that effect is founded. What Derrida refers to as 'the phoneticization of writing' is the denial of the effect of the signifier as such, and the attribution of the effect of any sign to a closer, more truthful, approach of the signified to some underlying reality.

Perhaps the two most prominent historical moments of the phoneticization of writing are the ancient acceptance of alphabetic writing for the purpose of recording the surest intelligible truths, and the later acceptance of mathematical notation for the same purpose.

In the second part of *Of Grammatology* Derrida elaborates a particular moment of the phoneticization of writing, focusing on Rousseau's theory of language. Rousseau's logocentric notion of the universal book of Nature is found to have arisen out of the combination of Christian theology with Greek philosophy. Thus Derrida notes a complicity in the histories of the concepts of the sign and the divine, suggesting their original unification within a single system. Good, natural, writing is considered to be more nearly pneumatological, flowing as a spiritual breath from the presence and inner sense of one's own voice.

Rousseau refers to the inscription within nature of divine law as being intuitively presented to the sensible cogito. Here, the mark of presence has shifted from being purely intelligible, as it was for Plato, to being sensibly intuitive. Rousseau engineers this shift by associating the idea of the closure of the book with that of good writing. Derrida observes that what is considered to be good writing has always been grasped within an intuitively surveyable totality, and most often enveloped in a book. And in order for the book, conceived as a closed signifier, to be a totality its signified must pre-exist it as an independent reality. Thus the idea of the book is coupled with that of natural totality, and the intuitive presence and the coherence of the former is transferred to the latter.

For Derrida, the possibility of writing, as trace, must precede any kind of linguistic convention. This becomes clear when we think of writing, not in the narrow literal sense, but as any irreducible and durable synthesis of signifier and signified. In his structural linguistics, Ferdinand de Saussure holds both that writing corrupts speech, and that speech is independent of writing.⁶ But the possibility of the former denies the truth of the latter. The externality of writing must somehow connect with the internality of speech. Such a connection would mean that speech is somehow always already infected by writing. Logocentrism tries to hide this fact of the original non-innocence of language with respect to the effect of writing. Thus a science of writing-as-trace, which Derrida would call 'grammatology,' and which would not be subordinate to linguistics, should be possible. But it would be

difficult to define the object of grammatology, because the key concepts are already controlled by a scientific linguistics operating under the metaphysical presuppositions of logocentrism. Linguistics is quick to tell us what writing, as dependent on language, is, and where and how it begins. But from the viewpoint of grammatology writing would not be, as it is for linguistics, subordinate to language. Grammatology would have to untangle many logocentric preconceptions in order to establish itself. Since the trace is neither simply a signifier nor a signified, we run into difficulties when we try to conceive such a science from within the presently dominant horizon of logocentrism, which maintains a strict distinction between the signifier and the signified.

From the stance of logocentrism, the term 'trace' can only be a signifier of some signified. A logocentric science of the trace would then proceed to determine *what* 'trace' signifies. But this approach would not be available to a science of grammatology. According to "its own meaning," even in terms of the broadest parameters of time and of being, the trace would be both indefinitely "arche-teleological" (tied to both the past and the future)⁷ and indefinitely "ontico-ontological" (being both a thing and a fundamental meaning).⁸ Still, if certain provisional concessions are made to logocentrism, what Derrida refers to as an 'arche-trace' might be identified as the movement of an irreducible synthesis which first opens the possibility of both spatial and temporal plenitude, and thus of presence. Plenitude manifests itself in a form that is both sensible and intelligible and that is imprinted with a reference to something else. This moving imprinted form Derrida also calls 'différance.'

In light of this concept of the trace, experience must be considered as the necessity of a pathway through a text, or, as a trail of signs which must make their necessity felt before being surpassed, or erased.

The fundamental condition for the possibility of grammatology as a science is the undoing of logocentrism. In spite of Derrida's endeavors, this is not yet in sight, and even in considering peripheral questions--e.g., how do we pass from one order of writing to another?--we run into the problem of not being able to define in a clear and stable way what writing, as trace, is.

The linearity involved in writing and reading, which has come to serve Western man as an ideological model, or ideal, governing the various human pursuits, e.g., those of economy, technology, and science, has the same limitations as phonetic writing, or logocentrism. The history of philosophy inherits these limitations, so that desedimentation of linear writing and deconstruction of the history of philosophy are inseparable. When science begins to feel the limitations of linearity, a resurgence of interest in multi-dimensionality, as something prior to linear writing, results. Derrida observes that today the linear model, that of the closed

book (or the story line), seems to be eroding. With a renewed access to multi-dimensionality, traditional ideas of man, science, and the line are erased. Thus, a science of the trace, or grammatology, cannot be described as one of the sciences of man.

In working out his objections to contemporary logocentrism, Derrida discusses some of the ingredients of a possible science of grammatology, insofar as it can be provisionally conceived from current linguistic theory. In considering the graphological aspects of such a science we would have to think in terms of style and connotation, rather than intention and denotation. There would be questions of both individual and collective graphic codes and discourses, and of graphic forms, substances, and instruments. There would also be something to learn from psychoanalytic research regarding questions of the objectivity and value of graphic signs.

Since, for Derrida, there is neither any purely phonetic nor any purely non-phonetic writing, each graphic form must have both an ideographic and a phonetic value. There would also be aspects of a graphic system that operate according to an unconscious causality, and that could be discovered only by examining the history of that system. This may even be the case with literal meaning itself, since it is a location of relative stability within the scope of metaphor. The properties of such a graphic system resemble those of the rebus, or picture-puzzle. It would be a picto-ideo-phonography. All these possibilities already exist in any script, even though it is dominated by one of them.

A grammatology would require that we think of graphic transformation as other than merely externally imposed disruption or catastrophe. But this does not mean that we should try to fill in the gap of nonintuitivity that change, considered as *différance*, opens. Filling in this gap would be superfluous outside the purposes of traditional philosophy and science.

According to Derrida, the various traditional fields of "science, religion, politics, economics, technology, law, art"⁹ etc., have all arisen out of an original complicity whose fragmentation is attributable to the effect of *différance*, or the de-motivation of the trace. But the gaps of non intuitivity that must have separated these domains during their emergence have been filled in by the phoneticization of writing. And now each field has investments in writing that it does not want uncovered by deconstruction, and to which it makes itself blind. This amounts to an incompetence of traditional science and philosophy that reflects the limits of their principle of knowledge as presence. These are the limits against which the concept of grammatology presses.

Notes

¹ See *Positions* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981) 39-44. Also see the translator's preface to *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) lxxvi-lxxvii.

² To aid reading, I will always underline the 'a' of 'differance.' Differance is the "source" of all differences, whether spatial, temporal, or conceptual. It makes possible the functioning of the trace. Derrida refers to differance as a deferred difference, or a differing/deferring. His essay on differance appears in *Speech and Phenomena* (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973).

³ *Of Grammatology*, 49.

⁴ *Of Grammatology*, 50.

⁵ *Of Grammatology*, 3.

⁶ After his death in 1913, Saussure's writings on linguistics were compiled, edited, and published under the title *Cours de linguistique general*. An English translation was published in 1966.

⁷ The concept of 'arche-teleology' was developed by Paul Ricoeur in essays collected in his volume entitled *The Conflict of Interpretations* (see especially pages 21-24 and 169-176). It refers to a dual approach to the origin of meaning, comprised of an archeology of a subject's past, based upon Freudian analysis, and a teleology of a subject's future, patterned after Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁸ The notion of the 'ontico-ontological' was elaborated by Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (see especially page 34). It refers to the dual character of human existence, or Dasein. Dasein is first of all an entity. But it is an entity for whom the question of the meaning of its being, and thus of the being of entities in general, is a matter of concern. 'Ontico-ontological' is coined from this dual interest in ontics and ontology, or in entities and in being in general.

⁹ *Of Grammatology*, 92.