METHOD AND DESPAIR IN DERRIDA'S "OF GRAMMATOLOGY".

By the word "grammatology" Derrida means a science of the *gramme*—that is, of the letter, of the grapheme, or more generally, of the activity itself of writing. Grammatology in this sense is not, for Derrida, merely a branch of linguistics, a single social science among many. It is an inquiry into thinking, into consciousness itself. For, the word "writing," according to Derrida, names something more basic even than the word "language," which he says has undergone an inflation in the process of being cavalierly applied to such heterogeneous phenomena as mathematical symbolism, animal behavior, music computer technologies, and so on. Writing, understood fundamentally, can be seen to be a phenomenon of which every other linguistic system is only a species or a mode[1].

The argument of the *Grammatology* is primarily a negative one. What Derrida wishes to combat is the view that the written word is somehow inferior to the spoken word, a mere signifier or representation of that more authentic phenomenon and coming after it both chronologically and in the order of value. This view he calls "phonologism." According to phonologism, the written word is deficient because it cannot adequately present or re-present the living *sound* of language—its accent, timbre, tone, or inflection—which is its heart and soul. Even an elaborate system of diacritical marks could never equip the written word to convey this, just as musical notation could never tell us how to recreate, say, the sound of John Lennon's voice.

Sound is the heart and soul of language, phonologism would have it, for two reasons. First, because sound alone can manifest accent, timbre, inflection, etc., only it can embody feeling, which must be understood as the impetus and orgin of speaking. Only sound is plastic enough to represent the infinite variety of wavers, textures, amplitudes, shades and colors of feeling. And secondly, sound, particularly the sound we create with our own voices, is more immediate than anything visual. That is, a spoken word is bound up with meaning in an originary way, as cries are bound up with pain. Voice comes from inside us, and reaches into our interiors with an intimacy that mere visual signs, external in their very nature, can never enjoy.

Phonologism is closely connected to what Derrida calls "logocentrism," a view that he finds similarly objectionable. Logocentrism is the view that a sign refers to its signified as an arrow points to an object, and that *logos,* or meaning, is the primary referent of the sign—the thing "pointed to" by it, so to speak. Meaning itself, according to this view, is self-contained and determinate—i.e., "objective"—and in its most primordial form is called "essence," "ground," or "origin"—the fundamental concept presupposed by the history of Western metaphysics. The distinguishing mark of the *logos,* Derrida says (following Heidegger), has until now been "presence." That is to say, logocentrism holds that in order for us to attain truth, meaning must be made "present" to consociousness, as an objective, definable idea, accessible identically

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1 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans., by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1946), p. 8.

to more than one thinker in more than one age. According to Derrida, the entire history of Western metaphysics has presupposed such a view. And it has therefore presupposed phonologism as well, because meaning can be made "present" to mind only by that sign which is "closest" to it, and that sign has "naturally" been taken to be utterance— especially, "authentic," "originary" utterance, such as that found in poetry and metaphysics.

As a teacher of literature and philosophy I welcome Derrida's dethroning of these two simplistic and even noxious views. Too many of my students are militant phonologists who hold that writing is a mere substitute for speaking, unfortunately necessary on rare occasions, but ultimately of secondary importance. They are also stubborn logocentrics. They claim that there are self-contained meanings in whose presence they have basked, although for which the precise signifiers have managed to escape them. "But you knew what I meant!" is the chorus that greets me on everyday I return marked essays.

It is as a novelist, however, that I most welcome Derrida's rebellion. I find myself more than a little impatient with certain literary connoisseurs, who in unlikely conspiracy with my phonologist students, believe that a poet's words are closer to spritual reality than those of her prosaic brethren—and for the simple reason that the poet's words are written to be heard rather than read. I confess to an impatience, too—dare I say it here, in the company of English professors?—with *Finnegan's Wake*,[2] which to my own mean-spirited mind merely muddles meaning with its meandering mellifluence. I am so prosaic I can even allow myself to believe that the most passionate, spontaneous, open-hearted utterance is no more authentic, no truer, than a written version. For, it seems to me that both the spoken word and the written word are simply signs, and as such, parts of complex sign systems, with either of which we can organize our yearnings into thoughts. I agree with Derrida that thoughts do not come first, erupting spontaneously into utterances and only secondarily and derivatively into written form. Thoughts do not occur except as a function of signs, and if Derrida is right, any kind of sign will do. I would not wish to deny that the deaf can think, or that they are in any way more estranged from truth than I am.

The written word, moreover, is by Derrida's view no less intimate, no further from us as thinkers, than the spoken word. On the contrary, it provides us privacy and reflection, which may allow the written word to bring a reader more genuinely into the orbit of a writer than the spoken word would bring a listener into the orbit of its speaker. Of course, the spoken word can be more compelling than the written word. But that is not because the spoken word is somehow a more primordial sign. It is because the ear cannot be closed off voluntarily. Listeners are more vulnerable to speakers than readers are to writers, because speakers are more capable of—and possibly more inclined towards—affecting or manipulating an audience.

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2 James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964).

However appealing Derrida's position for English teachers and mild-mannered prose writers, it still seems a perverse inversion of common sense. It is one thing to redeem writing from its present state of disrepute; is quite another to assert, as Derrida does, that writing is actually more fundamental than speaking. After all, it was not even until the time of St. Augustine that people could read a written word without pronouncing it aloud. And all available evidence suggests that writing developed very recently, and then only because of certain instrumental and mnemonic advantages. Such facts seem to confirm absolutely the secondary status of writing.

But by "writing" Derrida does not mean simply the shaping of alphabetic forms on a page or figures in stone. This so-called literal meaning of the word "writing" is just one among many, and although it provides a kind of model—Derrida calls it a "metaphor"[3]—for understanding other types of writing (for example, pictographic writing, use of rebus, videotaped sign language, God's writing in the Book of Nature, the writing of a genetic code in the material of a cell), its basic structure remains unthought. It is this "unthought" that Derrida is addressing, and that forms the subject matter of the *Grammatology*. Hence he gradually replaces the word "writing" with the term "arche-writing," a word that more explicitly reaches toward the fundamental. Arche-writing turns out to be, not surprisingly, the common root of all lingusitic systems —that is, of speaking as well as writing.

If arche-writing is the common root of all forms of language, the condition for their possibility, then why does Derrida not choose a more inclusive term? One is reminded of poor Euthyphro, who, when asked by Socrates to define justice, could only give examples of it. Derrida might, for example, call this common root "signing". But, as Derrida points out, "the notion of the sign always imples within itself the distinction between signifier and signified"[4], a distinction that heralds logocentrism, since the signified is nothing other than the possible presence, the essence, which is inevitably taken as an "object" of thought. Still, Derrida himself admits that "it is not a question of 'rejecting' these notions; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them".[5]

Derrida chooses the word "writing" to name the common root of all language because writing, in its everyday sense, exhibits most clearly just those aspects of language that phonologists and logocentrics wish to deny and Derrida wishes to emphasize—namely, the unbridgeable distance between the sign and the signified, as well as

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3 Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

between the sign and the signifying agent; or, more accurately, the absence, in the sign itself, of the signified. Phonologism and logocentrism would deny this character to the sign because the signified, insofar as it is in writing completely "outside" the sign, and thus not capable of being present in it in any clear way, threatens therefore to become opaque, irretrievable.

But Derrida does not—indeed, cannot—define the word "arche-writing," for to do so would lend it the character of an essence, something whose manifestation is possible only objectively, that is, only as a presence brought before consciousness through language itself. Arche-writing is not such a thing. The gerundive form of the word suggests that we may think of arche-writing, instead, as an activity of sorts. Derrida's language even tempts us to think of arche-writing as an unmanifest project, lying beneath the surface of writing and speaking in the way that a, subconscious intention, to borrow the suspect terminology of psychoanalysis, lies beneath conscious intention. But this way of thinking invokes a constellation of assumptions that Derrida is unwilling to make.

Since Derrida does not define "arche-writing," the term can only be explained by exhibiting its status within his discourse. And to do so, it is necessary to attend carefully to his method, or the strategy of argument he employs. That method is revealed by the recurrent use of phrases and concepts that bear an unmistakably Kantian imprint;"......... writing is......... the condition of the possibility of ideal object and therefore of scientific objectivity;"[6] "..........arche-writing .... cannot, as the condition of all linguistic systems, form a part of the linguistic system itself;"[7] "arche-writing, at first the possibility of the spoken word, then of the '*graphie*' in the narrow sense, ... is the opening of the first exteriority in general".[8] Derrida even frames his most central question in consciously Kantian terms; "On what conditions is a grammatology possible?"[9] We would expect, then, Derrida's investigations to yield results with a similar conceptual status as, say, Kant's *a priori* categories of the understanding, or Heidegger's "existentiales," however different they would be in content.

Even if we assume Derrida's method to be straightforwardly Kantian, though, his results are not thereby automatically clarified, the status of Kant's own results, of what he identifies as "the conditions for the possibility of experience in general," is far from obvious. At least, it is far from obvious to perfectly intelligent college students, whom I try annually to initiate into the mysteries of his system. "Are the categories of the understanding," I am innocently asked, "general characteristics of experience? What does it mean to say they must come first ? How can an abstraction come before what it is abstracted *from*?" Questions such as these reveal both a recognition that a special way of thinking is being used, and a confusion about exactly

6 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

what that way of thinking is. Students can understand that Kant is not talking of efficient causes, or of genealogy of concepts, or even of law-like regularities in thinking. They simply lack a familiar model for understanding him.

The only strategy I have discovered to help clarify the matter is an analogy; "Kant's categories", I profess to my students, "are to experience as grammar is to language. Grammar makes language possible. Without the subject-predicate relationship, for example, a sense-making sentence cannot be constructed. Grammar is therefore not just a characteristic of all existing sentences. It allows you to generate new sentences. This is what we mean when we say it is a condition for their possibility."

Derrida would probably say that I have not actually discovered an analogy for what Kant is doing. I have simply taken Kant's thought further in the direction that it should go. For, as Derrida says, "the problem of language has never been just one problem among others."[10] It may be the case that transcendental deduction, or critical analysis, leads inevitably to the foundations of language, there being no analogical examples outside such analysis that might serve to illuminate it. That is to say, it may be the case that the nature of language shows itself in itself in its own unique way.. and that way calls, initially at least, for Kantian language.

Derrida, though, would resist my associating him so closely with Kant. Derrida's project in the *Grammatology* is to deconstruct the history of thinking about language–which means he must deconstruct the history of Western metaphysics in general. That history includes, prominently, the very Kantian strategies he employs. So it is not surprising that Derrida refuses to use such Kantian and neo-Kantian terms as "ground" or "origin" to name the results of his efforts. Nonetheless, I think it does minimum violence to Derrida to say that he is being a bit ungracious by not acknowledging and accepting his predecessor. His debt to Kant is inescapable. Derrida himself says that to deconstruct metaphysics is "to surround the critical concepts with a careful and thorough discourse—to mark the conditions, the medium, and the limits of their effectiveness."[11] This last phrase names *precisely* what Kant names by the word "critique" in the *Critique of Pure Reason,* which attempts to determine the "rules and limits" of the faculty of understanding[12] and the "possibility" as well as the "extent and limits" of the science of metaphysics.[13]

The way that arche-writing shows itself as the "condition for the possibility of language" is as what Derrida calls "differance"—spelled with an "a" to mark it as a special term. In the same way that his term "arche-writing" retains something of the common concept of writing while at the same time reaching beyond it, the term "differance" retains something of the ordinary concept of difference—specifically, here,

10 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

12 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason,* trans. by J. M.D. Meiklejohn (Lonodon: George Ball and Sons, 1905), p. xxi.

13 *Ibid.*, p. xix.

the difference between a sign and its signified—while trying to express what is fundamental in arche-writing. Differance is what gets articulated, made clear and explicit, in arche-writing. We might say, then, that differance is in turn the condition of the possibility of arche-writing. Indeed, the term functions in Derrida's discourse in much the same way that the terms "space" and "time" function in Kant's. Language, and thus experience in general, is inconceivable without it.

And just as the ordinary concept of writing can lead us to what is fundamental in speaking, the ordinary concept of difference—that is, of difference between the sign and the signifier—can lead us to what is fundamental in language in general. A sign is only unarguably and unproblematically a sign, when the difference between it and its signified is most visible, i.e., when its intended object (again, using the suspect terminology of logocentrism) is absent. This is why, for example, researchers studying the capacity of animals for language say that chimpanzees who have been taught to use American Sign Language cannot be said to be speaking unless they use the signs in such a way that they exhibit *displacement*—unless, that is, the chimpanzee can indicate things distant in time or in space (which, by the way, they cannot do). If they do not exhibit displacement, signs can be mere responses to stimuli, or behavioral strategies to achieve immediately perceived ends—intelligent strategies, to be sure, but not properly linguistic.

We cannot, however, merely equate Derrida's notion of differance with the language theorist's notion of displacement, even if the strategies used to arrive at each seem indistinguishable. For, the notion of displacement presupposes the logocentric thesis—viz., that the sign and the signified are proper entities, each self-contained, complete, and objective. And though the notion of displacement, like the notion of differance, focuses on the difference between sign and signified, the former notion allows that there is a relationship between the two, albeit one of distance. This, Derrida cannot do. Indeed, given his rejection of meaning as object or entity—i.e., as presence or possible presence—he must reject the idea that differance can be a relationship at all.

To say that differance is not a relationship would seem simply to empty the word of any possible meaning. But it would be hasty at this point to pass such a judgement. For, Derrida's account of differance by itself is not intended as a complete account of the functioning of signs and language. "Differance names only the condition that must obtain before there can be arche-writing, or language in general. It does not explain how words mean. For this, Derrida needs the concept of the "trace". "Trace", like "differance", cannot be defined, but we might say, provisionally, that it functions in his discourse much as the concept of "basic meaning" functions in the discourse of linguistics. "*The trace,*" he says, "*is the absolute origin of sense in general*".[14] And since the trace is, like differance, the condition for the possibility of language, he uses the terms in some contexts as interchangeable: "*The trace is the differance* which opens appearance and signification".[15]

14 Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

15 *Ibid.*

It is important to notice that Derrida in the above passage conjoins appearance and signification, or meaning. The claim here, as I interpret it, is that the appearance of objects is not possible outside of meaning —that is to say, outside of a context, a perspective.[16] A "trace" for Derrida, we might therefore say, is that which evokes a context of meaning or a perspective. Specifically, it evokes a perspective whose structure is characterized, dominantly, by pastness. It might be more helpful, then, to compare the concept of the trace with something like that of a "memento" or a "relic" than with that of a "track," as in the term "animal track," with which Derrida's term is cognate. For the trace does not recreate or retain for consciousness anything specific, self-determinate, or complete, in the way that an animal track recalls a specific animal. The trace simply opens for us a horizon within which to retain past experience as memory. But if we imbue the trace, and thus the sign which derives from it, with specific images to be understood as its "content" or its "meaning," we have done something very much like giving an overly literal reading of a text. We have mistaken the concrete and specific for something that is not that at all.

We can understand, then, why the trace, and therefore the differance, is not a relationship. A word, insofar as it exhibits the trace phenomenon, does not so much refer as it does evoke. It opens a way of seeing. It indicates *how* we see rather than *what* we see. By thus focusing on the "*how*" of a word, Derrida brings into question the ontological status of the supposedly self-determinate meaning that generations of thinkers wrongly considered to be the "object" signified by a word, and with it, the theories such as phonologism and logocentrism, which took as their starting point just such an "object". "To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words 'proximity,' 'immediacy', 'presence' i.e., with regard to signs ...... is my final intention in this book".[17] One cannot help but think of Kant, who wished to overthrow centuries of thinking by arguing that space and time could not properly be "objects" of thought, however much our common vocabulary seemed to imply that they could. Just as for Kant "space" does not mean a relationship between things but rather the way we see things, for Derrida "differance" marks the *way* a word means, not a relationship bewteen a sign and its signified.

To remove meaning from the realm of the objective as Derrida has done, could —if Derrida is right in his wholesale indictment of the Western metaphysical tradition —cause as much consternation to thinkers of our era as Kant caused to thinkers of his own by removing space and time from the same realm. Derrida, like Kant, is attempting a kind of "Copernican revolution." His way of thinking, he believes, opens the door for an entirely new metaphysics, just as Kant's way of thinking

16 Cf., for example, *ibid.*, p. 47. "The field of the entity, before being determined as the field of presence, is structured according to the diverse possibilities—genetic and structural-- of the trace. The presentation of the other as such, that is to say the dissimulation of its' as such,' has always already begun and no structure of the entity ecapes it".

17 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

opened the door for the theories of Einstein. This is at least partly what Derrida has in mind when he talks of the future as an "absolute danger."[18] A way of thinking would have to follow his, he believes, that, like Einstein's, "breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity".[19]

One "monstrosity" already spawned by Derrida's revolution of thinking is what I like to call "hermeneutical relativism"—the notion that there is no right or wrong interpretation of a text. Since, as Derrida says, there is no "objective meaning" by which to measure the truth of an interpretation, then, the relativist would say, all interpretations are simply matters of convention. And indeed, Derrida's vocabulary seems to encourage such a view. "*There is nothing outside the text,*" he says.[20] But this notorious dictum does *not* mean that all interpretations of a text are ultimately arbitrary. If meaning, to use my own alternative vocabulary, is a way of thinking and not an object of thinking, an interpretation can on this basis still be judged right or wrong. For, an interpretation may miss altogether the way of thinking itself exhibited in the text (as it may obviously do in cases where there is understood to be no proper "object of thought," e.g., in poetry). I think, therefore, that even the most traditional linguistic approaches to interpretation are not actually "overthrown" by Derrida's "Copernican revolution" of thought. The collections and synthesis of various uses of a word within a text, for example, can be taken as helping to lay out the horizon of the word, the perspective it evokes, not collectively to indicate a supposed "object" of thought. Such traditional approaches to texts can thereby illuminate them, and significantly.

Derrida himself appears to recognize this. "Even if there is never a pure signified, there are different relationships as to that which, from the signifier, *is presented* as the irreducible stratum of the signified. Fot example, the philosophical text.........includes, precisely as its philosophical specificity, the project of effacing itself in the face of the signified content i.e., of "referring" to a content which it transports i.e., which is its meaning and in general teaches. Reading should be aware of this project, even if, in the last analysis, it intends to expose the project's failure."[21] But Derrida's "last analysis", to my mind at least, is a philosophical meditation on the "how" of language, with regard to which the text's specificity is ultimately not at issue, and therefore does not bear upon the rightness or wrongness of the text's traditional interpretations. When we deconstruct a text in Derrida's sense, we move beyond any putative specific or "literal" objects of discourse. Our task becomes rather to exhibit the fundamental perspective, the basic way of thinking, that made possible the expressions the author used. The way of thinking thus exhibited may be, and usually is, common to more than one text.

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18 *Ibid.*, p. 5

19 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 158.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

But Derrida himself would not allow this characterization of his point. Phrases I have used such as "basic way of thinking" or "fundamental perspective" in Derrida's view all inevitably invoke a "transcendental signified", i.e., they purport to reify the text with a supposed "content" potentially present to thought. Attempts to avoid such a reification by reserving a special status or separate category for such phrases will, Derrida believes, necessarily fail. Even Heidegger's insistence on what he calls the "*ontologische differenz*"[22]—the radical difference in kind between being and beings—is not according to Derrida enough to free the term "being" or other terms frequently associated with it (which I have used liberally in my account) such as "fundamental", "basic", and "essential" from their logocentric baggage. Indeed, if Derrida is right, Heidegger's notion of the *ontologische differenz* implies logocentrism, because "there has to be a transcendental signified [i.e., objective meaning] in order for the difference between signifier [in this case, the word "being" and signified being itself] to be somewhere absolute, and irreducible."[23] That is to say, according to Derrida, Heidegger's term *ontologische differenz* must refer to a relationship—in fact, the very relationship central to logocentrism—and cannot be understood as expressing what Derrida's own term "differance" expresses. Heidegger's distinction, then, and others like it, cannot help us in the "last analysis" at which Derrida aims.

Derrida's claim that Heidegger's term must refer to a relationship is, to my mind, simply a wrong reading of Heidegger. There des not have "to be," as Derrida says, a transcendental signified, if the transcendental signified is not, as Heidegger claims, the kind of thing of which one can ask, "What is it?" This is Heidegger's point. Being, as Heidegger would say, is not a "quiddity".[24] "In each of its inflections," Heidegger says, "the word 'being' bears an essentially different relation to being itself from that of all other nouns and verbs of the language to the essent that is expressed in them".[25] That is because being is not an "essent," that is, a "transcendental signified", as Derrida says. Hence, the *ontologische differenz* cannot be a relationship proper.

It is difficult to find an analogy that would clarify the peculiar lexical predicament faced by both Derrida and Heidegger. We might compare it with the predicament that arises in what Gilbert Ryle calls a "category mistake".[26] We could say, following Ryle's line of thinking, that the sentence "Being exists" exhibits an error in diction, an error that stems from the mistaken categorization of being among things that can be said to exist or not to exist. The error is the same as that exhibited,

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22 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

23 Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

24 Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. by William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (Vision Press Ltd., 1956), p. 37.

25 Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. by Ralph Manheim, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 88.

26 Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York: Hutichinson House, 1949).p. 16.

for example, in the sentence "Harmony exists." This latter sentence, if it means anything at all, is just an ellipsis for a longer sentence, such a "Tones can be sounded together at intervals of pitch that are pleasing to the ear". We would certainly be mistaken if the elliptical sentence provoked us to listen for harmony as if for some specific sound, such as that of the oboe or trumpet. There is no specific sound that is harmony. Harmony can no more be the object of hearing than the average man can be the object of a search, or to construct our analogy, than being can be the object of thought—i.e., the object of a signifier, the "transcendental signified," as Derrida would have it. And hence the *ontologische differenz* itself, we might conclude, cannot be a transcendental signified.

The analogy with harmony, though, is of course not perfectly satisfactory. Harmony is too easily thought as the texture of an aural impression, that is to say, as a quality of sound. But being cannot be understood in any sense as a quality. Nor can it be ranked among qualities in any logical or syntactical hierarchy. We come closer to a useful analogy if we think of harmony in its "fundamental" sense—i.e., as two or more tones sounded together—than in its "vulgar" sense—i.e., as the *pleasant* contemporaneity of two or more tones. As such, "harmony" is the condition that must obtain "before" there can be vulgar harmony, the situation that allows for there "to be" vulgar harmony at all. Harmony in this sense is not so much a quality of sound as it is a range of possibility.

Being, too, is a range of possibility—possibility in its most fundamental sense. It is the possibility —to use the very words Derrida uses with regard to "differance" —of both "appearance and signification".[27] We might therefore gain some advantage if, following Stephen Erickson in *Language and Being*, [28] we try to understand the word "being", and perhaps Derrida's word "differance" as well, as roughly coextensive with the more common word "meaning". For, it is meaning that makes possible, not just the usage of signs, but the recognition, and thus the "appearance" of objects. That is to say, meaning can be understood as a kind or orientation within a context, a repeatable strategy of situating ourselves in a certain way within a range of possible "presences". It is a *way* of seeing or thinking, to use the diction I have used above. Such an orientation, or perspective, is necessary before anything can *be* present to mind. A perspective or a context, in this sense, is not built into a thing as its structure, as something present within it. It is neither objective nor subjective, outside nor inside, abstract or concrete. It is the necessary perspective for seeing anything as such. In short, it is not a candidate for presence at all.

I do not believe, then, that Derrida succeeds in dissociating his conclusions from those of Heidegger, or, as I have shown above, his method from that of Kant or of transcendental phenomenology in general. It is not enough for Derrida merely

27 Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

28 Stephen A. Erickson, *Language and Being* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975).

to *declare,* as he does many times and in many ways, that his method cannot be reduced to transcendental phenomenology[29] or that differance cannot be called "origin" or "ground", or categorized with these notions in any way.[30] To establish such a claim, he must explain, by assertion rather than negation, a positive aspect of his method or of his results that differs from those of transcendental phenomenology. This he does not do. Merely putting his words "under erasure", as he says—i.e., refusing to embrace them as precise or even meaningful—neither confirms the novelty of his thinking nor helps to persuade the reader of his conclusions.

I do, however, agree with Derrida that there is an immense gulf between his thinking and that of Heidegger and other German phenomenologists. That gulf is evidenced, I believe, by the radically different attitudes Heidegger and Derrida have towards the intellectual predicament in which they find themselves. Heidegger, though he has also struggled monumentally with his vocabulary, believed there to be a resolution to his problem, a "ground" upon which his intellect could ultimately rest. His works can even be read as "inspirational".

Derrida is not so sanguine. Part I of the *Grammatology* can be read, in fact, as an extended Lamentation. Throughout it, Derrida repeatedly laments the impossibility of avoiding the method and the vocabulary of the very tradition he wishes to deconstruct. "Deconstruction falls prey to its own work," he says.[31] "It is a captive of that which it overthrows".[32] Its method "cannot break with transcendental phenomenology" (although he insists, nonetheless, as we have seen, that neither can the method be "reduced" to it).[33] Thus Derrida, following Heidegger, crosses out printed words on the page, to emphasize their inadequacy. Even his seminal notion of the trace, he says, must be ultimately beyond thought, since the very word "thought" invokes the entire system of Western metaphysics, the metaphysics of "presence".[34] "Grammatology", he concludes, is forever "walled-in within presence".[35] Such a vivid and constant renunciation of the very method and vocabulary he employs, and of the results he achieves, amount—in my mind at least—to a confession of failure, an acknowledgement of the futility of his project.

It is therefore more appropriate, I believe, to associate Derrida with French existentialism and its characteristically French mentality than with German phenomenology. "There is no finer sight", Camus had written in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, "than an intelligence at grips with a reality that transcends it"[36]—a reality, he means, that

29 Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

30 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

31 *Ibid.*, p 24

32 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 62,

34 *Ibid.*, p. 93.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 93

36 Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essaya*, trans. by Justion O' Brien (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, (1988). p. 41.

necessarily transcends it. For, according to Camus, there is no hope of ever deciphering life, or the world, or being in general. What saves Camus' view from nihilism, and marks it as "existentialist", is his belief that our predicament requires of us, nonetheless, that we never give up *trying* to decipher it. To do any less, Camus thinks, is to run from life, to hide from its challenge (something that Camus hints in a footnote[37] is not merely intellectually dishonest but unmanly). That is to say, intellectual struggle itself "is enough to fill a man's heart".[38] It is enough to fill a man's heart, even though there can be no ground upon which it can rest, no final answers for which it can hope, and no future to which it can appeal. Those thinkers who, like Heidegger and Kant, believe that there can be a resolution to their struggles, have committed what Camus calls "philosophical suicide".[39] They have capitulated to hope, a hope which both Derrida and Camus would say is indistinguishable from "onto-theology",[40] whatever their religious pretentions or lack of them. And for such hope as this, Camus reserves only scorn[41]. Derrida, on my reading at least, does the same.

An even more extended parallel can be drawn between Derrida and Sartre. Sartre sees in all human projects, intellectual or otherwise, a fundamental project that, like Derrida's project of grammatology, is ultimately futile. To articulate this fundamental project, Sartre borrows his method—transcendental phenomenology—and his ontology—Cartesian—from traditional Western metaphysics, which he, like Derrida, claims nonetheless to move beyond. The human project, he says, is a project to become "in-itself"—i.e., objective—while at the same time remaining "for-itself"—i.e., subjective. (Sartre's vocabulary is new , but the perspective is inescapably Cartesian.) That is to say, a human being wants always to make something of herself, i.e., to be something determinate, definable, or identifiable, while at the same time retaining her freedom. But only God is both free and at once completely determinate, both a pure subjectivity and a perfected objectivity. Or rather, we lamely use the word "God" as a name for this desired state of existence, this object of our highest aspiration. In fact, such a state of existence is logically impossible. It is impossible to be free, which is to have possibilities, and at once determinate, which is to have no further possibilities. A human being is condemned to for-itselfness alone, i.e., to freedom.

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37 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

40 Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

41 Cf. Camus, *op. cit.*, p. 90. "There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn." The importance to Camus of scorning hope, and those who would seduce us into having hope, is memorably phrased in the last sentence of his novel, *The Stranger*, trans, by Stuart Gilbert (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1946), p. 154. "All that remained to hope was that on the day of my execution there should be a huge crowd of spectators and that they should greet me with howls of exectration. "

until death. Only after her death does a person become in-itself; only then can we say of a person, "She *was* such and such a woman". While alive, she has the possibility to be other than we take her to be. Of course, we resist this kind of in-itselfness, Sartre says. We want to retain our freedom. Nor is it a matter simply of resisting death. We resist completeness of any kind, since it threatens to rob us of our freedom. We resist, as Eliot's Prufrock would say, being formulated in a phrase and pinned on the wall.[42] Nothing less that in-itself-for-itselfness—i.e., pure, impossible Godliness—will satisfy us. "Man," Sartre says, "is a useless passion."[43]

But man is nonetheless a passion. "Desire," Sartre says, "is the being of human reality".[44] And though desire must be understood at the fundamental level as the desire to be God, it exhibits itself concretely in virtually all of our mundane yearnings. It exhibits itself, for example (and most importantly for our purposes), in the desire to know. The desire to know, Sartre says, is a variation of the desire to have, to appropriate.[45] That is, desire to know is an attempt to appropriate or assimilate the so-called object of thought, which is taken, like objects themselves, to be determinate. We wish to unify ourselves with that object, so that we can somehow share in its determinateness, i.e., become ourselves determinate by being defined by its "presence" within us. Of course, we do not succeed, just as we do not succeed in defining ourselves by our possessions (however comforting their presence may occasionally be). We simply enjoy temporarily the illusion that we become *something*, *somebody* through the "objects of thought" we acquire. "Knowledge" is the name we give to this illusion.

For Derrida, too, knowledge is an impossible unity that we desire in vain. The sign is the "trace" left in the world of this desire— "wish sensibilized", as Maine de Biran says and Derrida cites approvingly[46], though a more precise formulation for Derrida would be "*unfulfillable* wish sensibilized". In Sartre's terms, we would say that the sign is an expression of the for-itself that exhibits a yearning for in-itselfness, a yearning that cannot be satisfied. Drawing upon Derrida's account, we would say, similarly, that the sign intends a unity it can never consummate, a unity with the putative signified, which Derrida characterizes, like Sartre's "in-itself", as self-contained, fully present, determinate. The sign cannot achieve such a unity because it would thereby cease to be a sign, just as, according to Sartre, a human being who desires cannot finally identify with the object of desire without losing her character as for-itself. For Derrida, then, unity of sign and signified is an impossible hope, in much the same way that unity of the for-itself and in-itself is for Sartre. "Language", Derrida might have written, "is a useless passion".

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42 T.S. Eliot, "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock," in *Poems 1909-1925* (London: Faber and Faber, 1925), p. 14.

43 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, Pocket Books, 1956), p. 784

44 *Ibid.*, p. 735.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 557.

46 Derrida, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

An important implication of Derrida's view, which ties it in some sense to existentialism, is that signs alienate us from the world, make distant and obscure what we imagine to be for "natural" or pre-verbal consciousness a surfeit. When used to "talk about" the world, rather than merely to manipulate what is at hand, language will necessarily have a peculiarly empty feeling. It will thus provoke what Camus calls our "nostalgia for unity", "the essential impulse of the human drama".[47] And since, if Derrida is right, we think only in signs, all thought (as Sartre says of desire) is troubled consciousness. All thought displaces us, disappoints us. Caught inevitably in the web of language, we are forever lost in the world—*unheimlich*, as Heidegger says: not at home.[48]

Such is the litany of existentialism. But it is with his contemporaries, I think, rather than with post-war existentialists, that Derrida ultimately belongs. For, he can be fit squarely, I believe, into what has come to be called "postmodernism". And it is not merely the content of Derrida's work—to the degree that he would even allow that his work can contain such a thing—but the style, the texture itself of his writing, that distinguishes it as postmodernist. His myriad literary allusions, his constant retractions, his avoidance of philosophical and ontological commitments, his extreme selfconsciousness regarding his method of presentation, etc., exhibit the same attitudes as those of writers such as Robbe-Grillet (whose novel *The Erasers* puts "under erasure" precisely what Derrida wishes to [49]) and Beckett, or composers such as Cage, who are concerned primarily with the conventions and the nature of the medium itself, and shrink from commitment to any specific "content". But they shrink from intellectual commitments, not merely because the world of experience is irrational, as existentialists like Camus had already emphasized, but because they, like Derrida, see all systems of meaning, all modes of comprehension—indeed, reason itself—as merely human artifice. Concepts such as "reality" and "truth" they consider to be outdated. Thus may postmodernist writers present their characters just as Derrida presents his ideas—namely, as merely "made up of words", as Philip Stevick states, summarizing the views of William Gass, or as "linguistic constructs."[50] Without any obligation to "truth," they are free to play with words, distort history, eschew structure, and generally indulge their imaginations in the rawest form, unrestrained by "artificial" requirements of significance and uncontaminated by the "arbitrariness" of moral commitment.

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47 Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus,* p. 13.

48 Heidegger, *Being and Time.*

49 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Erasers,* trans. by Richard Howard (London: John Calder, 1959).

50 Philip Stevick, "Literature," in Stanley Trachtenberg, ed., *The Postmodern Movement: A Handbook of Contemporary Innovation in the Arts* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1985), p. 141.

I find it ironic that the current fashionableness of Derrida is tied to a revival of Nietzsche. Though Nietzsche, too, saw systems of discourse as merely human constructs and truth as a human creation, I do not believe he could have endorsed the "grammatological" program as purveyed by Derrida[51] or the postmodernist program of those artists with whom Derrida shows such a striking kinship. Above all, Nietzsche celebrated creativity, and creativity meant for him the passionate embrace of a positive, unifying value. I can see nothing of Nietzsche's kind of creativity in the analyses of academic relics such as Saussure, in the repeated retractions, explicit self-contradictions, or puzzling "erasures" of the *Grammatology*, or in the general effacement of his very own words that suffuses Derrida's writing. There is no "value" here, in Nietzsche's sense, no commitment; there is only dis-value. And personally I see in such dis-value the symptom of a scholastic sub-culture that has lost its sense of mission. The late American novelist, John Gardner, characterizing the postmodernist movement in general, said that it embodies "ideas that no father would wittingly teach his children".[52] He might have said the same of Derrida.

Derrida reminds me of some urbane intellectuals in the United States who furnish their houses with garish relics of the fifties—things they would never have liked then and smile knowingly at visiting admirers, who by returning the smiles, show that they too recognize the "interesting" style to which those relics belong. But there is allowed in this ritual no embrace of that style and no embrace of the objects themselves. And so the objects sit on the mantlepiece "under erasure," announcing loudly, "That's not what I meant at all; that's not it, at all".[53] I have always suspected that when the visitors finally leave and the owners are alone at last, they stare blankly at their untreasured treasures and, as Kafka would say, "weep without knowing it".[54]

51 Although Nietzsche may not have rejected deconstruction itself. Derrida's deconstruction of Saussure's *A General Course in Linguistics* and Rousseau's *Essay on the Origoin of Languages* turns up basic issues that could conceivably be called "values". But Derrida's actual practice of deconstruction is not the same exercise as his attempt at a science of grammatology, which would found deconstruction theoretically, if not axiologically.

52 John Gardner, *On Moral Fiction* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1978), pp. 55–56.

53 Eliot, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

54 Franz Kafka, "Up in the Gallery," in *The Penal Colony; Stories and Short Pirces,* trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, Inc. 1948), p. 145.