

Determinate Indeterminations: Deconstruction and the Procedure of Knowledge

Sorelle Henricus

National University of Singapore
E-mail: sorelle.henricus@gmail.com

Abstract

The range of responses to Derrida over the decades demonstrates the difficulty of univocally reconciling the legacy of deconstruction. The tendency of deconstruction to mimic the form of various twentieth-century fields of knowledge production, such as information-communication theory and molecular biology, complicates these disagreements further by generating a matrix within which the response to Derrida's thought finds itself caught up in the performance of its own themes. Looking back on *Of Grammatology* demonstrates how the context of 1967 positioned Derrida's arguments toward consonance with the debates of its time – ethnography, (de)colonization, and the 'human sciences'. It might seem that these now outmoded issues had obfuscated the larger implications of deconstruction to areas of knowledge that are more pertinent today. However, the contention of *arche-writing* and the operation of textuality remain. This inherently generative 'problem', however, indicates a porosity between deconstruction and the moment in which it is being thought that highlights the tension within the gesture of deconstruction itself.

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Rodolphe Gasché recollects a remark Derrida once made regarding his strategy to approach the distinction between speech and writing, the idea that 'in principle, he [Derrida] could have done the inverse operation, namely, that of privileging the voice and developing under the title of the "voice" a conception as radical as that of arche-writing'.¹ There is little doubt that in the fifty years since its publication, *De la grammatologie* has remained one of the most provocative of Derrida's texts. The proposition that 'writing' was anterior to speech was almost unthinkable, an alien idea, for what is more natural to humans than speaking? This premise has been normalised today in many fields of thought, but this is due, in part, to the scandal that is Derrida's work and reputation. Its ramifications for philosophy, or, more specifically, what is thought to constitute 'the philosophical' is still unfolding in unexpected ways. In the early years of deconstruction, the case was made most convincingly by readers of Derrida, and particularly by Gasché, who insisted that despite the 'literary' significance of Derrida's thesis on 'writing', to relegate deconstruction primarily to a method of literary criticism would be grossly reductive.² Derrida's oeuvre, which spans four decades, and with the posthumous publication of his work seemingly beyond, demonstrates the inevitability of the re-

¹ Dawne McCance, 'Crossings: An Interview with Rodolphe Gasché', *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 41.2 (December 2008): 4.

² Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 1.

examination of the most fundamental bases of the tradition of metaphysics. In order to reckon with deconstruction more than fifty-years post *Of Grammatology* it is worth revisiting what exactly Gasché's early work is attempting to recover Derrida and, more specifically, Derrida's legacy from. What is the shape of the objection to 'deconstructive criticism' of literature as the sole place for Derrida's thought? The conundrum Gasché characterizes in the mid-1980s appears in the guise of an incommensurability of style. To rehearse the argument: 'Derrida's work is literary in essence' and yet not reducible to a method of literary criticism alone, but, by this very characteristic of style, neither is it strictly 'philosophical' in the traditional form.³ J. Hillis Miller addresses this critique from the other direction.⁴ Miller points out that, in the disciplinary tussle between philosophy and literature over deconstruction, to reduce Derrida to a metaphysician would be just as reductive as to reduce deconstruction to literary criticism – the two facets are inseparable.⁵ Today, these responses are historical moments in Derrida studies, historicizing and marking the 'age' of deconstruction. While the concerns Derrida's readers demonstrate in the Anglophone academy of the mid-eighties are never terminally resolved, the 'issues' and approach to Derrida's work have moved on. And yet these questions continue to haunt the effort to come to terms with deconstruction today.

To stay with Gasché's contextualization a little longer – to attempt to lay out the foundations we might, by now, consider familiar terrain – the work of deconstruction is not simply an extension of the metaphysical tradition, nor is it merely a rejection of various tenets and beliefs upheld by that tradition. Rather, deconstruction is an elucidation of the structures of a body of work (and particularly the body of the history of philosophy-as-metaphysics), a laying-bare of its 'infrastructures'.⁶ In this practical sense (a sense that is now over thirty years old), the usefulness of Gasché's reading of Derrida is its illustration of deconstruction as, more than anything, a clarification of the operations by which the metaphysical tradition, including its 'various and essentially heterogenous aporias and discursive inequalities',⁷ is able to stand as such. Nonetheless, as Bennington continuously brings to the fore⁸ (and this is a sense that Gasché too is acutely cognizant of), due to the emergence of deconstruction from within the very tradition which it 'treats' and for which it relies on for its tools, deconstruction cannot (and does not desire or

³ 'If philosophy is understood as constituted by a horizon of problematization exclusively determined by the traditional desiderata of a canon of issues, and if, in particular such a problematization is identified with one special technique of argumentation then Derrida's writings are strictly not philosophical.' (Gasché, 1.)

⁴ 'Deconstruction "is" that operation which brings into the open the possibility in any trace that it might be taken as literature. Deconstruction, it can be said, if there is such a thing, is the exposure of the literary in every utterance, writing, or graphic mark. But this exposure can only be performed through literature, that is through a use of language about which it cannot be decided whether it is referential or only an example of using language referentially, whether it is performative or only an example of what an efficacious performative would be.' J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's Topographies', *South Atlantic Review* 59.1 (1994): 20.

⁵ Miller, 20.

⁶ Gasché, 175.

⁷ Gasché, 175.

⁸ 'In following the sign through metaphysics, we have been obliged to borrow all our language and criteria of coherence – and we are attached to them – from the metaphysics of the sign: we are working in a milieu where possibility and impossibility imply one another, in a complexity that we are only beginning to glimpse' See Geoffrey Bennington, 'Derridabase', in Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 38; 'Derrida can thus be said to repeat metaphysics differently'. Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 11.

attempt to) replace ‘philosophy’ or Metaphysics (with a capital M) in the way, for instance, Hegel’s *Encyclopaedia* attempted. Nor does it propose a method⁹ in the sense of Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, or respond with a ‘position’ in the way Heidegger does. And yet any contextualization of the ‘nature’ of deconstruction must contend with Derrida’s concern with the discourse of what is called ‘Western thought’ as a *tradition*. Rather than presenting a question of order (in the sense of categorization by field), coming to terms with what Bennington calls the ‘interruption’¹⁰ of deconstruction is a consideration of the operation of the formal arrangement of structure – what Derrida expounds as ‘the structurality of structure’.¹¹ An idea as old as deconstruction itself and from which the nomenclature of ‘post-structuralism’ became concretized.

If the nature of deconstruction is to make evident the ‘internal limits’ of the foundations of texts, arguments, and discourses, its gesture requires the existence of the structure itself in order to formulate its illustrations while simultaneously rejecting a metanarrative of and for itself. Responding to Derrida and deconstruction fifty years after *Of Grammatology* (as well as *Speech and Phenomena* and *Writing and Difference*), one finds it difficult, if not impossible, to avoid being very quickly caught up in the performance of its themes. A performance Derrida himself relished rather than sought to relinquish as demonstrated in *Glas*, *The Post Card*, and *Dissemination* most explicitly. Perhaps this means that due to its modus of inhabiting and depending upon the ‘heterogenous aporias and discursive inequalities’¹² that it finds inherent in the structures themselves, deconstruction itself cannot be outstripped. But the question remains, what position does this renunciatory gesture leave for his interlocutors? How are we to reckon with remaining unavoidably, unapologetically ‘Derridean’, our lenses irreversibly altered by our own acts of reading Derrida?

‘Our Epoch’

In many respects, the ground-breaking nature of *Of Grammatology* has been a guiding light to Derrida’s philosophical position but its timing and context means it has also been read predominantly in ways that have not allowed the full force of its implications to emerge. The intellectual climate within which *Of Grammatology* appears, combined with its radical argument in relation to presence, speech, and writing, hijacks the import of its argument to *knowledge in general*. Twenty-first century scholarship on Derrida addresses every manner of global political concern and situation from global terrorism to war in Europe.¹³ But the question of whether these approaches respond to Gasché’s 1986

⁹ See Jacques Derrida, ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’, trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Warwick: Parousia Press, 1985), 3.

¹⁰ Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, 11.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’, in *Writing and Difference*, trans., with an introduction and additional notes, by Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 278. Hereafter cited as *SSP*, with page references.

¹² Gasché, 174.

¹³ See Geoffrey Bennington, *Scatter 1: The Politics of Politics in Foucault, Heidegger, and Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016); Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Sovereign Stupidity and Autoimmunity’, in *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 97-113; *Derrida and the Time of the Political*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Suzanne Guerlac (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Carolyn D’Cruz, ‘Europe after Derrida: Crisis and Potentiality’, *Contemporary Political Theory* 15.1 (February 2016): e25-8; available at

injunction for the extension of the implications of deconstruction remains. While approaching Derrida as a philosopher of global politics adds a dimension in which Derrida's work is relevant, however, it would fall short of the promise of deconstruction to position this perspective as subsuming the earlier work on textuality. Bennington continuously makes this case and highlights the ways in which the 'political' themes of Derrida's later work are always present in the early outline of deconstruction.¹⁴ Also, while deconstruction was most clearly and often most productively summarized as a method of reading texts, to maintain it as primarily a technique for the interrogation of the humanist tradition (however that may be defined) would be still be a gross reduction of its implications. As the evidence has mounted over the decades, glimpses of how the emergence of deconstruction contaminates all varieties of thought including, particularly, those regions of thought that are integral to the sustenance of knowledge, have emerged periodically. These moments contend most explicitly with the historical condition of knowledge. Not simply knowledge in the naive sense but a particular reign of twentieth-century *epistēme* – what Derrida refers to as 'our epoch'.¹⁵

There is no doubt that the preoccupation in the intellectual circles of the 1960s with 'information' (an obsolete idea today, for what can exist apart from it?) and the attempt to simultaneously develop and come to terms with the 'human sciences' in response to communication theory, casts its shadow across the linguistic gesture of deconstruction. It is explicitly this general turn in approaching the production of knowledge to which Derrida responds in the early parts of *Of Grammatology* (*OG*, 6-10). However, the grammatological movement itself already exceeds this notion (including the notion of 'grammatology' itself)¹⁶ in outlining the structure of the supplement, the trace, and subsequently, *différance*. Once the 'information revolution' comes to fruition by the 1990s (and although this is really more directly the moment of Jean Baudrillard), readers of Derrida might re-discover traces of 'the information system' and its organizing principles within *arche-writing*.

The characterization of 'logocentrism' in *Of Grammatology* is of an 'order' of thought; it is the scandalous identification of a 'program' within the tradition of

<https://doi.org/10.1057/cpt.2015.13> [accessed 9 November 2017]; J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's Politics of Autoimmunity', *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 30.1-2 (2008): 208-25; Michael Naas, "'One Nation...Indivisible": Jacques Derrida on the Autoimmunity of Democracy and the Sovereignty of God', *Research in Phenomenology* 36.1 (2006): 15-44; Kelly Oliver, 'Earthquakes: Deconstructing Humanitarianism', *Derrida Today* 10.1 (2017): 38-50.

¹⁴ See Geoffrey Bennington, *Scatter I*; Geoffrey Bennington, 'Sovereign Stupidity and Autoimmunity'.

¹⁵ The notion of the epoch is perhaps extrapolated from Derrida's engagement with Husserl's 'epoche', the phenomenological reduction. However, the term makes a marked appearance in Derrida's seminal early texts: '*Différance* is neither a *word* nor a *concept*. In it, however, we shall see the juncture – rather than the summation – of what has been most decisively inscribed in the thought of what is conveniently called our "epoch". Jacques Derrida, 'Differance', in *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 77; 'One does not exit the closure whose epoch one can outline'. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Corrected edition (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 13. Hereafter cited as *OG*, with page references; 'this "appearance" is the very essence of consciousness and its history, and it determines an epoch characterized by the philosophical idea of truth and the opposition between truth and appearance, as this opposition still functions in phenomenology.' (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 77)

¹⁶ See Nicholas Royle's reading of *Of Grammatology*, for example: 'People sometimes give the impression that *Of Grammatology* is a rather classical, formal and well-behaved text or series of texts. No: it is bizarre through and through, starting perhaps with its title. Nicholas Royle, 'Bizarre', in *Reading Derrida's Of Grammatology*, ed. Sean Gaston and Ian Maclachlan (New York: Continuum, 2011), 53.

metaphysics. (*OG*, 3) This polemic disrupts the history of thought because it is both rooted in its historical context and, radically, already beyond it. The order of the three elements Derrida identifies as logocentrism – ‘1. the concept of writing [...] 2. the history of (the only) metaphysics [...] 3. the concept of science or the scientificity of science’ (*OG*, 3) – are none other than elements of the entire history of Western thought. Their being ‘one and the same’ (*OG*, 3) maintains that there is an equiprimordiality between the elements upon which the structure of a field of knowledge may be erected. For instance, when Derrida addresses ethnocentrism in *Of Grammatology*, he deals with it as an example that displays all three of these elements – the idea of speech as prior to writing, alongside the presumption of the possibility of presence, and the role each of these plays in the establishment of the ‘human sciences’ as a positive science. Furthermore, within the context of decolonization, the stakes of logocentrism were vital to the consideration of the emergence of what he terms the ‘human sciences’. However, as Derrida demonstrates over again with several examples that gesture towards science, including Husserl’s phenomenology and psychoanalysis, exceeding the argument of the privileging of the *phone* over the *gramme* that takes centre stage in *Of Grammatology*, as well as in *Speech and Phenomena*, is a far more expansive assertion about the possibility of meaning-making. If Derrida’s readings of transcendental phenomenology demonstrate what is at stake in the attempt to understand ideality itself, perhaps it can only follow that what can be equally attempted on this basis is the approach of knowledge or *epistēme* in general. Derrida gestures to this in the exergue to *Of Grammatology*. If the operations of deconstruction are formal – concerning the ‘structurality of structure’ – then their relevance cannot remain within the bounds of metaphysics but must extend to what can be known materially. The basic ‘infrastructures’ identified by Derrida in relation to metaphysics must be equally relevant to what can be established via the consideration of the material world, the order of what is known since the seventeenth century as empirical science.

When Derrida uses the term ‘human sciences’ in his presentation of ‘Structure, Sign and Play’ in 1966, Lévi-Strauss’s work demonstrates a modality of thought that addresses, through his concern with the theory of language but also in its desire for objectivity and its reach for scientificity, a *modality* that Derrida outlines as inherent in the structuralist method. Derrida’s provocation – the concept of ‘logocentrism’ and deconstruction of the function of the linguistic sign in *Of Grammatology* – proves two things: the operation of the sign within the system of writing is always-already radically empirical, and it is neither impartial nor singular in its meaning. The scientificity that structuralism reaches toward is always-already outstripped by its operative modality – the system of differences that is language as *arche-writing*. In this respect, ethnocentrism, turns out to be (as all previously established twentieth-century concepts must be characterized after deconstruction) an example of the privileging of a certain difference over another [‘the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside it*’ (*SSP*, 279)]. The predicate of racial and cultural difference in the writings of the sixties, despite being the relevant one for its context, was, as Derrida’s oeuvre illustrates, only one example of how difference is always inscribed within what comes to be known as logocentrism.

To use the term ‘logocentrism’ to describe deconstruction today, however, feels as archaic as describing the technological arena of the present moment as ‘informational’. What is it that has shifted in regard to these fundamental descriptors of twentieth-century thought and contemporary cultural phenomena? Might the link between the history of information and the trajectory of deconstruction run deeper than a discursive and

outmoded vernacular? Could the ‘cybernetic’ and ‘grammatology’ (now dated terms that both emerged from a similar moment) demonstrate a mutual reason for their simultaneous falling out of fashion? What is it about the age of Shannon and Weaver, Bateson, von Neumann and Wiener that shares its heritage with deconstruction? And what relevance from this presumed affinity might be carried forward into the contemporary moment?

‘The Program’

By the early nineties, the question of the situation of Derrida’s thought is sidestepped rather than extended. Once deconstruction becomes domesticated within Anglophone scholarship, both in literary studies and critical thought more generally, its affinities to modes of rational thought begin to be noted in more sustained ways. Derrida’s discovery of the function of repetition as it is worked out in the system of writing starts to become recognizable as a structure mirrored elsewhere, particularly in the copies of ‘data’ in information-communication theory and within biology’s ‘genes’. When Christopher Johnson begins to talk about the affinity between ‘information systems’ and deconstruction, he describes the parallels between deconstruction and molecular biology as follows: ‘Derrida’s model or metaphor is the cutting and transplanting of the “sequences” or “chains” (philosophemes) one finds embedded in the text of Western philosophy, that is, something approaching a biotechnology’.¹⁷ What had not materialized in the nineties (and has it emerged even today?) was a questioning of the shared metaphor of ‘information’ between computing and the genetic operation of biology. Although Johnson does not at first make a definitive statement as to which field is ‘prior’ (deconstruction or cybernetics, which borrows from the other?), rather than any sustained consideration of the relation between them, the cultural climate of the moment dictates that the informational system should take precedence. But how do we account for the marked absence of sustained scholarship on the ‘program’ even when information systems have successfully colonized all aspects of knowledge and life since? Johnson’s looking-back on *Of Grammatology* in 1993 attempts to recast deconstruction itself; the ‘epistemic shift towards the scriptural and the informational’ cannot be anything but ‘inevitably and inseparably, a socio-cultural phenomenon’.¹⁸ The implication is that Derrida’s gesture toward the ‘program’ in *Of Grammatology* must be a symptom of the larger intellectual/cultural turn. In relation to this monumental technological moment of the late-twentieth century, deconstruction is implicitly cast as yet another indication of ‘the more general technological evolution of modern society, most strikingly in the domain of information and communication technology’,¹⁹ an inevitable response from the field of philosophy that is now forced to reckon with this shift.

The motifs of repetition, what Derrida refers to as the law of iterability, *différance*, the trace, etc. are re-contextualized in Johnson’s reading vis-a-vis a moment in *Of Grammatology* in which Derrida directly addresses ‘the program’.²⁰ This often-quoted

¹⁷ Christopher Johnson, *System and Writing in the Philosophy of Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 183.

¹⁸ Johnson, 6.

¹⁹ Johnson, 6.

²⁰ ‘It is also in this sense that the contemporary biologist speaks of writing and *pro-gram* in relation to the most elementary processes of information within the living cell.’ (*OG*, 9.)

passage from the beginning of *Of Grammatology*,²¹ where Derrida outlines the range of operations that fall within the demarcation of what he calls ‘writing’, deals with a particular moment in which he is toying with several emerging catch-phrases of research that were contemporaneous with the time of his writing. True, these include the cybernetic and the genetic, but in that moment, Derrida subjects not only these but also, along with them, ideas regarding ‘science’ and its dominance over the sphere of intellectual progress that had been building since the nineteenth century (if not the seventeenth) and which had preoccupied the thinkers of his time (including Heidegger) in relation to this program.²² In this sense, to recast the arc of deconstruction more than twenty years after *Of Grammatology* – 1993 Derrida is the year *Specters of Marx* comes out – as emerging from and consonant with the ‘information-revolution’ would be impossible. And so, the move by which the philosophy-literature matrix is circumvented in favour of ‘interdisciplinarity’, the updated thematic concern of the nineties falls short. Somehow from the mid-eighties to the mid-nineties, Derrida’s thought is turned from its import to questions of metaphysics (whither literature?) to the exigency of the social-cultural phenomena of ‘information’. What is ‘the theory itself’ of deconstruction that Johnson refers to?²³ What of the metaphysical distinctions Derrida’s readers and interlocutors had been tussling over just a few years prior?

On the other hand, this mode of thinking is not surprising given the moment, which was the beginning of ‘personal computing’ as we know it today. While the concept of ‘windows’ had been around since 1985, in the 1990s its relevance is consolidated with the simultaneous launch of the ‘Office’ programs by both IBM and Microsoft, heralding a new era of software for personal and business use. In 1993 the first miniature, portable computers (PDAs, or Personal Digital Assistants), the ancestors of today’s smartphones, were made available for purchase. It was also in 1993 that Adobe launched its ‘Acrobat’ software, which enabled the reliable copying of data files making ‘documents’ shareable across digital platforms, thus allowing email systems to become essential for corporate operations. All this was the capitalist, consumer-centric culmination of intellectual efforts that had been in the works since the 1950s under the loose umbrella of cybernetics, a term and idea that is now obsolete. The rhetoric and aesthetic of the ‘information age’ (a term that is itself today in search of a substitute) speaks for a version of what began as ‘cybernetics’. The falling out of fashion of the term, in an exemplary hegemonic demonstration, is due to its resounding success. The basis of today’s digital communication in the cybernetic is already taken for granted. It seems Heidegger was right that it is the *kubernētēs* (κυβερνήτης) that steers our world.²⁴

However, when it comes to the work of Derrida, it is as yet unclear what is meant by the ‘parallels’ between the metaphors found in the sciences (the information sciences or the bio-technological sciences) and deconstruction. Indicative of the moment of his writing, Johnson speaks of open versus closed systems, a conceptualization that he

²¹ ‘And thus we say “writing” for all that gives rise to an inscription in general’ (*OG*, 9).

²² ‘if the theory of cybernetics is by itself to oust all metaphysical concepts – including the concepts of soul, of life, of value, of choice, of memory – which until recently served to separate the machine from man, it must conserve the notion of writing, trace, grammè [written mark], or grapheme, until its own historico-metaphysical character is also exposed.’ (*OG*, 9).

²³ Johnson, 7.

²⁴ Martin Heidegger, ‘The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking’, trans. Joan Stambaugh, in *Basic Writings*, Foreword by Taylor Carmen, intr. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 378.

suggests Derrida upends in relation to structuralism and the linguistic system. Rather, the tenets of deconstruction shares ‘affinity with the metamorphic and adaptational (“open-system”) models found in systems theory, models which were never properly assimilated and applied by structuralist theory’.²⁵ What is at stake in this positioning of deconstruction, which remains first and foremost a response to the philosophical structure of metaphysics? For it is impossible, particularly in the case of Derrida, to remove ‘the theory itself’ from the structures it inhabits. Johnson refutes this claim, stating that despite Derrida’s profession of a lack of theory, the effect of the method of deconstructive reading outstrips this intent. More pertinently, Johnson’s argument maintains that the cybernetic irrefutably infiltrates deconstruction, a case which he constructs based on the notion of the trace as a movement, a dynamic that cannot be reducible to a substance.²⁶ In this formulation, Johnson finds an equivocation with Shannon’s ‘sender and receiver’ model²⁷ of communication. On this basis, Johnson is able to interpret Derrida’s reading of Freud in ‘Freud and the Scene of Writing’ as ‘a form of cohabitation of two descriptions or models, and a circulation or exchange of concepts between them.’²⁸ The homology of the structure of the cybernetic model of communication with what Derrida finds in Freud enables an oblique shift that allows Johnson to attribute cause and effect:

While it may owe something to previous philosophies of difference (Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger), there is also a sense in which Derrida’s reading of Freud would be impossible without the modern development of cybernetic and information theory, even if he does not appear to make any direct use of the concepts and terminologies of these disciplines.²⁹

However, the intent in dragging out this particular, historicized, reading of deconstruction is an attempt to discern vestiges of manner, rather than particularities of opinion. In the case of reading Johnson reading Derrida against the ‘cybernetic’ almost fifteen years later, we might gather the salience of the myths of intellectual culture and the care required when attending to the topical nature of the contemporary thematic.

Reading this early-nineties book in order to consider the legacy of deconstruction brings me to question my own interest in the ‘biological’ consonances to be found in Derrida’s writings. If Derrida’s articulation of the ‘structure of structures’ does indeed contain parallels with the manner in which molecular biology has discovered the operation of life in nature, must it then follow that biological conceptions of living matter might equally be conceived of (by Derrida or as the result of his writings) as a tool to think the entirety of consciousness and its relation to life and death? Must one disciplinary bias (either the empirical/scientific or the metaphysical/philosophical) take precedence? If Derrida speaks of iterability, survival, and the trace as articulations of writing, must the equivalent discovery of a ‘code’ of DNA in biological science ‘confirm’ the movement of deconstruction as described by Derrida or vice versa?

These questions have emerged alongside the most recent scholarship on the topic of Derrida and biology, particularly through readings of Derrida’s themes from nature

²⁵ Johnson, 8.

²⁶ ‘Derrida’s model of inscription is a structural model, that is, its purpose is not empirical description, but the setting forth of the conditions of possibility’ (Johnson, 75.)

²⁷ Claude E. Shannon, ‘A Mathematical Theory of Communication’, *Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (1948).

²⁸ Johnson, 76.

²⁹ Johnson, 76.

such as gestation and birth, filiation, dissemination, etc. However, the scholarship, which is still in its initial stages and rightly consists of close readings and re-readings of Derrida's texts, has not yet proposed a strong argument for or against a reading of Derrida as a philosopher of nature or of science. It is indispensable to dwell on the questions and implications that emerge from approaching a comparative reading of Derrida and biology. As one of the prominent voices on this topic, Vitale's work appears to place deconstruction as the primal descriptor of the operation of the 'living'.³⁰ In this reading, the live body and the biological process of replicating life, when viewed as a 'text', is the example par excellence of Derrida's *différance*. Such a reading calls not only for the re-envisioning of the relation between philosophy and science, but also the reconstruction of scientific work itself.³¹ A proposal that deserves serious consideration. But how might this reconception proceed? There is no doubt that to think the scientific understanding of biology as arche-writing necessitates the re-figuring of the relation between philosophy and science, which, subsequently, would no longer figure as binary modalities of thought but rather branches of the same instinct.³² However, given the lessons of cybernetics and the contemporary cultural milieu in which molecular biology dominates discussions of medicine, bio-scientific research and the popular imagination of 'life', the term 'biodeconstruction', its gesture, might give us pause. Techno-scientific culture today is exhibiting its biotechnological moment, one that is perhaps coming already to a close, in the way that the cybernetic culminated in personal computing in the nineties. This closure does not necessarily need to be terminal, as has been demonstrated by computing technologies. The 'work' of the genetic and its sign 'DNA' has penetrated all possible spheres of what might be considered biological life. Having exhausted this venue, it is escaping into any arena it might be afforded – architecture, information storage, alternative health, art, to name just a few. One must remain wary of its insistence on its own rubric as not only the mode of existence itself but also for its seduction as a technic of thought.

The task of reckoning with the consonances between deconstruction and molecular biology, in this case, must be conducted with awareness of the tendency to ascribe origin and intent, reading implications into a structure outlined by deconstruction that certainly is not reducible to a single thematic. For instance, reading a footnote Derrida makes on Freud in *Dissemination*, Senatore contends: 'Derrida seems to suggest that the properly called genetic program could be taken as the required, organic support provided by

³⁰ 'The notion of gramme permits us to inscribe the later history in an even greater one: the history of life itself, namely, the evolution of life in general, which is governed by the law of survival.' Francesco Vitale, 'The Text and the Living: Jacques Derrida between Biology and Deconstruction', *Oxford Literary Review* 36.1 (2014): 101.

³¹ 'if the living is a text which produces texts in order to survive in relation to its environment, then we can legitimate the possibility of scientific knowledge, whose conditions and structures, however, we should reconsider in textual terms.' (Vitale, 111.)

³² Phillips casts this very idea as the figure of the monster that is birthed at the end of *Structure, Sign and Play* 'The monstrous species turns out to have been the very genus of both the metaphysics of presence and empirical science. As such Hegel's *Begriff* – the concept of conception itself – generates itself as other than itself, and in this division, this difference, in which the trace of itself is born, conception inhabits its matrix while exceeding it. The trace, at once the matrix and the generated form, functions as the philosophical model for conception, a worthy if monstrous successor to Hegel's absolute knowledge, and as the current possibility of an engagement with the world event.' John W. P. Phillips, 'The Magic Center: Matrix and Conception in Derrida's *La Structure, Le Signe et Le Jeu*', *Theory & Event* 12.1 (2009); available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/263143> [accessed 6 November 2017].

contemporary biology to the tentative, grammatological concept of inscription.’³³ This statement, which is neither substantiated nor fully explored in an otherwise faithful and productive reading of ‘seminal difference’, underlies the difficulty of resisting the categorical divisions between *phenomena* and *noemata* when considering the topic of Derrida and biology. The distinction between the ‘biological’ and the ‘organic support’³⁴ provided by it can too easily be glossed over by failing to address biology itself as a historically determined discourse with a dynamic understanding of its objects – cells, genes, and molecules. Perhaps this is yet to come.

‘two interpretations of interpretation’

It appears that somehow, in thinking history and culture, we have returned to the opposition between nature and culture, the very theme Derrida describes as ‘congenital to philosophy’. (*SSP*, 282) When Derrida refers, in ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’, to the historical moment (‘the totality of an era, our own’ (*SSP*, 280)) as he does so often in his works of the sixties and seventies, his mode is historiographical. In several of his early writings, particularly ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’ as well as the beginning of *Of Grammatology*, followed by ‘Differance’, Derrida alludes to a very particular notion of history (‘our epoch’³⁵). This history (its concept), is a theme in Derrida’s writing that names the history of thought. But what is its name? It is almost always invoked within the context of Western discourses of knowledge as situated in its traditions, its *epistēmē* (‘the concept of structure and even the word “structure” itself are as old as the *episteme* – that is to say, as old as Western science and Western philosophy’ (*SSP*, 278)). When Derrida outlines in 1957 that ‘the entire history of the concept of structure [...] must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center’ (*SSP*, 278), even though this is an idea that is today more ‘classical’ than revolutionary, perhaps we often fail to recognize that interpretations of deconstruction themselves are not immune from this effect. Perhaps in the place of Lévi-Strauss and ethnology (the theme of the ‘human sciences’), in attempting to think biology (and what is more ‘human’ than the study of the living body?) we are caught in an encounter with the material. Could it be that this scientific reckoning with the intelligible and the sensible as it takes place on the ‘living body’³⁶ signals the impossibility of reconciling deconstruction in any satisfactory manner? The moment of writing, its historicization, is always wrapped up in the dressings of its entire history. Ethnology, Derrida’s example via Lévi-Strauss in ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’, then, is dressed up in garb that Derrida describes as ‘even older than Plato’.³⁷

³³ Mauro Senatore, ‘Of Seminal Difference: Dissemination and Philosophy of Nature’, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 15.1 (2015): 70.

³⁴ Senatore, ‘Of Seminal Difference’, 70.

³⁵ See footnote 16.

³⁶ ‘[Marx and Stirner] both share, apparently like you and me, an unconditional preference for the living body. But precisely because of that, they wage an endless war against whatever represents it, whatever is not the body but belongs to it, comes back to it: prosthesis and delegation, repetition, differance.’ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning & the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, intr. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 177.

³⁷ ‘It is at least as old as the Sophists. Since the statement of the opposition *physis/nomos*, *physis/technē*, it has been relayed to us by means of a whole historical chain which opposes “nature” to law, to education, to art, to technics – but also to liberty, to the arbitrary, to history, to society, to the mind and so on.’ (*SSP*,

The moment of deconstruction, which is now well over fifty years old, might indeed have marked the ‘rupture’ with the discovery of ‘the absence’ of the ‘original or transcendental signified’ which is ‘never absolutely present outside a system of differences’ (*SSP*, 280). Its effects have undoubtedly been cast throughout the humanities, particularly in literary studies. Similar to the term ‘cybernetic’, deconstruction has infiltrated all manner of critical scholarship from literature and philosophy to the political. On the front of ‘philosophy’, today deconstruction is trained, relegated to one ‘method’ amongst many that might be a matter of choice. And yet it silently infiltrates the possibility of philosophical critique on all fronts.

Perhaps it is not accidental that ‘the living body’³⁸ is the term Derrida uses when he first begins to outline the structure of the autoimmune in relation to the understanding of the conscious identity of the self. To proceed with a somewhat vulgar homology: ethnology might be transposed with biology (but before that ‘information’ or any other substitutions of the ‘centre’). The often-quoted moment, the first instance of Derrida’s use of the term autoimmune which is frequently read as the mark of Derrida’s transition into the territory of ‘politics’, might be re-interpreted as the latest iteration of the substitution of the centre when re-read alongside ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’. To consider this reading and this homology, however, is to face ‘post-structuralism’ as equivalent to the ‘structuralism’ it displaces, substitutes, supplements because it is itself equally susceptible to its own critiques.³⁹ This is guaranteed by Derrida’s description of the ‘structuralist’ moment as the movement of substitution itself.⁴⁰

The conflation of structuralism with post-structuralism, however, operates on a formal, rather than absolute distinction. The distinction Derrida reminds us of in *Of Grammatology* is the movement of *différance* itself: ‘Although the word “age” or “epoch” can be given more than these determinations, I should mention that I have concerned myself with a structural figure as much as a historical totality.’ (*OG*, lxxxix) This determines that its identification in no way necessitates shying away from an intervention in what Derrida, during the Cold War, called ‘techno-science’,⁴¹ the rise of which has not abated. Rather, this attempt to recollect ‘Structure, Sign, and Play’ would also call for the re-examination of scientificity in all its possible applications. The questioning of science is a sphere that deconstruction has engaged with since the beginning and is integral to thinking knowledge in the current context as Derrida began to do in ‘Faith and Knowledge’. Derrida reminds us that despite the impossibility of evading the very matrix we critique, the opening of deconstruction⁴² is offered in the possibility of its manner;

282).

³⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 177.

³⁹ ‘*It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed.*’ Jacques Derrida, ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’, trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in *Derrida and Différance*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Warwick: Parousia Press, 1985), 4.

⁴⁰ ‘one can describe what is peculiar to the structural organization only by not taking into account, in the very moment of this description, its past conditions: by omitting to posit the problem of the transformation from one structure to another, by putting history between brackets. In this “structuralist” moment, the concepts of chance and discontinuity are indispensable.’ (*SSP*, 286.) Phillips suggests this structure of substitution is rehearsed in the structure of Derrida’s article itself: ‘To read “Structure, Sign, and Play” in this way would inevitably lead to the problem of the structure of the article itself, which concludes with the assertion of a new opposition between the “two interpretations.”’ (Phillips, ‘The Magic Center’.)

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, ‘No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)’, *Diacritics* 14.2: ‘Nuclear Criticism’ (1984): 22.

⁴² ‘What deconstruction affirms, what it says “yes, yes” to, is not pure game or expenditure, but the necessity of contamination.’ (Bennington, ‘Derridabase’, 310.)

whether that might be a question of method or style, it does not shrink from addressing what remains largely ‘a problem of *economy* and *strategy*’ (*SSP*, 282). In this context – with the clarification of meaning as given by *différance* – the division of cells governing biological generation provides the grounds for the discussion of the operation of iterability as the operation of natural life itself. However, the definition of ‘life’ is itself a question that remains unresolved. ‘Living’ is also by this same logic inescapably the shared vernacular of the natural process of biological existence and of the process of consciousness that makes human existence meaningful.

‘the formless’

But still, the attempt to account for an inheritance, to think what might lie beyond the context of the milieu, requires a simultaneous movement of essentialization and contextualization. In order to proceed toward a twenty-first century understanding of the relation between Derrida and knowledge while at the same time avoiding the pitfall of adequation, the stakes must be raised, or at least contextualized, as none other than the politics of the university. These are not restricted to the artificially erected distinction between the domains of ‘the humanities’ and ‘the sciences’. As Rottenberg puts it, the ‘polemic of “Faith and Knowledge”’ might be read as an offering. Derrida’s ‘bold thematization of a terrible predicament, a predicament in which the failure of self-protection, the failure of consciousness and cognition to protect against the “possibility to come of the worst” [...] is bound up with the future of life.’⁴³ Just as Derrida’s ‘deconstruction’ of traditional metaphysics in the 1960s was a concern with the ‘subject’ through a reading of the voice, the critique of the subject via the autoimmune extends the characterization to the subjected-to – the state of religion, the sovereign nation-state, the state of the university and so on – through the enactment of what Derrida describes as ‘an irreducible “faith;” that of a “social bond” or of a “sworn faith, of a testimony”’ which is ‘a performative of promising at work’:

neither convention, nor institution, nor constitution, nor sovereign state, nor law, nor above all, here, that structural performativity of the productive performance that binds from its very inception the knowledge of the scientific community to doing, and science to technics.⁴⁴

As Derrida begins in the 1960s to write about the impossibility of the singular presence in *Of Grammatology*⁴⁵ and *Speech & Phenomena*⁴⁶ the import of the ‘biological

⁴³ Elizabeth Rottenberg, ‘The Legacy of Autoimmunity’, *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 39.3 (2006): 12.

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, ‘Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone’, trans. Samuel Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2001), 80.

⁴⁵ ‘To make enigmatic what one thinks one understands by the words “proximity,” “immediacy,” “presence” (the proximate [*proche*], the own [*propre*], and the pre- of presence), is my final intention in this book.’ (*OG*, 70.)

⁴⁶ ‘No one will be surprised if we say that language is properly the medium for this play of presence and absence.’ (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 10.); ‘The historic destiny of phenomenology seems in any case to be contained in these two motifs: on the one hand phenomenology is the reduction of naïve ontology, the return to an active constitution of sense and value, to the activity of a life which produces truth and value in general through its signs. But at the same time, without being simply juxtaposed to this move, another factor will necessarily confirm the classical metaphysics of presence and indicate the adherence of phenomenology to classical ontology.’ (Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 25.)

metaphor' comes to be held in a duality. This duality comes to bear explicitly in *Dissemination*, but even more so in his so-called political writings which feature the logic of the autoimmune. That is, given the trail of significations from Husserl's *Lebenswelt* to Derrida's reading of Husserl;⁴⁷ the intricacies between, life, (*la vie, Leben*), cannot be simplified into transliterations of the same concept, let alone considered as belonging singularly to either the domain of science or philosophy. This structural anachronism (rather than the similarities) generated by the lexical commonality might provide the basis for thinking the parallels between the traditions of empirical science and metaphysics.

The structure of metaphor as it embodies the method of knowledge indicates that Derrida's critique of what was called the 'human sciences' in the 1960s was not only directly relevant to science in general (the regime of *epistēmē* in its entirety), but that Derrida's use of the tropes of biology to describe his own method indicates a much deeper entanglement with natural science than is possible to be found in either Husserl or Heidegger, who were more explicit and vehement critics of what Derrida comes to call 'techno-science'. As the recurring 'lean towards' the biological descriptors evident in the next decade of Derrida's writing would indicate, the radical nature of the borrowing does not lie within the perception of the metaphoricity of the biological terms, but rather in the interconnections between them. The implications of this approach to Derrida's relationship to science indicates a relationship to what was identified in 'Faith and Knowledge' as the 'duplicity of sources in general'.⁴⁸ That is, not only to identify the artifice that is the duality that sources must be built upon, but to *rely upon it* as a way for thinking. The implications of this 'way' itself operates on a sort of autoimmune logic as it encounters the impossibility of engaging in a critique that is itself not subjected to. The logic of evolution makes a fitting analogy here, engaging the concept of 'mutation' productively, as variation by mutation offers the opportunity of renewal. It is mutation (with its threat of the possible monster) that allows the organism to differ in a manner that might remain advantageous to its species, and yet it is also the process by which the contemporary iteration faces obsolescence. Leaving its present form outmoded at best or else dooming it to its extinction. Deconstruction makes a similar offer to the philosophy of knowledge in its insistence on the impossibility of the faithfulness of the source but also on the impossibility of carrying on without it.

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⁴⁷ Phillips highlights the reference to 'life' in the link Derrida makes to Husserl's transcendental object from the Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry to Speech and Phenomena*, while, at the same time, highlighting the existence of a paradoxical structure of immunity that is described by Derrida within the scientific literature on the morphology of immunological function itself: 'Jacques Derrida's [...] adventures in the texts of Western philosophy more or less begin here, with his examination in Husserl's text of the necessary conditions underlying the "vital life" of intuition and the "Living Presence" of the lifeworld.' John W. P. Phillips, 'Force and Vulnerability in Philosophy and Science: Husserl, Derrida', *Cultural Politics* 11.2 (2015): 148.

⁴⁸ Derrida, 'Faith and Knowledge', 80.

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Indeterminări determinate. Deconstrucția și procedura privind cunoașterea

Rezumat

Multitudinea răspunsurilor critice la opera lui Derrida de-a lungul timpului demonstrează dificultatea de a reconcilia în mod univoc moștenirea deconstrucției. Tendința deconstrucției de a mima forma variatelor câmpuri de producție, ca de exemplu teoria informării-comunicării și biologia moleculară, complică aceste dispute și mai mult prin generarea unei matrici prin care răspunsul critic la provocările gândirii derridiene se împiedică în performarea propriilor teme. Întorcându-ne la *Gramatologia*, demonstrăm cum contextul anului 1967 a poziționat argumentele lui Derrida înspre un acord cu dezbaterile timpului din domenii precum etnografie, (de)colonizare, și „științele umane”. Se pare că aceste problematice astăzi demodate au umbrat implicațiile mai largi ale deconstrucției în arii de cunoaștere care sunt mai pertinente astăzi. Însă controversalele *arhi-scrierii* și operația textualității rămân valabile. Această „problemă” generativă inerentă indică o porozitate între deconstrucție și momentul în care se crede că a fost evidențiată tensiunea din interiorul gestului deconstrucției însăși.