The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions

Edward W. Said

The pages that follow work through two powerful, contemporary "ways" of considering, describing, analyzing, and dealing theoretically with the problem of textuality, a manifestly central problem for anyone concerned with criticism and theory. These "ways"—with only the slightest allusion to Proust's "ways" intended—are Foucault's and Derrida's. My analysis of these two theories is part of an attempt to characterize an exemplary critical consciousness as situated between, and ultimately refusing both, the hegemony of the dominant culture and what I call the sovereignty of systematic method. Moreover, I will argue that for both these critics, critical work is a cognitive activity, a way of discovery, not by any means a purely contemplative activity; indeed, I will go so far as to say that in our present circumstances criticism is an adversary, or oppositional, activity. Finally—and I am depressingly aware that these prefatory comments are far too schematic—I will discuss Derrida's *mise en abîme* and Foucault's *mise en discours* as typifying the contrast between a criticism claiming that *il n'y a pas d'hors texte* and one discussing textuality as having to do with a plurality of texts, and with history, power, knowledge, and society. Far from mediating or reconciling these vividly contrasting theses about textuality, whose protagonists serve me as but two instances of a very wide theoretical divergence polarizing contemporary criticism, my position uses both in what is its own best interest since both strike me as indispensable to any cogent critical position.
Derrida and Foucault are opposed to each other on a number of grounds, and perhaps the one specially singled out in Foucault’s attack on Derrida—that Derrida is concerned only with “reading” a text and that a text is nothing more than the “traces” found there by the reader—would be the appropriate one to begin with here.¹ According to Foucault, if the text is important for Derrida because its real situation is literally an abysmally textual element, l’écriture en abîme with which (Derrida says in “La double séance”) criticism so far has been unable really to deal,² then for Foucault the text is important because it inhabits an element of power (pouvoir) with a decisive claim on actuality, even though that power is invisible or implied. Derrida’s criticism therefore moves us into the text, Foucault’s in and out of it.

Yet neither Foucault nor Derrida would deny that what unites them—more, even, than the avowedly revisionist and revolutionary character of their criticism as theory, performance, and pedagogy—is their attempt to make visible what is customarily invisible in a text, namely, the various mysteries, the rules, and the “play” of its textuality. Except for one word, Foucault would not, I think, disagree with the rather abrupt definition of textuality advanced by Derrida at the opening of “La pharmacie de Platon,” that “un texte n’est un texte que s’il cache au premier regard, au premier venu, la loi de sa composition et la règle de son jeu. Un texte reste d’ailleurs toujours imperceptible. La loi et la règle ne s’abritent pas dans l’inaccessible d’un secret, simplement elles ne se livrent jamais, au présent, à rien qu’on puisse rigoureusement nommer une perception.”³ The rather troublesome word is “jamais,” although it is

1. Michel Foucault’s attack on Derrida is to be found in an appendix to the later version of Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique (Paris, 1972), pp. 583-603; the earlier edition has been translated into English: Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason, trans. Richard Howard (New York, 1965).
3. “A text is a text only if at first glance and to the first comer it hides the law of its composition and the rule of its internal play. Besides a text always remains imperceptible. Its law and its rule do not merely shelter themselves inside something so inaccessible as a secret, because they quite simply do not ever give themselves up, at present at least, to anything that we might rigorously call a perception.” Ibid., p. 71, here and elsewhere, my translation unless otherwise cited.

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so subtly qualified by Derrida as partly to lose its interdictory force: so I shall ignore the qualifiers and retain the obvious assertiveness of the statement. To say that the text's textual intention and integrity are invisible is to say that the text hides something, that the text implies, perhaps also states, embodies, represents, but does not immediately disclose something. At bottom, this is a gnostic doctrine of the text to which, in quite different ways, Foucault and Derrida both assent.

Foucault's whole enterprise has taken it for a fact, however, that if the text hides something, or if something about the text is invisible, these things can be revealed and stated, albeit in some other form, mainly because the text is part of a network of power whose textual form is a purposeful obscuring of power beneath (or in) textuality and knowledge (savoir). Therefore the countervailing power of criticism is to bring the text back to a certain visibility. More: that if some texts, particularly those in the later phases of a discursive development, assume their textuality because their sources in power have either been incorporated into the text's authority as text or obliterated, it is the archaeologist's task to serve as a countermemory for the text, to put the network around and, finally, before the text, where it can be seen. Derrida works more in the spirit of a kind of negative theology. The more he grasps textuality for itself, the greater the detail of what is not there for him; as will become evident shortly, I consider his key terms, "dissémination," "supplément," "pharmakos," "trace," "marque," and the like, to be not only terms describing "la dissimulation de la texture" but also quasi-theological terms ruling and operating the textual domain his work has opened.

In both cases, nevertheless, the critic challenges the culture and its apparently sovereign powers of intellectual activity, which we may call "system" or "method," when in dealing with texts these powers aspire to the condition of science. The challenge is delivered in characteristically large gestures of differentiation: Derrida refers everywhere to Western metaphysics and thought, Foucault in his earlier work to various periods, epochs, epistémès, that is, those totalities which build the dominant culture into its controlling, incorporating, and discriminating institutions. Each "way," Foucault's and Derrida's, attempts not only to define these challenged entities but also in some persistent fashion to redefine them, to attack the stability, authority, presence, power of their rule, to dissolve them if at all possible. For both writers, their work is meant to replace the tyranny and the fiction of direct reference—to what Derrida calls presence, or the transcendental signified—with the rigor and practice of textuality mastered on its own highly eccentric ground in Derrida's case, and in Foucault's, in its highly protracted, enduring, systematized, and sustained persistence. Dedefinition and antireferentiality are Derrida and Foucault's common response to the positivist ethos which they both

4. One should cite, as an instance of negative theology, the powerfully moving early chapters of De la grammatologie (Paris, 1967); in English, Of Grammatology, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, 1976).
abhors. On the other hand both have constantly appealed to empiricism and to the nuanced perspectivism they seem to have derived from Nietzsche.

There is some irony in the fact that both Derrida and Foucault are solicited nowadays for literary criticism since neither of them is in fact a literary critic. One is a philosopher, the other a philosophic historian. Their material, however, is generically hybrid: quasi-philosophical, quasi-literary, quasi-scientific, quasi-historical. Similarly, their positions in the academic or university world are anomalous in ways that need no very elaborate description here. I suppose that what I am drawing attention to is a fundamental uncertainty in their works as to what they are doing, theorizing over the problem of textuality or—and this is egregiously obvious in Derrida’s case, especially since Glas, but also noticeable in Foucault’s—practicing an alternative textuality of their own. Later I propose to discuss the doctrinal and didactic aspects of their works; now I want simply to state that, at least since De la grammatologie (or at least more explicitly since than before it), Derrida has attempted what he has called a form of écriture double, one half of which “provoque un renversement,” a complete overturning of the cultural domination he everywhere identifies with metaphysics and its hierarchies, the other half of which “laisse détonner une écriture à l’intérieur même de la parole, désorganisant ainsi toute l’ordonnance reçue et envahissant tout le champ.”¹⁵ This unbalanced and unbalancing (décalée et decalante) writing is intended by Derrida to mark the admittedly uneven and undecidable fold (pli) in his work between the description of a text, which he deconstructs, and the enactment of a new one, with which his reader must now reckon. Similarly in Foucault’s case, there is a “double writing” (which is not the name he gives it) intended first to describe (by representing) the texts he studies, as discourse, archive, statements, and the rest, then later to present a new text, his own, doing and saying what those other “invisible” texts have repressed, doing and saying what no one else will say and do.

This simultaneous, intertextual before and after in their writing is designed by both Derrida and Foucault to dramatize the differences between what they do and what they describe, between the logocentric and discursive worlds, on the one hand, and the Derridean and Foucauldian critique, on the other. In both their cases there is a postulated and repeatedly proved culture against which their dedefinitions are directed. Their characterizations of the culture are ample of course, but so far as I am concerned one aspect of these characterizations is extremely problematic.

First Foucault. As he outlines it in *L'Archéologie du savoir* and *L'Ordre du discours*, the archaeological method is supposed to reveal how discourse—impersonal, systematic, highly regulated by enunciative formations—overrides society and governs the production of culture. Foucault's thesis is that *individual* statements, or the chances that individual authors *can* make individual statements, are *not* really likely. Over and above every opportunity for saying something there stands a regularizing collectivity which in his more recent work Foucault has called a discourse, itself governed by the archive. Thus his studies of delinquency, the penal system, and sexual repression are studies of a certain *anonymity* during and because of which, Foucault says in *Surveiller et punir*, "le corps humain entre dans une machinerie de pouvoir qui le fouille, le désarticule et le recompose." The responsibility for this *machinerie* is a *discipline*, a turn taken by discourse when it enters the ranks of administrative justice; but here too Foucault dissolves individual responsibility in the interests not so much of collective responsibility as of institutional will. "Ces méthodes qui permettent le contrôle minutieux des opérations du corps, qui assurent l'assujettissement constant de ses forces et leur imposent un rapport de docilité-utilité, c'est cela qu'on peut appeler les 'disciplines.'"  

In a variety of ways, therefore, Foucault is concerned with *assujettissement*, the subjugation of individuals in society to some suprapersonal discipline or authority. He is obviously anxious to avoid vulgar determinism in explaining the workings of the social order, yet the whole category of intention is pretty much ignored by Foucault. He is conscious of this difficulty, I think, and his account of something called a will to knowledge (and power)—*la volonté de savoir*—attempts in some way to redress the asymmetry in his work between the blindly anonymous and the intentioned. Yet the problem of the relationship between individual subject and collective force (which reflects also the problem of the dialectic between voluntary intention and determined movement) is still an explicit difficulty, and it is acknowledged by Foucault as follows:

Can one speak of science and its history (and therefore of its conditions of existence, its changes, the errors it has perpetrated, the sudden advances that have sent it off on a new course) without reference to the scientist himself—and I am speaking not merely of the concrete individual represented by a proper name, but of his work and the particular form of his thought? Can a valid history of  

6. "The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down, and rearranges it.... These methods, which made possible the meticulous control, of the operations of the body, which assured the constant subjection of its forces and imposed upon them a relation of docility-utility, might be called 'disciplines.'" Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (Paris, 1975), p. 139; in English, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1978), pp. 137–38.
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science be attempted that would retrace from beginning to end the whole spontaneous movement of an anonymous body of knowledge? Is it legitimate, is it even useful, to replace the traditional "X thought that . . ." by a "it was known that . . ."? But this is not exactly what I set out to do. I do not wish to deny the validity of intellectual biographies, or the possibility of a history of theories, concepts, or themes. It is simply that I wonder whether such descriptions are themselves enough, whether they do justice to the immense density of scientific discourse, whether there do not exist, outside their customary boundaries, systems of regularities that have a decisive role in the history of the sciences. I should like to know whether the subjects responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them.

This is shrewd, perhaps even disarming, self-criticism, but the questions have yet to be answered. Certainly Foucault's work since the Archéologie du savoir and since the two long interviews given in 1968 to Esprit and Cahiers pour l'analyse, has progressed in the directions suggested by his remark about individuals, "I wonder whether such descriptions are themselves enough." That is, he has provided a prodigiously detailed set of possible descriptions whose main aim is, once again, to overwhelm the individual subject or will and to replace it instead with minutely responsive rules of discursive formation, rules that no one individual can either alter or circumvent. These rules exist, and they are to be complied with mainly because discourse is not mere formalization of knowledge; its aim is the control and manipulation of knowledge, the body politic, and ultimately (although Foucault is evasive about this) the State.

Foucault's dissatisfaction with the subject as sufficient cause of a text and his recourse to the invisible anonymity of discursive and archival power are curiously matched by Derrida's own brand of involuntarism. This is a very complex and, to me, deeply troubling aspect of Derrida's work. On the one hand, there are Derrida's frequent references to Western metaphysics, to a philosophy of presence and all that it entails and explains about a fairly wide variety of texts, from Plato, through Descartes, Hegel, Kant, Rousseau, Heidegger, and Lévi-Strauss; on the other hand, there is Derrida's attention to the minutiae, the inadvertent elisions, confusions, circumspections on certain key points, to be found in a number of important texts. What his readings of a text are meant to uncover is silent complicity between the superstructural pressures of metaphysics and an ambiguous innocence about a detail at the level of

base, for example, Husserl's merely verbal distinction between expressive and indicative signs or the vacillation (discussed in "Ousia et Grammé") between Aristotole's nun and ama.9 Yet the mediating agency between the level of detail and the superstructural level is neither referred to nor taken into account. In some cases, including the two I have mentioned, Derrida's implication is that the writer deliberately eluded the problems sprung on him by his own verbal behavior, in which event we are to suppose perhaps that he is being pressured involuntarily by the superstructure and the teleological biases of "metaphysics." In other instances, however, the writer's own complex textual practice is divided against itself; the undecidability of a term—for example, "pharmakos," "supplément," or "hymen"—is built into the text and its workings. Yet as to whether or not the writer was aware of this undecidability is a question posed explicitly only once by Derrida, and then dropped. Here is his rather allusive treatment of the problem in Of Grammatology:

In Rousseau's text, after having indicated—by anticipation and as a prelude—the function of the sign "supplement," I now prepare myself to give special privilege, in a manner that some might consider exorbitant, to certain texts like the Essay on the Origin of Languages and other fragments on the theory of language and writing. By what right? And why these short texts, published for the most part after the author's death, difficult to classify, of uncertain date and inspiration?

To all these questions and within the logic of their system, there is no satisfying response. In a certain measure and in spite of the theoretical precautions that I formulate, my choice is in fact exorbitant.10

What Derrida is really asking himself is whether what he does and whether the texts he has chosen for this analysis of Rousseau have anything to do with Rousseau, what Rousseau did or intended to do, or not. Did Rousseau value and emphasize the Essay on the Origin of Languages, or not? Moreover, in posing the questions and then saying that there is no satisfying response, isn't Derrida himself still relying on the very notion of intention which he tried to make exorbitant to his method? For despite his insistent criticism of such terminalistic or barrier ideas as source and origin, Derrida's own writing, in a passage like this one, is full of them. His word "privilege" for what he does, like his escape at the end of the passage into "exorbitance," does not diminish his reliance upon the notion of "Rousseau" as an author having a specifiable life span, an evident canon of texts, datable and classifiable works and periods, and so forth. There is also an eighteenth century, an age of Rousseau, and a

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much larger closure called Western thought—all of which seem to exert some influence on what texts mean, on their vouloir-dire. What “Rousseau” designates in all this is something clearly more than Derrida can ignore, even when he puts quotation marks around the name. To what extent is the phrase “my choice” to be understood as indicating mere intellectual willfulness and to what extent a methodological act of philosophic liberation from “the totality of the age of logocentrism”? Is the word “supplement” emphasized before Derrida’s exorbitance, and is his passage therefore prepared for in part by Rousseau himself out of the logocentric world; or is the choice made exorbitantly, and hence from exteriority, in which case we must ask how (since the method is the issue) one can systematically place oneself outside “the logocentric world” when every other writer somehow cannot. And what is the content of the will enabling such a translation of verbally ensnared philosopher into a new, efficient reader?

The severity of these questions is validated by Derrida himself, who in his critique of Foucault had barraged the Histoire de la folie with objections to its cavalier indifference about its own discursive complicities. In accusing Foucault of not having dealt sufficiently with the philosophic and methodological problems of discussing the silence of unreason in a (more or less) rational language, Derrida opens up the question of Foucault’s rigor. For even if Foucault claims to be himself using a language maintained in “une relativité sans recours,” Derrida is entitled to ask “à quoi en dernier recours il a appuyé ce langage sans recours et sans appui: qui énonce le non-recours? qui a écrit et qui doit entendre, dans quel langage et à partir de quelle situation historique du logos, qui a écrit et qui doit entendre cette histoire de la folie?”11 The issue here is Foucault’s claim to be liberating folly from its forcible enclosure inside Western culture. To which claim Derrida’s answer is: “je serais tenté de considérer le livre de Foucault comme un puissant geste de protection et de renfermement. Un geste cartésien pour le XXe siècle. Une récupération de la négativité. En apparence, c’est la raison qu’il renferme à son tour, mais, comme le fit Descartes, c’est la raison d’hier qu’il choisit comme cible, et non la possibilité du sens en général.”12 For what Der-

11. “A relativity without recourse [means that one is entitled to ask] on what in the final analysis he has caused this language to depend, as if without seeming in fact to depend on anything this language pronounces its own nonrecursability? Who has written and who must listen to this language, in what specific language and as a result of what historical situation of the logos must one understand how this language was written and how it was intended to be received? . . .” Derrida, L’Ecriture et la différence (Paris, 1967), p. 61.

12. “I would therefore be tempted to say that Foucault’s book is itself a powerful gesture of protection and enclosure. It is a twentieth-century Cartesian gesture. It is a sort of recovery of negativity. For apparently it is reason itself which it has enclosed, but just as Descartes did, Foucault has chosen as his target, not the possibility of meaning in general but a sort of yesterday’s reason.” Ibid., p. 85.
Derrida claims to have found Foucault doing is reading Descartes naively, mistaking Descartes and domesticating notions of doubt, making it appear that Descartes had severed folly from reason; whereas, according to Derrida, a close reading of Descartes' text shows the contrary, that Descartes' hyperbolic theory of doubt included the idea of "Malin Génie," whose function it was not to banish but to include folly as part of the originating and originary flaw undermining the order of rationality itself. It is this troubling economy between reason, madness, silence, on the one hand, and language, on the other, that Derrida accuses Foucault of overlooking as he seems to announce the exteriority of the archaeologica method to the structures of imprisonment and enclosure he describes.

I have simplified a very complicated argument, and I shall not now rehearse Foucault's response to Derrida's criticism; that response properly belongs to a later account of Foucault's work. For the moment my interest is in Derrida's positing of the metaphysical, logocentric world and in how the writers he examines as instances of that world become a part of it. This is a question that I take very seriously. For it is never really clear how the logocentric fallacy—which takes many different forms: binary, axiological oppositions with one apparently equal term controlling the other, paternally organized hierarchies, ethnocentric valorization, phallic insemination—how the logocentric prejudice insinuates itself to begin with, nor how it becomes (as it frequently is referred to) the larger thing that is Western metaphysics. Neither is it apparent how metaphysical biases, including the neglect of the sign and the nostalgia for presence, can be ascribed, on the one hand, to the inadvertencies of a writer (in some cases), his elisions, his sliding from one term to another (dérapage) and, on the other hand, to the clearly (but only implicitly) intentioned designs of Western metaphysics upon its adherents. For on the one hand there is Derrida's vigilance in exposing the small mistakes, the significant lapses made by writers going from one thing to the next heedlessly and, on the other, there is Derrida appealing to the influence of a philosophy of presence, which acts—it seems—as an agent of something still larger and more prevalent called Western metaphysics.

If we are not to say that the point of a philosophy of presence is to accomplish certain things not only in the text but beyond the text—in the institutions of society, for example—then are we forced to say that the accomplishments of Western metaphysics are (a) the infection of philosophic prose by certain errors of a false logic and (b), by a kind of irony, the deconstruction of Western texts by Derrida? As reader of these texts, then, Derrida's own will realizes itself, a process which is theoretically infinite because the number of texts to be deconstructed is as large as Western culture, and hence practically infinite. Is it entirely inaccurate to say that Derrida's elimination of voluntarism and of inten-
tion, in the interests of what he calls infinite substitution, conceals, or perhaps smuggles in, an act of Derrida's will in which the deconstructive strategy, based on a theory of undecidability and desemanticization, provides (and has already provided) a new semantic horizon, and hence a new interpretive opportunity associated with a Derridean philosophy? To the extent that Derrida's disciples have availed themselves of this strategy and its "concepts" (about which I shall have something to say later) a kind of new orthodoxy has come into existence, no less held in by certain doctrines and ideas than is "Western metaphysics." For this of course Derrida is not responsible.

But I am not convinced that such orthodoxies exist in any very simple, almost passive way. That is, it seems much more likely (and difficult to describe) that any philosophy or critical theory exists and is maintained in order not merely to be there, passively around everyone and everything, but in order to be taught and diffused, to be absorbed decisively into the institutions of society or to be instrumental in maintaining or changing or perhaps upsetting these institutions and that society. To these latter ends Derrida and Foucault have been variously responsive—and this is, I believe, what recommends them to our attention. Each in his own way has attempted to devise what is (in aim at least) a form of critical openness and repeatedly renewed theoretical resourcefulness, designed first to provide knowledge of a very specific sort, second, to provide an opportunity for further critical work itself and, third, to avoid if possible both the self-confirming operations of culture and the wholly predictable monotony of a disengaged critical system. I should like now to consider these things in Derrida's work.

Ever since his earliest considerations of the various programs put forward by critical and philosophical methods, Derrida has stalked a certain self-serving quality in these methods. The military and hunting metaphor is apt, I think, since Derrida has recently spoken in such terms of what he does: I refer not only to the interviews published in Positions but also to his essay "Où commence et comment finit un corps enseignant" published in the collection *Politiques de la philosophie*. What has attracted his aggressive intentions is the almost visual aspect of these methods by which the text, or the problem to be discussed by the method, seems to be entirely doubled, or duplicated—and hence deceptively resolved—in the text of the critic or philosopher. But this can only take place (and there are several conditions to be met) if the original text or problem is represented by the critic schematically in order that, second, the critical text can accommodate the problem completely so that, third, the critical text appears to stand alongside the original text, appearing also to absorb, explain, account for everything in it.

Derrida’s entire procedure is to show, either in the pretended rapport between critical and original texts or in the representation of a problem by a text, that far from criticism being able to account for everything by a doubling or duplicating representation, there is always something that escapes. Because writing itself is a form of escape from every scheme designed either to shut it down, hold it in, frame it, or parallel it perfectly, any attempt to show writing as capable in some way or the other of being secondary is also an attempt to prove that writing is not original. The military operation involved in deconstruction therefore is in one respect an attack on a party of colonialists who have tried to make the land and its inhabitants over into a realization of their plans, an attack in turn partly to release prisoners and partly to free land held forcibly. What Derrida shows over and over is that writing (écriture)—and here we must note that whether he admits it openly or not, Derrida does introduce oppositions, themes, definitions, and hierarchies between different sorts of writing, for there are, after all is said and done, various sorts of writing, some better than others—what Derrida shows is that écriture is not so much only a process of production and effacement, tracing and retracing, but essentially a process of excess, overflowing, of bursting through, just as his own work itself attempts to burst through various conceptual barriers, enclosures, repressions.

In the Grammatology Derrida speaks of a “redoublement effacé et respectueux du commentaire,” the idea being that when reading a given text traditionally a critic will respect its supposed stability and securely reproduce that stability in a critical commentary that—figuratively speaking—stands alongside the original text. Similarly, a formalist reading of a poetic text will posit the form as being principally there to receive—hence, formally, to double—the text’s meaning. The visual equivalent of such a procedure is described quite brilliantly by Derrida as geometrical, one text (“square,” “circular,” or having an irregular contour) reproduced in another text whose shape corresponds exactly to that of the first. Between them the pair of texts presumably allows the critic to have “la tranquille assurance qui saute par-dessus le texte vers son contenu présumé, du côté du pur signifié.” The teleology of the whole business is what Derrida legitimately questions, as when he describes Jean Rousset’s “teleological structuralism”: “Rousset ne semble pas poser . . . que toute forme soit belle, mais seulement celle qui s’entend avec le sens, celle qui se laisse entendre de nous parce qu’elle est d’abord d’intelligence avec le sens. Alors pourquoi, encore une fois, le privilège du géomètre?”

15. “The tranquil assurance that jumps over the text toward its presumed content, toward its pure signified.” Ibid., p. 228.
16. “Rousset seems not to have posited the notion that every form is beautiful, but
Such neatness as Rousset's can do nothing with the irreducible primordial shock delivered by all writing, an initial violence common to all écriture. So whether a critic doubles a text or says about a text that its form coincides perfectly with its content, the neatness is a repressing one, and it has been Derrida's remarkable project everywhere to open language to its own richness, thereby to free it from the impositions of helpful schemata.

But Derrida has been no less perspicacious in lifting off the covers of a great many assertions which, more recently in his work, he has called thèmes, or catégorèmes—words that claim to refer to something definite and unshakable outside themselves for which they are supposed to be exact duplicates. These words involve a great deal of purely linguistic maneuvering hidden behind their calm Apollonian façade. Not for nothing was Derrida's first extended work a study of Husserl's Logische Untersuchungen of 1900–1901 (a date with almost vulgar significance for phenomenology as a science of “pure principle” or primordiality), a set of investigations whose stated effort was to understand meaning and its implements more radically than ever before. Into every one of Husserl's important and not so important definitions Derrida insinuates his technique of trouble; he shows generally that Husserl's denigration of the sign, his subordination of the sign to a meaning it existed economically to express, was an unsuccessful attempt to “eliminate signs by making them derivative”;¹⁷ and still more important Husserl's attitude to signs (and to language) pretended that signs were mere modifications of “a simple presence,” as if in using language, presence could ever be present except as represence (or representation), reproduction, repetition—to all of which signs were not only inevitable but, paradoxically, the only presence, a represence proclaiming the absence of what the sign presented. Derrida's role is that of an investigative reporter “attentive to the instability [and the messy quality] of all these [philosophers'] moves, for they pass quickly and surreptitiously into one another.” Far from being a set of neat radical distinctions between one thing and another, Husserl's whole science of origins thus turns out instead to be “a purely teleological structure” designed mainly to eliminate signs, and other trivia, and restore “presence.” And what is presence, but “an absolute will-to-hear-oneself-speak”?¹⁸ The self-confirmation not only of philosophy but also of a kind of lumpish, pure,

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¹⁸. Ibid., pp. 101–2.
and undifferentiated presence to oneself (ontological egoism) simply ignores language which while being used to bring about "presence" is being denied simultaneously. For despite Husserl's desperate scramble to keep it secondary and a serviceable double for presence, language manufactures the very meanings that philosophy desires to produce, plus of course more meanings that philosophy desires to suppress as embarrassing, marginal, accessory. Thus for every big word like "god" or "reality," there are small words like "and" or "between" or even "is," and Derrida's philosophic position is that the big words don't mean anything outside themselves: they are significations attached for their entire sense to all the small words (the \( \text{chevilles syntaxiques} \), as he calls them) which in turn signify more than they can adequately be understood to be expressing.

What, in my opinion, Derrida refers to portentously as Western metaphysics is a magical attitude licensed ironically by language and so far as I know is not necessarily a Western attitude. (But perhaps that is a small point.) Derrida's argument stresses the (again visual) thesis that the valorization of voice, or presence, of ontology is a way of not looking at writing, of pretending that expression is immediate and does not rely upon the signifying visual chain, which is \( \text{écriture} \), writing. The grammatological attitude—and with it the strategy of deconstruction—therefore is a visual, theatrical one, and its consequences for intellectual production (Derrida's in particular) are quite specific and quite special.

2

I should like to begin this section with what may seem a somewhat irrelevant quotation from Great Expectations. Pip and Herbert go off to watch a performance of Hamlet in which Mr. Wopsle, Pip's fellow townsman, has the leading role; the performance comes before Pip finds out who his benefactor is, so the near farce (which, incidentally, anticipates Beckett quite brilliantly) of what he and Herbert see on the stage is meant to be a mocking allusion to Pip's own pretensions at being a gentleman.

On our arrival in Denmark, we found the king and queen of that country elevated in two arm-chairs on a kitchen-table, holding a Court. The whole of the Danish nobility were in attendance; consisting of a noble boy in the wash-leather boots of a gigantic ancestor, a venerable Peer with a dirty face, who seemed to have risen from the people late in life, and the Danish chivalry with a comb in its hair and a pair of white silk legs, and presenting on the whole a feminine appearance. My gifted townsman stood gloomily apart, with folded arms and I could have wished that his curls and forehead had been more probable.
Several curious little circumstances transpired as the action proceeded. The late king of the country not only appeared to have been troubled with a cough at the time of his decease but to have taken it with him to the tomb, and to have brought it back. The royal phantom also carried a ghostly manuscript round its truncheon, to which it had the appearance of occasionally referring, and that, too, with an air of anxiety and a tendency to lose the place of reference which were suggestive of a state of mortality. It was this, I conceive, which led to the Shade's being advised by the gallery to "turn over!"—a recommendation which it took extremely ill. . . . The Queen of Denmark, a very buxom lady, though no doubt historically brazen, was considered by the public to have too much brass about her; her chin being attached to her diadem by a broad band of that metal (as if she had a gorgeous toothache), her waist being encircled by another, and each of her arms by another, so that she was openly mentioned as "the kettledrum." . . . Lastly, Ophelia was a prey to such slow musical madness, that when, in course of time, she had taken off her white muslin scarf, folded it up, and buried it, a sulky man who had long been cooling his impatient nose against an iron bar in the front row of the gallery, growled, "Now the baby's put to bed, let's have supper!" Which, to say the least of it, was out of keeping.

Upon my unfortunate townsman all these incidents accumulated with playful effect. Whenever that undecided Prince had to ask a question or state a doubt, the public helped him out with it. As for example; on the question whether 'twas nobler in the mind to suffer, some roared yes, and some no, and some inclining to both opinions said "toss up for it;" and quite a Debating Society arose. When he asked what should such fellows as he do crawling between earth and heaven, he was encouraged with loud cries of "Hear, hear!" . . . On his taking the recorders . . . he was called upon unanimously for Rule Britannia. When he recommended the player not to saw the air thus, the sulky man said, "And don't you do it, neither; you're a deal worse than him!" 19

The comedy of this is immediately obvious: Dickens takes a well-known play, never mentions it by name, and proceeds to describe the somewhat demeaning incongruities that occur when it is being staged by an incompetent and ridiculous company. The technique of Dickens' description, however, bears a little more analysis. In the first place, several levels of action are formed in the scene which, because Dickens describes a staged performance at a theatre, we expect to be kept distinct from each other. There are Pip and Herbert; there is an audience; there are several vociferous members of the audience who stand out; there are bad actors; there is a stage setting which is supposed to be Denmark; and finally,

very far away it seems, there is supposed to be a play written by Shakespeare commanding the entire proceedings (although the actor playing the part of the ghost carries the text with him).

Now in the second place, these levels are hardly distinct from each other during the performance. That is why the whole business is so funny. Since nothing and no one—actors, spectators, setting, Pip and Herbert—does what is expected of him, we come to realize without much difficulty that no one and nothing fits the part assigned to him. The fit between actor and role, the fit between audience and performer, between speaker and words, between supposed setting and actual scene: all these are out of joint with each other and behave differently than they would if, for example, actor and part were perfectly matched. In short, nothing during this hilariously inept performance perfectly represents what we expect to be represented. For in our heads we have a picture telling us that Hamlet ought to look noble, that the audience ought to be quiet, that the ghost ought to be ghostlike, and so on. The effect of these foiled expectations is a travesty of a great play which, despite the abuses, nevertheless manages to weave its way more or less into everything Dickens describes and inform the entire proceedings. Indeed it would be quite accurate to say that Shakespeare's play, its text, is there offstage, and what happens onstage is a result of the text's imperfect or insufficient power to command this particular performance. For what goes wrong is in some measure due not only to the company's and the audience's incompetence but also to the text's insufficient authority to make a representation or performance of itself work "properly."

One more thing. Not only are the levels scrambled, not only is there no correspondence between original text and its realization, there is also the fact that Hamlet the play is everywhere in Dickens' account of this disastrous evening. I mentioned this a moment ago, but now I must add that what Dickens gives us is in fact a double scene or, to use a musical analogy, a theme and variations in which one text (or theme) and a confused, new version of it take place simultaneously in his prose. Dickens' narrative somehow manages to portray Hamlet and Hamlet travestied, together, not just as montage, but as criticism, a criticism which opens the venerated masterpiece to its own vulnerability, which forces a monument of literature to accept and actually accommodate the fact of its written, and hence unprotected, consequence: each time the play is performed, the performance is a substitute for the original, and so on to infinity, and each time the original becomes a more and more hypothetical "original." So at one and the same time Dickens narrates a dramatic text in the process of its performance as it wants or as it intends to be performed as well as the same text in a new configuration as it is being performed and grossly travestied. The old and the new can cohabit this way for us only because Dickens puts the two together and lets them happen together in his text according to a relatively strict method of
comic exfoliation. If we say that *Hamlet* as Shakespeare wrote it is at the center, or the origin, of the whole episode, then what Dickens gives us is a comically literal account of the center not only unable to hold, but being unable to hold, producing instead a number of new, devastatingly eccentric multiples of the play. Thus the power of the text turns out to be the exact reverse of what I said about it earlier; the text commands and indeed permits, invents, all the misinterpretations and misreadings which are functions of itself.

Since the beginning of his career Derrida has been fascinated with the possibilities of this sort of thing. Some of his philosophic ideas about presence, about the privilege given by Western metaphysics to voice over writing, about the disappearance of the idea of center or origin in modern thought are assumed in a most unphilosophic way by Dickens. For him the simple incontrovertible fact that Shakespeare may have been the author of a great play called *Hamlet* but is not around to prevent *Hamlet* from being taken over and literally redone by anyone who has a mind to do so is an assumption resembling Derrida’s notion that ideas of voice, presence, and metaphysical “origins” are simply inadequate for the performative actualities of language. The other side of this view is the paradoxical one that Shakespeare’s text is about its travesties of course, but those have to do with the text’s powers, which are tied to its written state and the exigencies of performance and not to Shakespeare’s presence as a once alive human being.

The technique of showing how these myths about voice and presence persist in our thinking, and in much writing (whose whole status is undermined and debased by the idea that writing is simply a reflection for something, like thought or a voice, which it is expected to represent), is Derrida’s as much as it is Dickens’ in the scene I’ve been discussing and—to mention another example—Mark Twain’s in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*. Derrida himself has made the point that such debunkings as his in a sense revalidate the old myths, just as Dickens’ parody of *Hamlet* is an act of homage to Shakespeare. This is what Derrida means when he speaks of his philosophy as a form of *paleonymy*. For Derrida the reason the old ideas have this “hold” (the word he uses in *La Voix et le phénomène est prise*) on us and him is that they have preempted our thinking more or less completely, they have caused certain notions (which he calls *impensé*) to become uncritically accepted, and—this is perhaps more important—as a philosopher he has been unable to discover a new way of thinking that totally liberates us from old or persistent ideas. Derrida has been extremely scrupulous about saying that he is not attempting to replace the old ideas with new ones since he apparently does not intend to become the promulgator of a new orthodoxy to replace the old one. Whether this new orthodoxy emerges or not in his work is something I shall come back to a little later; however, it is an
important question and one, I think, unfortunately ignored by Derrida and by his disciples.

But what is Derrida's philosophic strategy of deconstruction, as he calls it, and why are its techniques helpfully illuminated by the scene in *Great Expectations*? Let us start with *representation*, one of the key problems in all criticism and philosophy. Most accounts of representation, including Plato's, involve an original and a copy or representation, the first coming first in time and higher in value, the second later in time and lower in value, the first determining the second; in principle, a representative representation is meant to be a sometimes unavoidable, sometimes merely convenient substitute for the original, which for any number of reasons cannot be present to be itself, and act itself. The representative or substitute is thus qualitatively different from the original, in part because an original is itself and not contaminated by its difference. I simplify greatly of course, but Derrida's philosophic position is that difference—as between original and representative—is not a quality merely added to a representation or secondary object in the way that language is often considered to be a substitute for the real thing (since, for example, it is commonly supposed that language *represents* an idea or a person not immediately present). Rather, Derrida says that difference on one level is added to objects when they are designated as representative, but on another level, the strictly verbal level of designation itself, difference is already differed, and therefore cannot be thought of as a quality or an idea or a concept having originals and copies. Difference is something wholly intrinsic to language, which is diacritical, and is the very activity of language itself when it is perceived not phonetically but graphically, and for this purely graphic linguistic activity Derrida invents the word *différance*, an unnameable (or unpronounceable) name.

What is unnameable here is not some ineffable being that cannot be approached by a name; like God, for example. What is unnameable is the play that brings about the nominal effects, the relatively unitary or atomic structures we call names, or chains of substitutions for names.20

To name something is to specify an idea, object, or concept by giving some priority to the very activity of naming and, of course, to the name. Derrida wants us to see—if not to understand—that so long as we believe that language is mainly a representation of something else, we cannot see what language *does*; so long as we are expecting to understand language in terms of some primitive essence to which it is a functional addition, then we cannot see that any use of language means not only representa-

tion but, paradoxically, the end or permanent deferring of representation and the beginning of something else, which he calls writing. So long as we do not see that writing, more accurately and materially than speaking, signifies language being used not simply as a substitute for something better than itself but as an activity all its own, we cannot recognize that “something better” is a fundamental illusion (for if it could be there, it would be there). In short we will remain in the grip of “metaphysics.”

Written language in fine involves representation, just as the play that Pip sees is a representation; yet to say that language—or rather writing, since that is what Derrida is talking about always—and the performance are representations is not to say that they could be something else. They cannot be because, as I said earlier, the play by Shakespeare called Hamlet is also an instance of writing, and all writing is not a replacement for anything but an admission that there is only writing when language is to be used, at least so far as the possibility of sustained, repeatable representation is concerned. All of a sudden we see that the very notion of representation acquires a new uncertainty, just as, if one thinks about it, every performance of Hamlet—no matter how zany—confirms the play’s own verbal and even thematic instability. What we find Derrida doing is what we saw Dickens doing, allowing the very notion of representation to represent itself on a stage (which is a profoundly apt locale, obviously) where at least two versions of a familiar text get in each other’s way and “on top of each other” (in Norman O. Brown’s phrase), one reversing the other, the new version supplementing the old, and the whole thing happening within Dickens’ prose, which is where and only where it can happen. Thus Derrida’s endless worrying of representation involves him in a kind of permanent but highly economical tautology. He uses his own prose to represent certain ideas of presence, as well as their representations, at work in a whole series of texts from Plato to Heidegger; then in representing these texts he re-reads and rewrites them, enabling us to see them not as representations of something, as references to a transcendental signified outside them, but as texts representing only themselves in, for a text, perfectly representative ways.

This is an extremely bald and inadequate summary of what is by all odds one of the most sophisticated and complex theories of meaning and textuality available today. My main reason for doing the summary as I did is to emphasize a small number of Derrida’s ideas (by no means his system, if there is such a thing) in order to speak about them in a little more detail. I believe that these ideas have a special interest for the critic today who may wish to place himself skeptically between culture, as a massive body of self-congratulating ideas, and system or method, anything resembling a sovereign technique that claims to be free of history, subjectivity, or circumstance. In addition Derrida’s work has some urgency for my notion that if it is not to be merely a form of self-
validation, real criticism (which his is) must intend knowledge and, what is more, it must attempt to deal with, identify, and produce knowledge as having something to do with will and with reason.

Many of Derrida's essays employ not only the spatial metaphors I've been describing but, more specifically, theatrical ones. Writing, écriture, is seen in Freud's work, for example, to have a kind of textuality that attempts to emulate a stage setting. Derrida's two remarkable essays on Artaud in L'Écriture et la différence exploit Artaud's interest in an infinitely repeatable representation in order both to explicate Derrida's own idea about writing being an infinite substitution of one trace for another and to define the space of a text as being activated by play, jeu; similarly, Derrida shows the irreducible ambiguity in Artaud's notions of the theater, that on the one hand he needed—like Derrida—to see everything in terms of a theater, although "Artaud a aussi désiré l'impossibilité du théâtre, a voulu effacer lui-même la scène, ne plus voir ce qui se passe dans une localité toujours habitée ou hantée par le père et soumise à la répétition du meurtre."21 The quasi-montage technique I described earlier is characterized by Derrida as having something uniquely to do with all writing, where (the preposition is relevant here) the graphological process traces, retraces, and effaces itself constantly, the old and the new combining in what Derrida calls la double scène; and later, employing one of the pun series he exploits insistently in his later work, he calls what he does with it a double science, which itself recalls his two-part lecture on Mallarmé's writing, la double séance.

All this establishes a sort of perpetual interchange in Derrida's work between the page and the theater stage, yet the locale of the interchange—its a page and a theater—is Derrida's prose, which in his recent work attempts to work less by chronological sequence, logical order, and linear movement than by abrupt, extremely difficult to follow lateral and complementary movement.22 The intention of that movement is to make Derrida's page become the apparently self-sufficient site of a critical reading in which traditional texts, authors, problems, and themes are presented in order to be dedefined and dethematicized more or less permanently. Thus textuality is seen to be the written equivalent of a stage for which, paradoxically, there are boundaries only to be jumped over, actors only to be decomposed into numerous parts, spectators who enter and exit with impunity, and an author who cannot

21. "Artaud also wished for the impossibility of theater, and wanted himself to obliterare the stage, as well also as not wanting to see what was taking place in a spot which was eternally inhabited or haunted by the father and subject to the repetition of an original murder." Derrida, L'Écriture et la différence, p. 366.
decide whether he writes, or rewrites, or reads on one side of the stage page or the other. (The resemblances with Pirandello and Beckett here are worth quickly remarking.)

The polemical burden of Derrida’s verbal exhibitions is virtually to rethink what he considers to be the mainstays of philosophical (and even popular) thought: and of these it is, he believes, the idea of an authorizing presence as “substance/essence/existence [ousia]” and with it the commanding fiction of such guiding notions as Platonic ideas, teleological processes like Hegelian synthesis, and all literary critical totalizing that have now served their time and must be seen as having been valorized not by some “outside” power but by a misreading of texts. And a misreading of texts is made possible by texts themselves, for which—in the best of them—every meaning-possibility exists in a raw unresolved state. This notion is Derrida’s principal philosophic idea, out of which his announced but not practiced science called grammatology is made initially possible. Yet Derrida’s work also eliminates the possibility of deciding what is in a text, of being able to determine whether a critical text can so easily be detached from its parent text as critics have often believed, of being able to contain the meaning of a text in the notion of meaning itself, of being able to read texts without a commanding suspicion that all texts—the greater the text, and perhaps the critic, the more skillfully—attempt to hide their almost androgynous style in a whole structure of misleading directions to the reader, fictional objects, ephemeral appeals to reality, and the like. For since we have only writing to deal with writing, our traditional modes of understanding have to be altered considerably.

An important instance of Derrida’s manner of muddling traditional thought beyond the possibility of its usefulness is found in this passage on the genealogy of a text:

We know that the metaphor that would describe the genealogy of a text correctly is still forbidden [that is, if we try to think where a text comes from, we will be left with some outside notion like “author,” and this forbids us from trying to grasp the text’s specifically textual origins, an altogether different matter]. In its syntax and its lexicon, in its spacing, by its punctuation, its lacunae, its margins, the historical appurtenance of a text is never a straight line. It is neither causality by contagion, nor the simple accumulation of layers. Nor even the pure juxtaposition of borrowed pieces. And if a text always gives itself a certain representation of its own roots, those roots live only by that representation, by never touching the soil, so to speak [this is something with which it is possible to disagree completely because Derrida goes too quickly over the way in

which texts are connected to other texts, to circumstances, to reality]. Which undoubtedly destroys their radical essence, but not the necessity of their racinating function.25

The effect of such logic (the mise en abîme) is to reduce everything that we think of as having some extratextual leverage in the text to a textual function. What matters in a text is that its textuality transgresses even its own explicit statements about such things as its “roots” in, or affiliations with, reality. For rather than being mystified by the obvious analogy between the production of writing and the production of organic life (as the similarity is permitted to stand in the parallel between seme and semen, for example), Derrida breaks the similarity down, reverses matters. The culturally permitted idea of the book is that of a totality—whose greatest exemplar is the encyclopedia—and the totality enables, produces a family of ideas conceived by, inseminated with some single Original, which like a self-delighting pedagogue or father makes meaning cyclical, derived from and imprisoned by the one source. Every concept testifies to autoinsemination, the one confirming and reconfirming every other.26

Against this set of concepts—the sexual language usually used to discuss meanings and texts is very much at the center of Derrida’s most consistently interesting book La Dissemination—Derrida sets and reenacts an opposite movement (as the actors in Wopsle’s Hamlet are set in Shakespeare’s Hamlet). This movement he calls dissémination, which is not a concept at all but what he elsewhere describes as the power of textuality to burst through semantic horizons.

Dissemination does not mean. It does not require the notion of a return to a source or origin or father; quite the contrary, it entails a certain figurative castration: showing the text in its writing, dissemination is capable of emasculating the Platonic idea informing our views of meaning and representation as well as the Hegelian triangle resolved in synthesis. Dissemination maintains the perpetual disruption of writing, maintains the fundamental undecidability of texts whose real power resides not in their polysemousness (which can after all be collected hermeneutically under the heading of several themes, the way Jean-Pierre Richard’s account of Mallarmé collects all his work under the much varied rubric of “un monde imaginaire”)27 but texts whose power lies in the possibility of their infinite generality and multiplicity.

La dissémination inscrit, avec une extension régulée du concept de texte, une autre loi des effets de sens ou de référence (antériorité de la « chose », réalité, objectivité . . .), un autre rapport entre l’écriture au sens métaphysique et son « dehors » . . . . (La dissémination s’explique aussi . . . mais tout autrement. . . . Hétérogénéité, ex-

teriorité absolue de la sémence, la différencé séminale se constitue en programme mais en programme non formalisable. Pour des raisons formalisables. L’infinité de son code, sa rupture, donc, n’a pas la forme saturée de la présence à soi dans le cercle encyclopédique...

Every one of Derrida’s extraordinarily brilliant readings since and including *De la grammatologie* therefore builds from and around that point in a text around which its own heterodox textuality, distinct from its message or meanings, is organized, the point also *toward* which the text’s textuality moves in the shattering dissemination of its unorganizable energy. These points are words that are anticoncepts, bits of the text in which Derrida believes, and where he shows, the text’s irreducible textuality to lie. These anticoncepts, antinames, counterideas escape definite or decidable classification. That is why they are only textual and why also they are heterodox. Derrida’s method of deconstruction functions then to release them, just as the climactic moment in each of his texts is a *performance* by these anticoncepts, these mere words. Thus what Derrida points toward is “une scène d’écriture dans une scène d’écriture et ainsi sans fin, par nécessité structurelle marquée dans le texte.”

Only words that are syncatégorèmes—words having, like the copula, a syntactic function but capable of serving semantic ones too—can reveal textuality in its element. These words are of an infinite, hence disseminative, pliability: they mean one thing *and* another (rather like Freud’s antithetical primal words), but Derrida’s interest in them is that it is they, and not the big ideas, that make a text the uniquely written phenomenon that it is, a form of *supplementarity* to (or something necessarily in excess of) formulable meaning. And this supplementarity is that property of the text capable of repeating itself (*a*) without exhausting itself and (*b*) without keeping anything (for instance, a secret hoard of meaning) in reserve. Thus Derrida’s reading of the *Phaedrus* is an explication of the word “*pharmakos,*” whose use for Plato is to make him able to write in such a way as to produce a text where truth and nontruth coexist as instances not of ideas but of textual repetition.

28. “Dissemination inscribes, with a regulated extension of the concept of the text, another kind of law governing the effects of meaning or of reference (anteriority of the thing to the word, reality, objectivity . . .), another kind of relationship between writing (in the metaphysical sense of that word) and what is ‘exterior’ to it . . . (Dissemination explains itself too . . . but altogether differently . . . Heterogeneity and the absolute exteriority of ‘seed,’ seminal *différence* constitutes itself into a program, although a nonformulizable program. For formulizable reasons. The infinity of its code, and its rupture, so to speak, therefore do not have the same sort of form saturated with presence that in its circular form, the encyclopedia does. . . .)” Ibid., pp. 49, 60.

29. “A scene of writing set inside a scene of writing and so on without end, by virtue of a structural necessity marked in the text.” Ibid., p. 252.


Of these privilege words of his, these textual runes, Derrida says:

Ce qui vaut pour « hymen » vaut, mutatis mutandis, pour tous les signes qui, comme pharmakon, supplément, différence et quelques autres, ont une valeur double, contradictoire, indécidable qui tient toujours à leur syntaxe, qu'elle soit en quelque sorte « intérieure », articulant et combinant sous le même joug, uph'en, deux significations incompatibles, ou qu'elle soit « extérieure », dépendant du code dans lequel on fait travailler le mot. Mais la composition ou décomposition syntaxique d'un signe rend caduque cette alternative de l'intérieur et de l'extérieur. On a simplement affaire à de plus ou moins grandes unités syntaxiques au travail, et à des différences économiques de condensation. Sans les identifier entre eux, bien au contraire, on peut reconnaître une certaine loi de série à ces lieux de pivotement indéfini: ils marquent les points de ce qui ne se laisse jamais médiatiser, maîtriser, relever, dialectiser par Erinnerung et Aufhebung. Est-ce par hasard que tous ces effets de jeu, ces « mots » qui échappent à la maîtrise philosophique, ont, dans les contextes historiques fort différents, un rapport très singulier à l'écriture? Ces « mots » admettent dans leur jeu la contradiction et la non-contradiction (et la contradiction et la non-contradiction entre la contradiction et la non-contradiction). Sans relève dialectique, sans relâche, ils appartiennent en quelque sorte à la fois à la conscience et à l'inconscient dont Freud nous dit qu'il est tolérant ou insensible à la contradiction. En tant qu'il dépend d'eux, qu'il s'y plie, le texte joue donc une double scène. Il opère en deux lieux absolument différents, même s'ils ne sont séparés que d'un voile, à la fois traversé et non traversé, entr'ouvert. La double science à laquelle ces deux théâtres doivent donner lieu, Platon l'aurait nommée, en raison de cette indécision et de cette instabilité, doxa et non épistémè.32

32. "What goes for 'hymen' goes, mutatis mutandis, for all those signs which, like pharmakon, supplément, and différence and a few others, have a double, contradictory, and undecidable value, which is always linked to their syntactical form, whether that might be somehow 'interior' and articulating and combining two incompatible significations under the same yoke, hyphen (uph'en), or whether it might be 'exterior,' dependent on the code by which the word is made to operate. But the syntactical composition or decomposition of the sign makes the question of interior or exterior quite irrelevant. What we have to do with therefore are more or less larger syntactical operating units, and with differing economies of condensation. Without in fact making these distinctions very clear, we can acknowledge a certain law governing the serial pivoting of these signs in place, a place never mediated, mastered, restored, or dialectitized by Erinnerung and Aufhebung. Is it an accident that all these effects of play and pivoting, these 'words' that manage to escape the grip of philosophic mastery have, in very different historical contexts, an extremely marked relationship to writing [écriture]? These 'words' admit into the space of their play both contradiction and noncontradiction (as well as the contradiction and the non-contradiction between contradiction and noncontradiction). Without dialectical relief, without even any respite, they belong somehow both to the consciousness and to the unconscious, of which Freud has told us that it is tolerant of as well as insensitive to contradiction. To the extent then that the text depends on these 'words,' that it is folded around them, the text therefore acts out a double scene. It operates in two absolutely different places, even if they are only separated by a veil, passed through and not passed through at
What all the words share is not so much a common meaning but a common structure, very much like the word “hymen” that Derrida uses to guide his reading of Mallarmé, or like the word “tympan” used to open *Margins.* The word’s undecidable meaning—“hymen” can be decomposed by a stroke of the pen into “hymne,” for example—is like a hypersensitive, permeable membrane marking its different significations, different positions, different sides (as of a folded piece of paper) but easily penetrable, easily rupturable by the very seductive activity it gets started, attracts, and finally is compelled to release through it. Derrida’s key words furthermore are unregenerate signs: he says that they cannot be made more significant than signifiers are. In some quite urgent way then there is something frivolous about them, as all words that cannot be accommodated to a philosophy of serious need or utility are futile or unserious.

Basing his enterprise on a suggestion in Condillac, and then also on the ceaseless alternation in Nietzsche’s writing between instructive philosophy and seemingly careless song, fable, aphorism, or prophetic utterance, Derrida has inaugurated a style of philosophic criticism and analysis that quite literally and self-consciously wanders (Derrida’s word is errance, with its cognates in erreur, for instance) into corners neglected by supposedly serious criticism and philosophy. The form of his work, which like Lukács’ is cast in essays purposely vulnerable to the charge that they are only essays, is disseminative; and the intention of his work is to multiply sense, not to hold it down. The habitual amenities of exposition are cast aside, and the skidding from allusion to pun to neologism is sometimes impossible to follow. But in a strict sense, Derrida’s deconstructive technique is a form of discovery (I use Mark Schorer’s famous phrase advisedly) whose material is not merely the textuality of texts, nor the text’s peculiar verbal eccentricities that do not fall into categories, nor even the unresolvable uncertainties in structure between the writing and the asserted meaning of some texts, but the opposition between diction and scription, between the absent/present word and its limitless repetition in writing. What he wants to bring to performance is “la proposition écrite du logocentrisme; l’affirmation simultanée de l’être-dehors du dehors et de son intrusion néfaste dans le dedans.” Invariably this conundrum will be found lodged not in a stable veridic discourse but, and here Derrida is affirmatively Nietzschean, in a discourse whose hidden instruments and agencies are the figural powers of literature. It is this
latter point that Derrida emphasizes in his essay "La Mythologie blanche." What each of Derrida's works tries to do is to reveal the entame—the tear, or perhaps the incision—in every one of the solid structures put up by philosophy, an entame already inscribed in written language itself by its persistent desire to point outside itself, to declare itself incomplete and unfit without presence and voice. Voice thus appears secondary to writing since writing's facility is precisely the facility of all fiction to authorize, even create, its opposite and then act subordinate to and become invisible for it.

The range of texts chosen by Derrida for analysis and discovery—unlike the much more restricted range of texts chosen by Derrida's disciples and imitators for their analyses—is relatively wide, from Plato to Heidegger, Philippe Sollers, Maurice Blanchot, and Georges Bataille. Insofar as his readings seek to unsettle prevalent ideas in Western culture, his texts seem to have been chosen because they embody the ideas influentially: thus Rousseau, Plato, and Hegel are revealed to be unavoidable examples of logocentric thought enmeshed in and exemplifying its noncontradictory contradictions. More recent authors—Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, for example—are chosen with what seems to be a fairly straightforward polemical goal in mind. However, even a superficial reading of all Derrida's work will reveal an implicit hierarchy, the more conventional for its not being stated than for Derrida's brilliant uncoverings of new significance in his texts. Therefore, for Derrida, Plato, Hegel, and Rousseau either inaugurate epochs, inhabit them, or solidify them; Mallarmé initiates a revolutionary poetic praxis; Heidegger and Bataille wrestle openly with problems they both canonize and restate. The way these figures are characterized historically would support any list compiled by a teacher of "humanities" or masterpieces of Western thought. Yet there is no explanation why what Derrida calls the age of Rousseau should not also be known as the age of Condillac, nor why Rousseau's theory of language should receive precedence over Vico's, or Jones', or even Coleridge's. But Derrida doesn't go into these issues, although I think that they are not problems of historical interpretation marginal to what Derrida does; on the contrary, they seem to me to lead to the major questions raised by Derrida's work.

It will be recalled that I introduced my remarks on Derrida and Foucault by saying that although they represented divergent views on criticism, both of them consciously attempt to take revisionist, if not adversary, positions toward a reigning cultural hegemony—and for such a position their criticism provides an account of what cultural hegemony is—and, moreover, they have formulated a reflective critical position while aware of the danger that what they do might itself turn into a critical orthodoxy, an unthinking system of thought impervious to change and insensitive to its own problems. Now Derrida's position and

his entire production have been devoted to exploring both the misconceptions and the uncritically repeated notions central to Western culture. On at least one occasion he has also pointed out that a teacher of philosophy working in a state-run institution bears a special responsibility for understanding the system by which ideas get passed on mechanically from teacher to student and back again. This defines the teaching position he happens officially to occupy, to the ironies of whose name he is wryly sensitive: agrégé-répétiteur. In addition he also belongs to the corps enseignant, and to the meaning of this somewhat compromising position he is also sensitive:

Mon corps est glorieux, il concentre toute la lumière. D’abord celle du projecteur au-dessus de moi. Puis il rayonne et attire à lui tous les regards. Mais il est aussi glorieux en tant qu’il n’est plus simplement un corps. Il se sublime dans la représentation d’un autre corps, au moins, le corps enseignant dont il devrait être à la fois une partie et le tout, un membre donnant à voir l’assemblée du corps; qui à son tour se produit en effaçant comme la représentation à peine visible, toute transparente, du corpus philosophique et du corpus socio-politique, le contrat entre ces corps n’étant jamais exhibé sur le devant de la scène.37

The theatrical metaphor is well employed here and elsewhere in Derrida’s only explicit analysis of the institutional, historical, and political consequences and realities of being what he is, a philosopher and a teacher with a particular and identifiable project of his own. Yet he has stopped the characterization of this special and privileged position of his rather short, I think. Is it enough to say that the deconstructive method must not attempt to differentiate between “des chaînes longues ou peu mobiles” and “des chaînes courtes et vites perimées” of philosophical ideas but rather concern itself in a very general way with how “les pouvoirs multiples de la plus vieille machine [in this case, he refers to the whole operative structure of Western thought as exemplified in the philosophical tradition] peuvent toujours être réinvestis et exploités dans une situation inédites”?38 My feeling is that so long as it is referred

37. “My body is glorious, and it concentrates all the light on itself. First of all the light coming from the projector above me. Then it radiates out toward and attracts to it all public scrutiny. But it is also glorious inasmuch as it is not simply a body. In the representation of at least one other body it sublimates the teaching corps of which it is at the same time a part and the whole: a member making it possible to see the whole of the teaching corps which in its turn produces itself by effacing the barely visible and wholly transparent philosophical and sociopolitical corpus, the contract between these various bodies never itself being exhibited openly to public view.” Derrida, “Où commence et comment finit un corps enseignant,” pp. 87–88.

38. “Long or scarcely moving series of ideas . . . short and quickly outdated series of ideas . . . the multiple powers of the oldest intellectual apparatus, powers which can always be re-used and exploited in new situations.” Ibid., p. 73.
to generally, or even if it is found concretely in individual texts, Western thought is going to remain an abstraction and as it is, not because Derrida does not oppose it—he does, and does not, in some of the subtle ways I've tried to describe—but because Western thought is something more differentiated, incorporative and, most important, institutionally representative than Derrida seems to allow.

The problem does not end here, however. To the extent that Derrida has been most careful to say that even his affirmative deconstructive technique is not a program to replace the old style philosophic system, he has also gone to extraordinary lengths to provide his readers (and his students, here and in France) with a set of what I would call counterconcepts. The main thing claimed by the Derrideans for those words, and indeed about his deconstructive method, is that they are not reducible to a limited semantic lexicon. Neither are they supposed to be mirror opposites of the oppositions, dogmas, ideas endemic to Western metaphysics that they challenge. "Différance," for example, is first "defined" in 1968 as having two and perhaps three root meanings, all of them different from différence. In 1972 he said of "différence," however, that is resembled "une configuration de concepts que je tiens pour systématique et ir-réductible et dont chacun intervient, s'accentue plutôt, à un moment décisif du travail." I think I understand him to be saying that "différence," or some aspect of it, depends for its exact meaning on its use at a given moment in reading a text. Yet we are left wondering how something can be practical, contextual, systematic, recognizable, irreducible and, at the same time, not really a fixed doctrine, nor a concept, nor an idea in the old sense of those words. Can we remain poised indefinitely between an old and a new sense? Or will not this median undecidable word begin to corral more and more meanings for itself, just like the old words? Similarly if the texts he has read and organized around key words do not necessarily elevate those words into universal key words (in Raymond Williams' sense) they are not simply neutral words. "Supplément" is a perfect example since out of the word he finds in Rousseau, Derrida has built a small repertory of words, including "supplémentarité," and the "supplément" of one thing and the other, all of which have had evident uses in the reading of other texts. More and more, a word like "supplément" gathers status and history; to leave it without some attention to its vital positional use in his work is, for Derrida, I think, a strange negligence.

My point is that Derrida's work has had and continues perforce to have a cumulative effect on him, to say nothing of the obvious effect on his disciples and any of his readers. I rather doubt that, in wisely at-

40. "A configuration of concepts that I consider to be systematic and irreducible; thereafter each intervenes, and is more marked, at decisive moments in the work [of a text]." Derrida, Positions, p. 17.
tempting to avoid the wholly compromising fall into systematic method to which as a powerful philosophic teacher he is more than likely to succumb, he has been successful in avoiding the natural consequence of accumulating a good deal that resembles a method, a message, a whole range of special words and concepts. Since it is incorrect (and even an insult) to say that Derrida's accumulation of knowledge in the course of his published work is no more than a mood, or an atmosphere, we shall have to accept it then as constituting a position, which is a word that he himself has used comfortably. As a position it is of course specifiable but Derrida's programmatic hesitation toward his historical situation, toward his work's affiliation with certain types of work and not with others, both (again) programmatically deny it its own considerable position and influence. Likewise, the texts to which this position has been applied by Derrida have also been denied their historical density, specificity, weight. Derrida's Plato, Rousseau, Mallarmé, and Saussure: are all these just texts, or are they a loose order of knowledge from the point of view of a liberal believer in Western culture; how have they a professional significance for a philosopher, linguist, and literary critic; how are they events for an intellectual historian? The refinements are greatly extendable, just as the complex apparatus diffusing Plato, Rousseau, and the others, in the universities, in the technical language of various professions, in the Western and non-Western worlds, in the rhetoric of possessing minorities, in the application of power, in the creation or rupture of traditions, disciplines, and bureaucracies is an apparatus with power and a lasting historical, actual imprint on human life. But all this needs some greater degree of specification than Derrida has given it.

I will not go so far as to say that Derrida's own position amounts to a new orthodoxy. But I can say that it has not, from its unique vantage point, illuminated in sufficient detail the thing he refers to in his account of le corps enseignant, that is, le contrat entre ces corps (bodies of knowledge, institutions, power), a contract hidden because jamais exhibé sur le devant de la scène. All of Derrida's work has magnificently demonstrated that such a contract exists, that texts demonstrating logocentric biases are indications that the contract exists and keeps existing from period to period in Western history and culture. But it is a legitimate question, I think, to ask what keeps that contract together, what makes it possible for a certain system of metaphysical ideas, as well as a whole structure of concepts, praxes, ideologies derived from it, to maintain itself from Greek antiquity up through the present. What forces keep all these ideas glued together? What forces get them into texts? How does one's thinking become infected, then get taken over, by those ideas? Are all these things matters of fortuitous coincidence, or is there in fact some relevant connection to be made, and seen, between the instances of logocentrism and the agencies perpetuating it in time? In one of his writings Borges says: “I used to marvel that the letters in a closed book did not get mixed
up and lost in the course of a night.” And so in reading Derrida’s work, we marvel at what keeps the ideas of Western metaphysics there in all the texts at night and during the day, for so long a period of time. What makes this system Western? Above all, what keeps the contract hidden and, more important, lets its effects appear in a highly controlled, systematized way?

The answers to these questions cannot be found by reading the texts of Western thought seriatim, no matter how complex the reading method and no matter how faithfully followed the series of texts. Certainly any reading method like Derrida’s—whose main ambition is both to reveal undecidable elements in a text in lieu of some simple reductive message the text is supposed to contain and to shy away from making each reading of a text part of some cumulatively built explicit thesis about the historical persistence of and the agencies for Western metaphysical thought—certainly any method like that will finally be unable to get hold of the local material density and power of ideas as historical actuality. For not only will those ideas be left unmentioned, they cannot even be named—and this, any reader of Derrida will know, is highly consonant with the entire drift of Derrida’s antinominalism, his defeminational philosophy, his desemanticizing of language. In other words, the search within a text for the conditions of textuality will falter and fail at that very point where the text’s historical presentation to the reader is put into question and made an issue for the critic.

Here one can make the divergence between Derrida and Foucault very dramatic. It is not enough to say, as I implied, that Foucault moves the text out from a consideration of “internal” textuality to its way of inhabiting and remaining in an extratextual reality. It would be more useful to say that Foucault’s interest in textuality is to present the text stripped of its esoteric or hermetic elements and to do this by making the text assume its affiliation with institutions, offices, agencies, classes, academies, corporations, groups, guilds, ideologically defined parties and professions. Foucault’s descriptions of a text, or discourse, attempt by the detail and subtlety of the description to resemanticize, and forcibly to redefine and reidentify, the particular interests that all texts serve. A perfect case in point is his answer to Derrida to which I have referred several times. Foucault is not only able to show very polemically that on one crucial point Derrida has apparently misread Descartes by employing a French translation that adds words not present in Descartes’ Latin original; he is also able apparently to “prove” that Derrida’s whole argument about Descartes is wrong, even capricious. Why? Because, true to his method and not to the text’s semantic sedimentation, Derrida insists on trying to prove that Foucault’s thesis about Descartes, in which Descartes separated folly from dreaming, was really not that at all but an argument about how dreams were more extravagant even than folly, folly being but a weak instance of dreaming. And that argument, accord-
ing to Foucault, merely read the text: it allowed the reader's (i.e., Derrida's) opinions, uncertainties, ignorance to override an almost invisible but present and functioning system of ideas which makes the text say specifically that madness is forcibly to be distinguished and excluded from the system of normal human activity, which includes dreaming.

The trouble with this evident overriding of the text, as Foucault is at very great pains to show, is that Derrida's reading of Descartes does not read matters in the text that have the plainly intended force of active juridical and medical authority, of specific professional interests at work. Moreover, the form of Descartes' text rigorously follows the pattern of two discourses, the meditative exercise and a logical demonstration, in both of which the positional status of the objects discussed—dream and folly—as well as the positional role of the subject (the philosopher who holds and conducts both discourses in his text) constitute and even determine the text. Derrida's textualization has the effect therefore of "reducing discursive practice to textual traces," a reduction which has given rise to a pedagogy associated with Derrida:

je dirai que c'est une petite pédagogie historiquement bien déterminée qui, de mainière très visible, se manifeste. Pédagogie qui enseigne à l'élève qu'il n'y a rien hors du texte, mais qu'en lui, en ses interstices, dans ses blancs et ses non-dits, règne la réserve de l'origine; qu'il n'est donc point nécessaire d'aller chercher ailleurs, mais qu'ici même, non point dans les mots certes, mais dans les mots comme ratures, dans leur grille, se dit "le sens de l'être". Pédagogie qui inversement donne à la voix des maîtres cette souveraineté sans limite qui lui permet indéfiniment de redire le texte.41

This extremely bitter climax of Foucault's reply to Derrida is to some extent a way of registering anger that Derrida's pedagogy, and not so much his method, seems easily teachable, diffusable and, at present, potentially more influential than Foucault's work. The personal animus informing Foucault's judgment also supplies it with a rhetoric of furious, perhaps even unseemly, denunciation. But isn't Foucault's intellectual point that Derrida's reading of a text does not allow for the role of information at all, that in reading a text and placing it en abîme in a wholly textual ether, Derrida does not seem willing to treat a text as a

41. "It is an historically sufficiently determined little pedagogy which manifests itself most visibly. A pedagogy that tells the pupil that there is nothing outside of the text, but that within it, in its interstices, in its white spaces and unspokennesses, the reserve of its origin reigns: it is not at all necessary to search elsewhere, for exactly here, to be sure not in the words, but in words as erasures, in their grill, 'the meaning of being' speaks itself. A pedagogy that conversely gives to the voice of the teacher that unlimited sovereignty which permits them to read the text indefinitely." Foucault, Histoire de la folie, p. 602; see also Spivak's introduction to her translation of Derrida's Grammatology, pp. 1xi-1xii.
series of discursive events ruled not by a sovereign author but by a set of constraints imposed on the author by the kind of text he is writing, by historical conditions, and so forth? For if one believes that Descartes merely wrote his text, and that his text contains no problems raised by the fact of its textuality, then one eludes and elides those features of Descartes' text that bind it willingly to a whole body of other texts (medical, juridical, and philosophical texts) and imposes upon Descartes a certain process of produced meaning which is his text and for which as author he accepts legal responsibility. Derrida and Foucault therefore collide on how the text is to be described, as a praxis on whose surface and in whose interstices a universal grammatological problematic is enacted or as a praxis whose existence is a fact of highly rarefied and differentiated historical power, associated not with the univocal authority of the author but with a discourse constituting author, text, and subject which gives them a very precise intelligibility and effectiveness. The meaning of this collision is, I think, remarkably significant for contemporary criticism.

The significance of Derrida's position is that in his work he has raised those questions uniquely pertinent to writing and to textuality that tend to be ignored or sublimated in metacommentary on texts. The very elusiveness of texts, and the tendency to see them homogeneously either as functions of, or as parasitic on, some schematic philosophy or system on which they are dependent (as illustrations, exemplifications, expressions): these are the things at which Derrida's considerable dedefinitional energies are directed. In addition he has developed a particularly alert and influential reading method. Yet his work embodies an extremely pronounced self-limitation, an ascesis of a very inhibiting and crippling sort. In it Derrida has chosen the lucidity of the undecidable in a text, so to speak, over the identifiable power of a text; as he once said, to opt for the sterile lucidity of the performative double scène in texts is perhaps to neglect the implemented, effective power of textual statement. Derrida's work thus has not always been in a position to accommodate descriptive information of the kind giving Western metaphysics and Western culture a more than repetitively allusive meaning; neither has it been interested systematically and directly in dissolving the ethnocentrism of which on occasion it has spoken with noble clarity; neither has it demanded from its disciples any binding engagement on matters pertaining to discovery and knowledge, freedom, oppression, or injustice. For if everything in a text is always open equally to suspicion and to affirmation, then the differences between one class interest and another, or between oppressor and oppressed, one discourse and another, one ideology and another are virtual in—but never crucial to making decisions about—the finally reconciling element of textuality.

42. I have referred to this, citing Derrida, in "Roads Taken and Not Taken in Contemporary Criticism," Contemporary Literature 17 (Summer 1976): 334.
If for Derrida the impensé in criticism which he has frequently attacked signifies a lazy, imprecise understanding of signs, language, and textuality, then for Foucault the impensé is what at a specific time and in a specific way cannot be thought because certain other things have been imposed upon thought instead. In those two meanings of impensé, the one passive, the other active, we must be able not only to see the opposition between Derrida and Foucault—but thereafter to take our position as critics doing something which it may be possible to describe and defend.

For Foucault, as much as for Derrida, textuality is a more variable and interesting category than the somewhat lifeless one imposed on it by the canonizing rituals of traditional literary criticism. Ever since the beginning of his career Foucault has been interested in texts as an integral, and not merely an accessory, part of the social processes of differentiation, exclusion, incorporation, and rule. He has said of a text, his own included, that it is an "objet-événement," which "se récopie, se fragmente, se répète, se simule, se dédouble, disparaît sans que celui à qui il est arrivé de le produire, puisse jamais revendiquer le droit d'en être le maître." More specifically:

> Je voudrais qu'un livre ne se donne pas lui-même ce statut de texte auquel la pédagogie ou la critique sauront bien le reduire; mais qu'il ait la désinvolture de se présenter comme discours: à la foi bataille et arme, stratégie et choc, lutte et trophée ou blessure, conjonctures et vestiges, rencontre irirégulière et scène répétable.43

The conflict in each text between its author and the discourse of which, for various social, epistemological, and political reasons, he is a part is central for Foucault's textual theory. Far from agreeing with Derrida's contention that Western culture has valorized speech over writing, Foucault's project is to show precisely the opposite, at least since the Renaissance, and to show also that writing is no private exercise of a free scriptive will but rather the activation of an immensely complex tissue of forces for which a text is a place among other places (including the body) where the strategies of control in society are conducted. Foucault's entire career from Histoire de la folie through La Volonté de savoir44 has been an

43. "A text is an object-event that copies itself, fragments itself, repeats itself, simulates itself, doubles itself and finally disappears without its author ever being able to claim that he is its master... I would like for a book not to give itself the sort of status that would make of it a text which pedagogues and critics would then be able to reduce; rather I would want a text to have the casual bearing, as it were, in order to present itself only as discourse; that it be at the same time battle and arms, strategy and shock, struggle and trophy (or wound), conjuncture and vestiges, irregular encounter and repeatable performance." Foucault, Histoire de la folie, p. 8.

44. Foucault, La Volonté de savoir (Paris, 1977).
attempt to describe these strategies with, on the one hand, greater and
greater detail and, on the other, a more and more effective general
theoretical apparatus of description. It is arguable, I think, that he has
been more successful in the former than in the latter, and that such
books as Surveiller et punir are of a greater intrinsic interest and power
than L'Archéologie du savoir. But what is not arguable is Foucault's ability
somehow to put aside his enormously complex theoretical apparatus (as
it emerges in L'Archéologie du savoir) and let the material he has dug up
create with him its own order and its own theoretical lessons. Certain
basic theoretical categories, assumptions, working principles have re-
mained near the center of what he does, however, and I should like now
to sketch them briefly.

Some of them are clearly derived from temperament. Foucault is a
scholar for whom no corner is too obscure to be looked into, especially
when he investigates the machinery of corporeal and mental control
throughout Western history. While it is true that he has been mainly
interested in two sides of the same coin—the process of exclusion by
which cultures designate and isolate their opposites and its obverse, the
process by which cultures designate and valorize their own incorporative
authority—it is now certain that Foucault's greatest intellectual contri-
bution is to an understanding of how the appetite for or will to exercise
dominant control in society and history has also discovered a way to
clothe, disguise, rarefy, and wrap itself systematically in the language of
truth, discipline, rationality, utilitarian value, and knowledge. And this
language, in its naturalness, authority, professionalism, assertiveness,
antitheoretical directness, is what Foucault has called discourse. The dif-
ference between discourse and such coarser, yet not less significant,
fields of social combat as the class struggle is that discourse works its
productions, discriminations, censorship, interdictions, and invalida-
tions on the intellectual at the level of base, not of superstructure. The
power of discourse is that it is at once the object of struggle and the tool
by which the struggle is conducted: in penology, for example, the juridi-
cal language identifying the delinquent and the intellectual schema em-
bodyed in the prison's physical structure are instruments controlling,
identifying, incarcerating felons as well as the powers (withheld from
felons obviously) to keep freedom for oneself and deny it to others. The
goal of discourse is to maintain itself and, more important, to manufac-
ture its material continually; thus, as Foucault has said provocatively,
prisons are a factory for creating criminals. Temperamentally, and no
doubt because he is an intellectual uniquely gifted to see that intellectuals
are part of the system of discursive power, he has written his books in
solidarity with society's silent victims to make visible the actuality of
discourse and to make audible the repressed voice of its subjects.

The master discourse of society is what Foucault in L'Ordre du dis-
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cours has called le discours vrai or le discours de vérité. He has not described this even in L’Archéologie du savoir, but I assume that he is referring to that most mysterious and general of all elements in discourse that makes its individual utterances appear to be speaking for, about, and in truth. Yet each branch of discourse, each text, each statement has its own canons of truth, and it is these that designate such matters as relevance, propriety, regularity, conviction, and so forth. Foucault is perfectly correct to note that when one writes as a philologist, say, or philologically what one writes, its form, its shape, its statement, is made rigorously apt, fitting, appropriate by a set of enunciative possibilities unique to philology at that time and in that place. These regional but productive constraints upon the writing and subsequently the interpretation of texts make Foucault’s reading of texts a very different process than Derrida’s, but theoretically they also situate or locate texts and what they enact far more dramatically than is possible in Derrida’s theater or representations.

Foucault’s most interesting and problematic historical and philosophical thesis is that discourse, as well as the text, became invisible, that discourse began to dissemble and appear merely to be writing or texts, that discourse hid the systematic rules of its formation and its concrete affiliations with power, not at some point in time, but as an event in the history of culture generally, and of knowledge particularly. Here as elsewhere in his work, Foucault makes a rigorous effort to be specific even though we are not sure whether what Foucault tries to describe is an event in the common sense meaning of that word, or an event in a rather more special sense, or both together. My inclination is to think that Foucault is identifying a phase through which culture must have passed at a period in time that is approximately locatable. Because this phase presumably lasted for a long period, the event then can be characterized as a gradual alteration in the essentially spatial relationship between language and representation. Once again we are in the theatrical space, although it has a considerably thicker historical dimension to it than Derrida’s. In Les Mots et les choses (The Order of Things) Foucault builds his descriptions of the event around a contrast of a fairly simple and instrumental sort. At least until the end of the eighteenth century, he says, it was believed that discourse (that is, language as representative of an order of Being) “ensured the initial, spontaneous, unconsidered deployment of representation within a table” or, we might well add, within a quasi-theatrical space. Now this at least seems to be the case before the event Foucault is about to describe, so completely and dramatically has that event altered, and made difficult even to grasp, the kind of relationship that obtained between language and reality before the event.

The change occurred when “words ceased to intersect with representations and to provide a spontaneous grid for the knowledge of things.” Discourse then became problematic and seemed to efface itself since it was no longer obligated immediately to represent anything other than itself; this is the moment that Foucault calls “the discovery of language,” albeit a dispersed language. What he describes is something we can understand a little better in terms of the scene from Great Expectations. Dickens nowhere says that what he is representing is a theater nor, as I said earlier, is Hamlet (Shakespeare’s play—the text on which the whole performance is based) named. The comedy of the situation is that we somehow know that the characters are trying to act a play they obviously have an imperfect grasp of. But we know this because Dickens’ language obliquely directs the entire scene, represents the stage and its actors, clues our responses as readers. And all this is possible because of the novelistic convention in which a special referentiality and a quasi-realistic use of language are permissible and to which readers bring quite specialized expectations and responses. In other words, the theater Dickens describes exists in the language of the novel, which has absorbed and taken over reality so much as to be completely responsible for it. Novelistic convention, however, is language released from the burden of representing reality exclusively in a table or grid; rather, the table or, in this case, the theater is a use for novelistic convention, which is obligated to perform as novels do, to refer to things novelistically and in no other way. As for philological convention, it views words quite differently. There are therefore many kinds of language, each doing things in its own way, each requiring a different discipline to produce, transmit, or record, each existing according to rules available only after much investigation. These special languages are the modern form of discourse.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, [words] re-discovered their ancient, enigmatic density; though not in order to restore the curve of the word which had harbored them during the Renaissance, nor in order to mingle with things in a circular system of signs. Once detached from representation, language has existed, right up to our own day, only in a dispersed way ...

The witnesses of this dispersion of language—who between them map the space possible for language to act in—are Nietzsche and Mallarmé: the first sees language as wholly determined by history, by circumstance, by the individual using language at any given moment, by the terms of the speaker; the latter sees language as pure Word, which “in its solitude, in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness, [is] the word itself—not the meaning of the word, but its enigmatic and precarious

47. Ibid.
being.” Therefore “the whole curiosity of our thought now resides in the question: What is language, how can we find a way around it in order to make it appear in itself, in all its plenitude?” And since language is situated between the two poles articulated by Nietzsche and Mallarmé, Foucault situates his work between them, there he says “to discover the vast play of language contained once more within a single space.”48 The imperative is to make language and, if possible, discourse once again appear within that field of invisible dispersion that since the end of the Classical Age language has become.

The passages I have been quoting from Les Mots et les choses are, I think, typical of the early—or at least the earlier—Foucault. To make language and discourse reappear is in the earlier book, we note, a task for the intellectual historian; even the disappearance of discourse is not described as anything but an archaeological event, so to speak. All of Foucault’s work since Les Mots et les choses has been a rephrasing of the question “How, when and why did language and discourse disappear,” and he has turned it into a political and methodological question of the greatest urgency. By replying that discourse did not simply disappear but that it became invisible, Foucault begins his answer to the question, adding that if it disappeared it did so for political reasons, the better for it to be used to practice a more subtle, more insidious form of control over its material and its subjects. Thus the very effectiveness of modern discourse is linked to its invisibility and to its rarity. Each discourse, each language—of psychiatry, penology, criticism, history—is to some degree a jargon, but it is also a language of control and a set of institutions within the culture which it constitutes as its special domain.

The major shift that occurred in Foucault’s thought in 1968—after Les Mots and before L’Archéologie—is the one reconceiving the problem of language not in an ontological but in a political or ethical framework, the Nietzschean framework. Thus we can best understand language by making discourse visible not as a historical task but as a political one; the model ought then to be a strategic and not finally a linguistic one.

Plus je vais, plus il me semble que la formation des discours et la généalogie du savoir ont à être analysées à partir non des types de conscience, des modalités de perception ou des formes d'idéologies, mais des tactiques et stratégies de pouvoir. Tactiques et stratégies qui se déploient à travers des implantations, des distributions, des découpages, des contrôles de territoires, des organisations des domaines qui pourraient bien constituer une sorte de géopolitique, par ou mes préoccupations rejoindraient vos méthodes. Il y a un thème que je voudrais étudier dans les années qui viennent: l'armée comme matrice d'organisation et de savoir—

la nécessité d'étudier la forteresse, la « campagne », le « mouvement », la colonie, le territoire. La géographie doit bien être au coeur de ce dont je m'occupe.49

Between the power of the dominant culture, on the one hand, and the impersonal system of disciplines and methods (savoir), on the other, stands the critic. We are back now to my first formulation and, I hope, to a greater awareness of what such a geopolitical position as Foucault's might mean. Whereas Derrida's theory of textuality brings criticism to bear upon a signifier freed from any obligation to a transcendental signified, Foucault's theories move criticism from a consideration of the signifier to a description of the signifier's place, a place rarely innocent, dimensionless, or without the affirmative authority of discursive discipline. In other words, Foucault is concerned with describing the force by which the signifier occupies a place, so in Surveiller et punir he can show how penal discourse in its turn was able to assign felons to their places in the structural, administrative, psychological, and moral economy of the prison's panoptical architecture.

Now the value of such a strictly historical view of the signifier in the text is not only that it is historical. Its greatest value is that it awakens criticism to the recognition that a signifier occupying a place, signifying in place is—rather than represents—an act of will with ascertainable political and intellectual consequences and an act fulfilling a strategic desire to administer and comprehend a vast and detailed field of material. The nonrecognition of this act of will is what one finds the deconstructor not recognizing, thereby denying or overlooking it. Thus by virtue of Foucault's criticism we are able to understand culture as a body of disciplines having the effective force of knowledge linked systematically, but by no means immediately, to power.

Foucault's lesson is that while in one sense he complements Derrida's work, in another he takes a step in a new direction. The vision of history he has been propounding takes as its starting point the great shift in knowledge at the end of the eighteenth century from a despotic to a strategic articulation of power and of knowledge. The disciplines that arose in the nineteenth century were specialized ones in which the

49. "The further I go in my work, the more it seems to me that the formation of discourse and the genealogy of knowledge ought to be analyzed not in terms of types of consciousness, modalities of perception or as forms of 'ideology,' but as tactics or strategies of power. These tactics and strategies are deployed by means of implantations, distributions, sections, control of territories, organization of domains, which taken together could constitute a sort of geopolitics, at which point my own preoccupations and methods as a scholar meet up with yours, as geographers. There is one theme that in the years to come I would like to study: the army as a matrix of organization and of knowledge—this entails the necessity of studying the fortress, the campaign, the military movement, the colony, the territory. I think that geography must very well be right at the heart of what it is I do." "Questions à Michel Foucault sur la géographie," Hérodote (January–March 1976), p. 85.
human subject was first collapsed into swarming detail, then accumulated and assimilated by sciences designed to make the detail functional as well as docile. From these disciplines evolved a diffuse administrative apparatus for maintaining order and opportunities for study. Thus what Foucault proposes is, I think, a criticism as catholic and as detailed in its descriptions as the knowledge it seeks to understand. For Foucault where there is knowledge and discourse, there must criticism also be, to reveal the exact places—and displacements—of the text, thereby to see the text as a process signifying an effective historical will to be present, an effective desire to be a text and to be a position taken.

While severed consciously from cultural hegemony, this sort of criticism is a meaningful activity within the culture. It releases one from the barriers imposed formally on one by departments, by disciplines, or by moribund traditions of scholarship and opens up the possibility of an aggressive study of the realities of discourse, which at least since the eighteenth century has ruled the production of texts. Yet despite the extraordinary worldliness of this work, Foucault takes a curiously passive and sterile view not so much of the uses of power but of how and why power is gained, used, and held onto. This is the most dangerous consequence of his disagreement with Marxism, and its result is the least convincing aspect of his work. Even if one fully agrees with his view that what he calls “the micro-physics” of power “is exercised rather than possessed; it is not the ‘privilege’, acquired or preserved, of the dominant class, but the overall effect of its strategic positions,”50 the notions of class struggle and of class itself cannot therefore be reduced—along with the forcible taking of state power, economic domination, imperialist war, dependency relationships—to the status of superannuated nineteenth-century conceptions of political economy. However much power may be a kind of indirect bureaucratic discipline and control, there are ascertainable changes stemming from who holds power, who dominates whom, and so forth.

In short, power can be made analogous neither to a spider’s web without the spider nor to a smoothly functioning flow diagram; a great deal of power remains in such coarse items as relations of production, wealth and privilege, monopolies of coercion, and the central state apparatus. In understandably wishing to avoid the crude notion that power is unmediated domination, Foucault more or less eliminates the central dialectic of opposed forces that still underlies modern society, despite the apparently perfected methods of “technotronic” control and seemingly nonideological efficiency that seem to govern everything. What one misses in Foucault therefore is something resembling Gramsci’s analyses of hegemony, historical blocks, ensembles of relationships done from the perspective of an engaged political worker for whom the fascinated de-

scription of exercised power is never a substitute for trying to change power relationships within society.

To a great extent Foucault's flawed attitude to power derives from his insufficiently developed attention to the problem of historical change. While he is right in believing that history cannot be studied exclusively as a series of violent discontinuities (produced by wars, revolutions, great men), he surely underestimates such motive forces in history as profit, ambition, ideas, the sheer love of power, and he does not seem interested in the fact that history is not a homogeneous French-speaking territory but a complex interaction between uneven economies, societies, ideologies. Much of what he has studied in his work makes greatest sense not as an ethnocentric model of how power is exercised in modern society but as part of a much larger picture involving, for example, the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world. He seems unaware of the extent to which the ideas of discourse and discipline are assertively European and how, along with the use of discipline to employ masses of detail (and of human beings), discipline was used also to administer, study, reconstruct—and then subsequently to occupy, rule, and exploit—almost the whole of the non-European world. This dimension is wholly absent from Foucault's work even though his work helps one to understand it; since it strikes me as being a definitive part of modern history, some account of this European hegemony over the world needs to be taken.

The simple fact is that between 1815, when European powers were in occupation of approximately 35 percent of the earth's surface, and 1918, when that occupation had extended to 85 percent, discursive power increased accordingly. One can very well ask—as I have tried to\footnote{In my \textit{Orientalism} (New York, 1978).}—what makes it possible for Marx, Carlyle, Disraeli, Flaubert, Nerval, Renan, Quinet, Schlegel, Hugo, Rückert, Cuvier, and Bopp all to employ the word “Oriental” in order to designate essentially the same corporate phenomenon, despite the enormous ideological and political differences between them. The principal reason for this was the constitution of a geographical entity—which, were it not for the Europeans who spoke for it and represented it in their discourse, was otherwise merely passive, decadent, obscure—called the Orient, and its study called Orientalism, that realized a very important component of the European will to domination over the non-European world and made it possible to create not only an orderly discipline of study but a set of institutions, a latent vocabulary (or a set of enunciative possibilities), a subject matter, and finally—as it emerges in Hobson's and Cromer's writing at the end of the nineteenth century—subject races. The parallel between Foucault's carceral system and Orientalism is striking. For as a discourse Orientalism, like all discourses, is "composed of signs; but what they
[discourses] do is more than use these signs to designate things. It is this 'more' that renders them irreducible to the language and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe."

In the discourse and discipline of Orientalism this “more” to which Foucault refers is the power to make philological distinctions between “our” Indo-European languages and “their” Semitic languages (with a clear evaluation of one over the other expressed in the distinction) and the institutional force to make statements about the Oriental mentality, the inscrutable Oriental, the unreliable and degenerate Oriental, and so forth. Moreover the enormous growth in Oriental professorships all across Europe, the mushrooming of books on the Orient (for the Near East alone, estimated at 60 thousand books between 1850 and 1950), the springing up of Oriental societies, Oriental Exploration Funds, geographical societies and, finally, the creation of a vast colonial bureaucracy, government departments, and research facilities—all this is far “more” than the Orient to which the sign “Orient” seems innocently to refer. Above all Orientalism had the epistemological and ontological power virtually of life and death, or presence and absence, over everything and everybody designated “Oriental.” In 1833 Lamartine visited the Orient and wrote his experiences in his Voyage en Orient, which contains the record of many discussions with natives, of visits to their villages, of meals taken with them. Yet how is one to explain his statement in the “Resume politique” attached to the Voyage that the Orient is at present a territory without real citizens, nations, or frontiers—except by the force of Orientalist discourse assigning Europeans and Orientals to ontologically different categories of existence and nonexistence. For like all discourses Orientalism is correlated with juridical discourse—say, Emer de Vattel’s theory about legally inhabited territories and the right of Europeans to expropriate and render useful territory that had no real inhabitants; Orientalism is correlated with biological discourse, not only Cuvier’s typology of races but Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire’s teratology of the study of deviant, monstrous types; with pedagogical discipline, of the sort expressed in Macaulay’s 1835 report on Indian education.

Above all it is as a discipline of detail, and indeed as a theory of Oriental detail by which every minute aspect of Oriental life testified to an Oriental essence which it expressed, that Orientalism had the eminence, the power, and the affirmative authority over the Orient that it had. In Orientalism the accumulation of texts, by which enormous caches of Oriental manuscripts were transported westwards to be made the subject of remarkably detailed study, and more and more during the nineteenth century the accumulation of human bodies, by which the

Oriental races and their territories were acquired for European suzerainty: these two went hand in hand, as did the discipline of their management. If we believe that Kipling's jingoistic White Man was simply an aberration, then we cannot see the extent to which the White Man was merely one expression of a science—like that of penal discipline—whose goal was to understand, and to confine, nonwhites in their status as nonwhites, in order to make the notion of whiteness—as its apex is embodied in European culture—clearer, purer, stronger. If we cannot see this, then we will be seeing a good deal less than every major European intellectual and cultural figure of the nineteenth century saw, from Chateaubriand, Hugo, and the other early romantics, to Arnold, Newman, Mill, to T. E. Lawrence, Forster, Barrès, William Robertson Smith, Valéry, and countless others. What they saw was the necessary, valuable connection between the affirmative powers of European discourse—the European signifier, if you like—and constant exercises of disciplined authority, affirmation, and overcoming, in short, exercises of strength with everything designated as non-European, or nonwhite. I am referring of course to the hegemony of an imperialistic culture, but what is alarming is to which much contemporary criticism that is lost in the "abyssal" element of textuality seems utterly blind to the impressive constitutive authority in textuality of such power as that of a broadly based cultural discipline, in Foucault's sense of the word.

I can conclude on a more positive—if somewhat summary—note. I have been implying that criticism is, or ought to be, a cognitive activity, and that it is a form of knowledge. I now find myself saying that if, as Foucault has tried to show, all knowledge is contentious, then criticism, as activity and knowledge, is or ought to be openly contentious, too. My interest is to reinvest critical discourse with something more than contemplative effort or an appreciative technical reading method for texts as undecidable objects. There is obviously no substitute for reading well, and that of course criticism, in one of the branches exemplified by Derrida, does try to do and does try to teach. My sense of the contemporary critical consciousness is that having initially detached itself from the dominant culture, having thereafter adopted a situated and responsible adversary position for itself, this consciousness begins its meaningful cognitive activity in attempting to account for, and rationally to discover and know, the force of statements in texts: statements and texts, that is, as doing something more or less effective, with consequences that criticism should make it its business to reveal. For if texts are, as indeed in many but not all cases they are, a form of impressive human activity, they must be correlated with (not reduced to) other forms of impressive, perhaps even repressive and displacing, forms of human activity.

Criticism cannot assume that its province is merely the text, nor even the great literary text. It must see itself, as well as other discourse,
inhabiting a much contested cultural space in which what has counted in the continuity and transmission of knowledge has been the signifier as an event that has left lasting traces upon the human subject. Once we take that view, then literature as an isolated paddock in the broad cultural field disappears, and with it too the harmless rhetoric of self-delighting humanism. Instead we will be able, I think, to read and write with a sense of the greater stake in historical and political effectiveness that literary, as well as all other, texts have had.