

Masson Long

Jacques Derrida

Key Concepts

Edited by
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New Concept of Life (Fordham, 2006); *Thinking Through French Philosophy: The Being of the Question* (Indiana, 2003); *The Challenge of Bergsonism: Phenomenology, Ontology, Ethics* (Continuum Books, 2003); *Derrida and Husserl: The Basic Problem of Phenomenology* (Indiana, 2002); and *Imagination and Chance: The Difference Between the Thought of Ricoeur and Derrida* (The SUNY Press, 1992). He is currently working on a new book called *Violence against Violence* (for Edinburgh University Press).

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2 The Auto-Bio-Thanatological Heterographical

Maebh Long

In an interview held in 1983 Anne Berger said to Derrida: "I don't know if I'm addressing the man or the 'writer-thinker', I don't know what their relation is" (P: 132). In the deceptively simple question posed by one conducting an interview with a scholar – 'we had not decided whether we would talk about you or your texts, or about you and your texts at the same time' (P: 132) – we touch on the divisions between thinker and thought, life and work, biography and philosophy that have been a sustained feature of Derrida's texts. As Derrida repeatedly insisted:

I do not believe in the conceptual value of a rigorous distinction between the private and the public. There can be the singular and the secret, but these resist the 'private' as much as they do the 'public'. In what I write one should be able to perceive that the boundary between the autobiographical and the political is subject to a certain strain. (N: 17–18)

The work produced by a philosopher is presumed to move towards universal truths, and as such is thought to be a public exercise transcending an empirical, personal identity or signature. The biographical details of the philosopher may impact on the language in which his or her work is transcribed, but the content is thought to be irreducible to the idiosyncrasies of the individual or the tongue. Biography is thus traditionally considered to be external to philosophy. As Derrida pithily exemplifies in the film *Derrida*, for Heidegger the response to the question "What was Aristotle's life?", was "very simple. [...] "He was born, he thought and he died." All the rest is pure anecdote" (S: 61). Auto-biography is thus usually avoided by classical philosophers, as they consider it an inappropriate exposure of the private in a public arena. It is, perhaps, in response to this perceived indecency that when asked

what he'd like to see in a documentary about philosophy, Derrida replied "Their sex lives", asking, "Why do these philosophers present themselves asexually in their work? Why have they erased their private life from their work? Or never talked about anything personal?" (S: 105). Rejecting what he perceives to be a false opposition between the private individual and the public philosophy Derrida argues that "you must (and you must do it *well*) put philosophers' biographies back in the picture, and the commitments, particularly political commitments, that they sign in their own names, whether in relation to Heidegger, or equally to Hegel, Freud, Nietzsche, Sartre, or Blanchot, and so on" (PM: 145).

Nietzsche, Derrida writes in *A Taste for the Secret*, was a thinker who absolutely wrote his life into his work, as he practised a "psychology of philosophers", understanding great philosophers to be the result of a "certain psychology", as "Philosophy is psychology and biography together, a movement of the living *psyche*, and thus of individual life and the strategy of this life, insofar as it assembles all the philosophemes and all the ruses of truth" (TS: 35). Derrida's texts operate at this intersection of the philosophical and the psychoanalytic, and his works often resonate with a confessional inclusion of aspects of his life which singularly respond to the text or theme under analysis. From the moment when, as a young Jewish boy in Vichy governed Algeria, he was removed from his school in keeping with anti-Semitic quotas, he argues that it was no longer possible "to distinguish the biographical from the intellectual, the non-intellectual from the intellectual biography, the conscious from the unconscious" (TS: 37). He thus incorporated the personal into his public work, provocatively describing himself in "Circumfession" as "the only philosopher to my knowledge who, accepted – more or less – into the academic institution ... will have dared describe his penis" (C: 115).

However, in emphasising the intrusion of the personal into the intellectual it cannot be thought that the philosophical or theoretical is to be understood solely through the empirical events of a writer's life. Derrida's background and his relation to the French language, for example, may have been instrumental in his questioning of language and identity, but we cannot understand questions such as 'How can one write one's memoirs when one has no mother tongue? What language should they be in?' (M: 31) as no more than the inevitable product of a man who 'was-born-in-El-Biar-on-the-ousskirts-of-Algiers-in-a-petit-bourgeois-family-of-assimilated-Jews' (S: 59). A text is not a code to be deciphered through the events of the author's life, and often 'the one who reads a text by a philosopher, for instance a tiny paragraph, and interprets in a rigorous, inventive and powerfully deciphering fashion is more of a real biographer than the one who knows the whole story of the individual's

life' (S: 59). All texts contain a narration of the self, and all reading is an engagement with a biography. In rejecting the opposition of the "classical, 'novelised' narrative of the 'life of the great philosophers'" to a "systematic, or even a structural, philosophical reading" (? : 220), Derrida rejects both the concept of a universal system independent of the personal and idiomatic, *and* the notion of "psychobiographies" which "claim that by following empirical procedures of the psychologicist – at times even psychoanalytic – historicist, or sociologicist type, one can give an account of the genesis of the philosophical system" (EO: 5). Texts are neither philosophical systems external to the life of the author, nor cryptograms which fall open once the 'stable origin' of the encryption – the author's life – explains their manufacture.

Instead of positioning ourselves on either side of the binary we must explore the 'dynamics' of that borderline between the "work" and the "life", the system and the subject of the system' (EO: 15), and examine the nature of the subject and of singularity when 'the *autos* disturbs self-relation' (TS: 41). The philosophical question of the 'Subject' is intertwined with the singular subject's signature, and the concept of Being is also the question of 'who': a question that does not end in the realisation of a central identity, but which questions the concept of a self who knows how to say 'I'.

Call it biographical, autobiographical or existential, the form of the question *who* is what matters to me, be it in, say, its Kierkegaardian, Nietzschean, or Heideggerian form. *Who? Who asks the question who? Where? How? When? Who arrives?* [...] It is clear that the *who* withdraws from or provokes the displacement of the categories in which biography, autobiography, and memoirs are thought.

(TS: 17)

How then can we write an autobiography when we do not know how to say 'I'? How can we write a biography when we do not know what 'who' designates? How can we sign a text? Derrida's texts explore the complexity between a writing of the self and a writing of the other, a writing of the life of a subject and a writing of death, a writing of contaminated autobiography, biography, thanatography, and heterography.

Beginning, then, with death, Derrida writes that the phrase "'I live'" is guaranteed by a nominal contract that falls due only upon the death of the one who says "I live" in the present' (EO: 10–11). To be human is to die; one's name is always the name of a person who will be dead, and one's signature is always the mark of the eventually deceased. After death "Only the name can inherit, and this is why the name, to be

distinguished from the bearer, is always and a priori a dead man's name, a name of death" (EO: 7). To write, to sign, is to relate to absence and one's own demise – as Maurice Blanchot puts it, "to write is to accept that one has to die without making death present and without making oneself present to it" (Blanchot 1995: 66). The presentation of the self is a writing of the death of the self, a *thanatography*:

To write one's autobiography, in order either to confess or to engage in self-analysis, or in order to expose oneself, like a work of art, to the gaze of all, is perhaps to seek to survive, but through a perpetual suicide – a death which is total inasmuch as fragmentary. To write (of) oneself is to cease to be, in order to confide in a guest – the other, the reader.

(Blanchot 1995, 64)

Writing on the self is a drive to survive by way of a constant suicide, a killing of the self to enshrine it. An act of writing makes one a writer, but when the act of writing ceases the text remains, at the expense of the death of he or she who wrote. When that text is read, the new interpretation brought by the reader animates the text and the author, but in so doing changes them, killing them in the rebirth. In "Circumfession" Derrida offers the phrase 'I want to kill myself' as a phrase incessantly returned to throughout his life and work. Yet, 'I want to kill myself,' he writes, "speaks less the desire to put an end to my life than a sort of compulsion to overtake each second, like one car overtaking another, doubling it rather, overprinting it with the negative of a photograph already taken with a 'delay' mechanism" (C: 39). The compulsion to die is also a compulsion to live, to follow each dead breath with a new breath, each dead instant with a new instant. Hence "I posthume as I breathe;" each breath signals the end of a previous breath, a living and a dying (C: 26).

In the case of autobiography one writes in order to preserve oneself, but kills oneself in that act, and is killed once again when one re-reads what has been written. Furthermore, in gathering the events of a life together the attempt is made to present a stable, unified, self-present self, but by gathering the self, the self is changed. The self that gathers is wholly different to the selves that are gathered:

There is not a constituted subject that engages itself at a given moment in writing for some reason or another. It is *given* by writing, by the other: *born* as we were bizarrely saying a moment ago, *born* by being given, delivered, offered, and betrayed all at once.

(P: 347)

The self which presents itself to itself, or the self that writes and the self that is written about, are not the same (and are different from the self who reads or views). There is a blind spot as one reflects, an invisible trait that cannot be captured as one looks at oneself looking. The self-portrait, like the autobiography, inhabits every text, but is never fully present, always a ruin and in ruins. Thus the self, preserved, is a different self, and the autobiography comprises heterography, and thenarography, as the written self is always other and dead. In addition, in the drive to preserve a memory or two the memories themselves are changed, as the mode of preservation changes the memories: written events are not the same as the events experienced. Preserving and gathering become suicide, but an autoimmune suicide: what dies is not the self as such, but the very idea of a whole, self-present, pure self. The strong, self-present, undivided *autos* presumed by the autobiographical genre is a fiction.

For Derrida Nietzsche was a writer whose philosophy was a gathering of the self, making an "immense bio-graphical paragraph out of all that [he] had written on life or death" (EO: 7). But while Nietzsche made repeated use of his own name, Derrida argues that Nietzsche's signature was highly mediated by the structure of the Eternal Return and the concept of a future signature. Quoting from *Ecce Homo*, Derrida explains that Nietzsche felt that his "real" identity was wholly different from the one his contemporaries associated with his name. Nietzsche's identity stems from what he knows he will become, what he is in the future. It is only when he dies, when the sum total of his life is measured, that he can be said to have lived. As such he takes his authority from his future self, from a line of credit given to him by himself and that will be authorised by the countersignature of the future reader. He thus tells his life to himself; his autobiography is biography as he is his text's addressee. But "since the 'I' of this *récit* only constitutes itself through the credit of eternal return, he does not exist" at the point of writing (EO: 13). Thus,

Nietzsche's signature does not take place when he writes. He says clearly that it will take place posthumously, pursuant to the infinite line of credit he has opened for himself, when the other comes to sign with him, to join him in alliance and, in order to do so, to hear and understand him. [...] The ear of the other says me to me and constitutes the *autos* of my autobiography.

(EO: 51)

Nietzsche "*writes himself to the other* who is infinitely far away and who is supposed to send his signature back to him" (EO: 89). His

signature only takes place in the act of reception; as such he has no relation to himself, he has no identity, until he, his life, his work, is re-signed by the other. It is in the act of reception by the reader that his identity is realised. While Derrida is specifically speaking about Nietzsche, this is also structurally true beyond Nietzsche:

It is rather paradoxical to think of an autobiography whose signature is entrusted to the other, one who comes along so late and is so unknown. But it is not Nietzsche's originality that has put us in this situation. Every text answers to this structure. It is the structure of textuality in general. A text is signed only much later by the other.

(EO: 51)

Even the most overtly autobiographical text, adhering to all the conventions of the autobiographical genre, awaits a reader, awaits one who will counter-sign the text and the future contexts in which the text will operate. All autobiographies are troubled by the "autos" and become posthumous works, suicidal biographies signed by the other.

In 'Paper or Me, You Know' Derrida writes that each breath marks a longing for an 'absolute memory', describing his "sigh[ing] after the keeping of everything" as his "very respiration" (PM: 65). Every exhalation is a longing to preserve, to retain and remember everything that happened. An autobiographical, confessional text traditionally requires the bringing together of all the threads that explain, expose, present and re-present the self. But in presenting the self we not only have to involve the threads of many others, we also have to assemble threads of events that never took place: 'Still today there remains in me an obsessive desire to save in uninterrupted inscription, in the form of a memory, what happens – or *fails to happen*' (AL: 34). This "adolescent dream of keeping a trace of all the voices which were traversing me – or were *almost doing so*" (AL: 35) meant that all that occurred and did not occur should be retained, as

what *happens* – in other words, the unique event whose trace one would like to keep alive – is also the very desire that what does not happen should happen, and is thus a 'story' in which the event already crosses within itself the archive of the 'real' and the archive of 'fiction'. Already we'd have trouble not sporting but separating out historical narrative, literary fiction, and philosophical reflection

(AL: 35)

The writing of a (soon-to-be) dead author recounts 'dead' events, events that never took place, that are not and were not. The autobiography is

thanatography, and the recounting of real events is also a work of fiction.

While the writing of the self is a writing of death and of the other, each writing on an other is also an exploration of the self. As Derrida writes regarding Paul de Man:

where de Man says of Baudelaire that he says of Gyps what in truth he says of himself, how can one avoid reading in this passage something Paul de Man is having said by these two others about himself, for himself, in his name, through the effects of an irony of the signature?

(M: 62–63)

Under the irony of the signature every text is an autobiographical text, a text on the self and a text on the other. The self becomes mediated through what Derrida refers to as transferential figures, and “The most private autobiography comes to terms with great transferential figures who are *themselves* and themselves *plus* someone else (for example, Plato, Socrates, and a few others in *The Post Card*, Genet, Hegel, Saint Augustine, and many others in *Glas* and *Circumfession*, and so forth)” (P: 353). Every text is an anacoluthic autobiography/heterography — an ironic, interrupted exegesis of the corpus of the other that is an ironic, interrupted exegesis of the corpus of the self. The story of the self does not recount the life of a single, unified self present to itself, but a self split by alterity, signed, in a moment of allography, by the other. Thus, under the irony of the signature, the overwriting of the self by the other is also an underwriting that ironically both secures and disturbs the self. The truth of the life of the self becomes the (perjured) confession of a death given over to the other. In signing itself the self must wait for the countersignature of the other, for the other to read, repeat and step in a different direction. The countersignature of the other comes “to *lead it* [the text] *off* elsewhere, so running the risk of *betraying it*” (AL: 69). Thus the (ironic) countersignature of the other, the change from autobiography to heterography, is an autoimmune act: “you have to give yourself over singularly to singularity, but singularity then does have to share itself out and so compromise itself, *promise to compromise itself*” (AL: 69). A promise is a co-promising which is both a compromise and compromising. Each text, and each autobiography, is *ironic and autoimmune*, an auto-interpretation or self-critique that both turns every text into a writing of the self, and in that process undoes the self. The irony of the signature is a paragraph of the autoimmune, the ironic signing that erases itself as it signs. It signs the ironic contamination of the self and

the other, as each text is undersigned by the self, a signature that is already a signing of alterity.

In presenting the self through the other we must not forget that one of the transferential figures through which Derrida presented himself was “Derrida.” We see a later Derrida re-signing his texts, gently seeping them in different directions, asserting — inserting — the political within texts previously read as apolitical, the ethical in texts thought of as engaging themselves elsewhere. He, as other, re-writes his texts through the authority those texts gave him, presenting a later Derrida through the earlier, turning earlier interests into later ones, rewriting his works, guiding interpretations, marking off a legacy and a future for his texts and his name. Hence, as Catherine David said in a 1983 interview: “To read you, one has to have read Derrida,” (P: 117). Similarly, Derrida’s readings of Nietzsche and Hegel become, as Eugenio Donato pointed out, a performance of “Derrida rereading *Of Grammatology* today” (EO: 55).

As we move towards a conclusion, we might ask what form a “Derridean” (auto)biographical text would take, and might find an idea in *Jacques Derrida. Jacques Derrida* comprises “Circumfession”, by Derrida, and “Derridabase”, by Geoffrey Bennington, and presents a text in which the eponymous hero is the life and the work of a multiple, fragmented, shifting figure. Together these separate and conjoined texts form a work which is complete and incomplete, as “Derridabase,” which describes “the general system” of Derrida’s thought, is undermined and undercut by “Circumfession”, which, running along the bottom third of the page, demonstrates and performs the impossibility of describing, and therefore closing, Derrida’s system (C: 1). “Derridabase” consists of Derrida as read by Bennington, who attempted systematically to detail and delimit the logical categories of Derrida’s thought without quotation or biographical detail. The systematisation of deconstruction will, however, make it predictable, and therefore rob it of a future, and so Derrida responded to Bennington’s death sentence with “Circumfession”, a text which revealed this systematisation or programmability to be doomed to failure. Derrida destabilises his *Thought* with his *thoughts*, with autobiographical fragments of his life, a proliferation of signatures, phrases masquerading as transcendental signifiers, ambiguously directed apostrophes, doubles and doubled discourses. Responding to Bennington’s — and, through him, all other previous and future — attempts to systematise him, Derrida goes to war against this self/other, and presents, not a therapeutic undoing, nor a positional engagement, not a descriptive analysis of inaccuracies or exclusions, but a confessional testimony of exceptional singularity — an “interrupted autobiothanatoheterographical opus” (C: 213).

As writer of the “absolute theologic program” and holder of god-like absolute knowledge (*savoir absolu* (S.A.)), the figure called G. – Geoffrey Bennington, but also alluding to Derrida’s mother Georgette – must be confessed to, not in order to *present* knowledge, but to *produce* it. Derrida confesses, and thus changes his life, produces a different truth, bears witness to what did not occur, and recounts memories of “factive” events. As Derrida writes in *Demeure*, it is here “that the possibility of fiction *and* lie, simulacrum *and* literature, that of the right to literature insinuates itself, at the very origin of truthful testimony, autobiography in good faith, sincere confession, as their essential compossibility” (D: 42). “Circumfession” writes to exist, writes to produce an unpredictable text and self, and so live, and yet is caught by the double bind of writing – writing is always of death. In “Circumfession” the self is questioned through multiple figures, and identity and events become troubled. Thus Derrida’s mother is both the woman who cried each time he left – “she who wept as much as Monica [St. Augustine’s mother] at each of my departures, from the first”, and she who never cried – “the one who literally could not weep for him” (C: 177; 51) Derrida is both “drunk with uninterrupted enjoyment”, knowing no one “who has been happier than I, and luckier, euphoric,” and yet is also “the counter-example of myself [...] constantly sad, deprived, destitute, disappointed, impatient, jealous, desperate, negative and neurotic” (JD: 268). Derrida is the double of his dead brother: Derrida was conceived, he felt, to replace him, and was thereby “excluded *and* favourite” (JD: 279). He is also the double of his sister, whose initials are also J.D., and the double of Augustine and Rousseau (he stole grapes and figs, and compares his mother to Monica, Augustine’s mother). The *autos* is also *heteros* and Derrida is ventriloquised by voices that are his and other. But all the descriptions of Derrida’s life, all the secrets revealed and the ghosts allowed to speak do not offer a single “gift with which to sew up the chain of all my texts” (JD: 136). The fifty-nine long sentences which comprise “Circumfession” present multiple, fragmentary and contradictory stories of the self, proffering a mode of writing on the borders of literature and philosophy, truth and fiction, work and life, self and other such that *Circumfession* is “*Everybody’s Autobiography*” in which, for each “everybody,” “it only happens to me” (JD: 311; 305).

3 Supplement

Robert Bernasconi

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida took up the term *supplément* from his reading of both Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Claude Lévi-Strauss and used it to formulate what he called “the logic of supplementarity” (G: 144–45). Derrida returned to Lévi-Strauss’s use of the word “supplement” in “Structure, Sign and Play” (WD: 289) and in *Given Time* (GT: 66–77), but I will focus here on Derrida’s reading of this word in Rousseau’s *Confessions*, *Discourse on the Origin and Foundation of Inequality among Men*, and *Essay on the Origin of Languages* because his reading of Rousseau has proved so powerful and because the logic of supplementarity is better illustrated than generalised.

As Derrida observed, Rousseau in these works employed binary oppositions: nature versus society, passion versus need, south versus north, and, most significantly for Derrida in the late 1960s, speech versus writing. In the course of declaring these oppositions Rousseau can be found writing the ambiguous term *supplément* and its cognates into his narratives. The supplement is an addition from the outside, but it can also be understood as supplying what is missing and in this way is already inscribed within that to which it is added. In this way the word, “supplement” seems to account for “the strange unity” of two gestures: “on the side of experience, a recourse to literature as appropriation of presence, that is to say, ... of Nature; on the side of theory, an indictment against the negativity of the letter, in which must be read the degeneracy of culture and the disruption of the community” (G: 144).

To the extent that Derrida presents the supplement as the unity of two gestures it is not yet fully radicalised. One can find in other authors’ formulations that suggest a notion of supplementarity to the extent that what stands first and what follows it can vary according to one’s perspective. One might say that the so-called Cartesian circle where the order of reasons is different from the order of being has that same structure. Or one might point to Georges Canguilhem’s formulation, articulated at the same