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## Deconstruction and the Resistance to Anthropology

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Andrew J. McKenna

According to the originary hypothesis of Generative Anthropology, human language emerges as a result of an act of appropriation whose aborted fulfilment on the part of highly mimetic predatory hominids issues in a gesture of representation, whereby a lifeless prey is designated as desirable to all and therefore as taboo to any one, as dangerous to appropriate. The first sign signifies only to the extent that it signifies symmetrically opposite values, to the extent that it suspends the attention of desiring subjects between attraction and repulsion regarding the mimetically designated object of their common desire. Accordingly the originary scene of representation is immune to the aporias of deconstruction in that it posits that origin and mimesis, origin and repetition, origin and difference and especially differance—as deferred appropriation, or desire—are one. Origin and indirection, origin and obliquity are one: the gesture of representation is a by-product of the act of appropriation. And origin and misrepresentation, or misprision, are one to the extent that the victim is accorded a power owing to human representation alone. That the deconstruction of transcendental origins poses no obstacle to the originary hypothesis, but beats a path to it is suggested by Eric Gans' observation, tucked away in a footnote in *The End of Culture*, that "in Derrida's work, philosophy renders up its final insights to anthropology."<sup>1</sup> What is significant though, from an anthropological point of view, is that no such acknowledgement takes place. Something else takes the place of an incipient anthropology; a preoccupation

with violence in texts which concerns itself thereafter only with textuality and not with violence. What is of interest here is how, where and why deconstruction resists its own anthropological implications.

In "Comment ne pas parler," "How not to Speak,"<sup>2</sup> Derrida goes to great lengths to demonstrate that despite the appearance of common linguistic scruples, that despite apparent formal resemblances, deconstruction is not negative theology. Note the double negative, of which Derrida, one of our most linguistically conscious writers, is acutely aware, as witnessed by the subtitle "Dénégations," which pluralizes the Freudian *Verneinung* while inviting us to think "Of Negations." The trace, the supplement, the parergon and their other "non-synonymous equivalents" as he calls them in *Marges*, are not figures of anything ineffably transcendent; they do not designate any beyond, any "au-delà" which is not at the same time or always already "en deça" or "entre," the theme or rather anathememe of "La Double Séance." In fact deconstruction's *via negativa* is otherwise interesting, otherwise significant. It is not negative theology but negative anthropology, the negative exposure of anthropology, or anthropology under erasure.

Let me explain what I mean with reference to what Derrida says of the "reduction of writing" in Rousseau: "What he excluded more violently than another must, of course, have fascinated and tormented him more than another."<sup>3</sup> I think it is not unfair—note the double negative; we are on delicate, Derridian ground here—to say as much of Derrida's preoccupation with origins: that they fascinate him more than many another. They are everywhere in his writings, on Descartes, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger as well as on Rousseau, to name but a few, and they are everywhere inscribed under erasure in his text, as originating in a trace, a repetition, a double, a non-origin or archetrace which is expelled from the text of anthropology (with Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss) as well as philosophy (with Plato, Husserl). Derrida does not repeat this expulsion but marks it, thematizes it, to the symmetrical exclusion of any quest for origins, which are deemed irredeemably metaphysical. The exclusion in his text is not violent but sly, jokerly, mercurial, which is to say *Hermetic*, with a capital H, for Hermes, the messenger god, with whom he identifies writing in "Plato's Pharmacy." There is more fascination than torment then. To understand it we need to review what deconstruction prefers to notions of foundation and origins.

In "Structure, Sign and Play in the Human Sciences," Derrida op-

poses a Rousseauian, guilt-ridden nostalgia for lost origins to what he evokes as “the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation.”<sup>4</sup> What does this surrender to what he calls “genetic indetermination, to the *seminal* adventure of the trace” offer us? Nothing less, nor more, than the dream of literature as rigorously antithetical to the dream of philosophy. Whereas Plato, and all of philosophy after him, dreamed of “truth as distinct from its sign, being as distinct from types . . . memory with no sign” (PP 109), we are to envision signs as distinct from truth, types as distinct from being, signs with no memory, movement without position. The goal of the game is to keep the ball in perpetual motion, while scoring an occasional victory against a Husserl or a John Searle, but only because they seek to arrest its play. Differance is the “pas de la danse” and not that of negation, resonating with *Le Pas au-delà* of Maurice Blanchot, a step/not beyond as it moves toward *L’Entretien infini*, *Le Livre* which is always *à venir*. It puts us inevitably in mind of “Le Livre” of Mallarmé, whose “antre” is not a beginning or an end, but an “entre,” a between, “mi-lieu,” as evoked in the latter’s *Mimique*, “pur de fiction... *sous une apparence fausse de présent*.” The signs are without memory—except of other signs, other signifiers, the model, the literal and letterly stereotype of which we find in and as Derrida’s writings, where signifieds are ever detoured from their (im)possible referents by a “retour” to their homonyms, playing among what Paul Valéry called “les similitudes amies qui brillent parmi les mots.” Derrida’s strategy is structurally destined to self-reflection and self-imitation, where language does not mirror reality but itself, its unself, its lack of essence. Not once again, language as “être” but as “entre.” Its linguistic performance is predestined to “pervformance” (Derrida’s term in *La Carte Postale*) as signifiers do not refer to any thing but revert back to themselves. This cannot fail to fetishize language: emulating the attraction-repulsion of signifiers, it stands in relation to language as the desiring subject to the sacred victim, to whom the subject defers by virtue of the same ambivalent force which attracts his desire to it.

But exactly so. Here is the structural source, the origin, at the origin of language, of Derrida’s ambivalence towards representation, of his fascination with language.

What fascinates deconstruction? It is fair to say that the answer

is language, formal representation, as curiously incarnate in writing, in the gramm, the grapheme. Where does this fascination originate, where does it come from? The answer once again is writing, as Derrida has testified in his Thesis Defense:

The project [on “the ideality of the literary object”] went astray with the first questions it posed: ‘What is literature?’ And first of all what is it ‘to write?’ How is it that the fact of writing can disturb the very question ‘what is?’ and even ‘what does it mean?’

(“The Time of a Thesis” 37)

We go around in circles unless we ask what is fascination? It is irresistible attraction without the prospect of appropriation; an attraction and a simultaneous repulsion, an attraction at a distance, or with a difference. About this structure there is no mystery for the mimetic hypothesis of Generative Anthropology: *fascēs* is a bind, consisting in the double bind, attraction and repulsion, fort/da, emanating from the object of desire, whose attractiveness is a function of its distance from our grasp, its internal difference as desirable and taboo.

What fascinates us is what we cannot resist and cannot appropriate, what we cannot deny (note the double negative) and cannot make our own (“propre”); it is what we cannot claim and cannot disclaim (note the double negative). The structural and functional affinity with the uncanny, strange and familiar, sinister and ordinary, is not fortuitous, not accidental—but anthropological, genetic. What fascinates us is uncanny in just the antithetical sense that first attracted Freud’s attention and Derrida’s after him when he undertook to study the mime’s mimesis of mimesis, of language and desire in Mallarmé’s *Mimique*. In a footnote of “La Double Séance,” Derrida evokes the uncanny as “les paradoxes du double et de la répétition.”<sup>5</sup> In another note on “the always already divided generation of meaning” (300), he again evokes the uncanny as “l’ambivalence indécidable, [le] jeu du double. . . l’échange sans fin du fantastique et du réel, du ‘symbolisé’ et du ‘symbolisant,’” these last terms being quoted from Freud’s essay.

Again, these paradoxes hold no mysteries for Generative Anthropology, according to which language originates in just this very fascination, in just this double bind, issuing from the oscillation of double and contradictory imperatives: take/don’t take, as this aporia issues from the oscillation of doubles, where every taker finds in his

mimetic double the model, rival and obstacle to his grasp. These paradoxes characterise the origin of language as the moment of undecidable ambivalence towards the victim, of undecidable difference between attraction and repulsion seeming to emanate from the now really fantastic object of desire, deferral to which issues in and as the sacred, the sacred word which is "symbolisant" because it designates the victim but also "symbolisé" because it designates the victim as inappropriable, inaccessible, taboo. Accordingly it *performs* the attraction-repulsion of the object of desire. As a performance or performative, it necessarily draws attention to itself as the substitute for further violence. Whence it is that language has the power to command the presence of a non-violent community, a power which we still seek for it today in our quests for theory.

To sum up then, deconstruction, "plus qu'un autre" is fascinated, is fascination itself, with the origin of language because that is where it, deconstruction, takes place, makes its home: at the origin of language. What I mean is that it represents, enacts, performs as if driven by a kind of "Widerholungszwang," a crucial, cruciform, bi-polar moment and movement at the origin of language; it replicates an essential phase of the originary hypothesis. It is the moment precisely of the double-bind informing and informed by the first sign, which inevitably, I mean structurally, by its own dynamic, results in referring us not only to the object but away from it and back to itself. It is the moment and movement of denial which coincides with its own self-denial, the moment of denegation, being the moment of denial which only reinforces desire for the object.

In "Comment ne pas parler," Derrida says we have to think denegation independently of and before Freud, as if to say think it structurally, and I am sure he is right about that. We are considering here what is in every respect a double moment, a moment of mimetic doubles, of what I don't hesitate, what I cannot resist calling multi-doubles which issue in and from a movement of negating doubles and self-negating negations, of double negatives which do not issue in a simple affirmation of any kind, but in denegations, or rather di-negations with the prefix "di-" meaning twice, doubled, and also divided. It is the moment of indecision affecting the victim, of the undecidable value of the victim as holy and accursed, as the one because the other, as it issues from the representations of what I cannot resist calling undecidables. This moment is irresistible: without the double force of mimetic attraction and repulsion, yes—of what

we may call irresistdoubles—language could not have emerged. This moment is irresistible and deconstruction succumbs to it again and again in its constant reversion to aporetic or “parergonal” structures that are “both . . . and . . .” and therefore “neither . . . nor . . .,” no less than in its irresistible word play. “La langue veut ça,” Derrida has been wont to say; indeed, it’s only human, all too human and anthropoeic. Yet to surrender to such moments of textual cannibalism is not to resist anthropology successfully, but only to perform one of its scenes—indeed its primal scene.

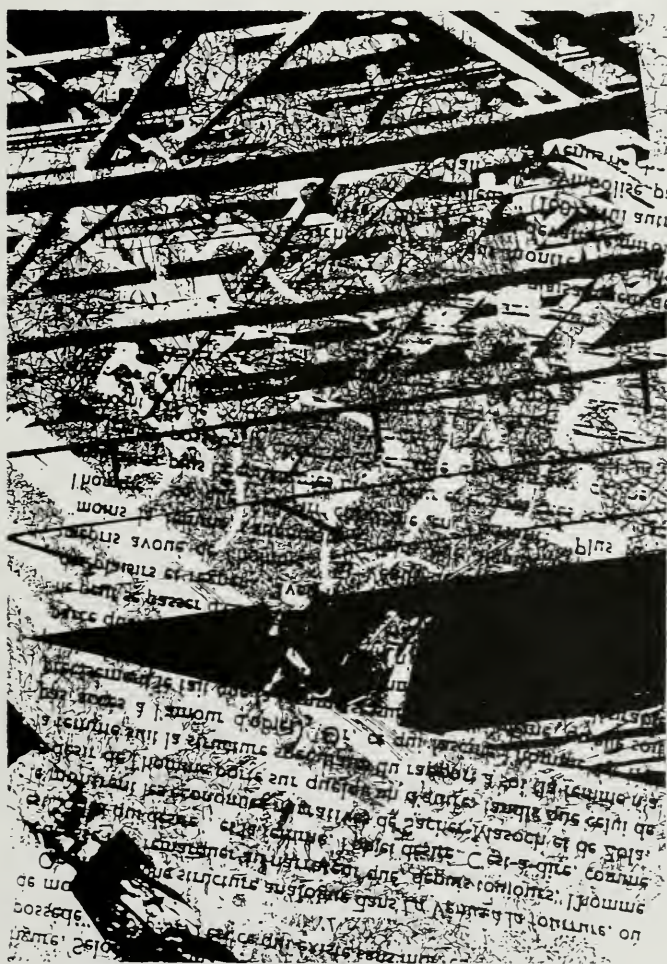
*Andrew J. McKenna is currently a Professor at the Loyola University of Chicago.*

### Notes

1. Eric Gans, *The End of Culture* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1985) 315, n. 21.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Psyché: inventions de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).
3. ———, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1967) 147.
4. ———, *Writing and difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978) 279.
5. ———. *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981) 173-286.

# PAROLES GELEES

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UCLA French Studies

Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de  
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait  
ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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