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# Jacques Derrida and the Necessity of Chance

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Summary

Chance, in the sense of the incalculable, the indeterminable, names the limit of every estimation of the truth. Whereas traditional philosophical discourses aspire to transcend this limit, deconstruction affirms on the contrary its necessity; not as a higher principle that relativizes truth and renders all our calculations futile, as is commonly suggested by flippant appropriations of Derrida's work, but as a structural property within every event and every concept, every *mark*. Rather than a mere impediment to the pursuit of truth then, the incalculable forms a necessary correlative of the pursuit itself.

Deconstruction effectively attests to and exemplifies the dependence of every philosophical discourse on its irreducible, inherent limitation. With reference to numerous commentaries on Derrida's work, Chapter 1 shows that the unconditional indeterminability of a deconstructive, methodological identity is indissociable from deconstruction's critical import. And as Chapter 2 verifies in turn, focusing now primarily on Derrida's lecture 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*' and the performative aspects of his writing, deconstruction's appeal to the accidental and the idiomatic is not a call to irresponsibility and a turning away from theory; it is what ensures its remarkable theoretical consistency.

Through close readings of Aristotle, Freud, Richard Rorty and William James, Chapter 3 demonstrates that any attempt to regulate chance cannot help but put chance to work instead. Not even fiction can arrest its contaminating force. Reading Derrida alongside Edgar Allan Poe, Chapter 4 posits that the commonsensical conception of chance as a deviation from the truth is bound up with an uncritical notion of literary writing as sheer untruthfulness, and hence as the site of pure chance. The constitutive pervasiveness of chance bears out, in the first place and above all, the instability of the limit that separates fiction from non-fiction, truth from non-truth.

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## Introduction

In a sense, a study on chance is a contradiction in terms. Any study that adheres to reason is constituted in opposition to chance, out of the desire to withhold its effects. The indeterminable, the unpredictable, the incalculable, denotes a problem that needs to be solved, a limit that, in the name and with the aid of reason, one aspires to transcend. The fortuitous, the accidental, what happens to happen, for no apparent reason, has no bearing on truth and knowledge. Its parasitical import is thus precisely what a philosophical investigation must contain and, if possible, completely eliminate. One wants to arrive at a safe conclusion, provide a positive answer and produce a measurable result in place of an uncertain 'perhaps'. A study that concedes chance in advance would be a study destined to err; impossible.

At the same time, however, and by the same token, chance also carries a positive or, more precisely, a non-negative significance. It denotes an opportunity, it signals an opening, that is also the opening of reason, the very possibility of truth and knowledge. Indeed, every study on any subject becomes possible on account of that which resists comprehension; a singular 'perhaps' will have always been its point of departure. The 'possible' is not only what we have failed to fully grasp but also what we have yet to investigate. The indeterminable is what calls for the response to the other, what leaves room for the response of the other. Chance gives reason to reason; necessary.

It appears, as a consequence, that chance carries within itself two directly opposite meanings. On the one hand, it signifies what stands in the way of our calculations and, on the other, what paves the way for our calculations. It is what a study needs to fend off at all cost and what it needs to embrace first and foremost. A concept at odds with itself, a threat and an opportunity at once, chance constitutes both

the condition of impossibility and the condition of possibility of the pursuit of truth as such.

Traditional philosophical discourses tend to privilege the first, more troublesome and less favourable, definition of chance and to repress the second. Naturally, an unconditional commitment to the ideal of perfect knowledge and absolute truth entails a categorical hostility towards the effects of chance. The haphazard is to be controlled, the indeterminable to be determined, the accidental ignored and the irregular accounted for. But what would become of philosophy itself if it were to successfully eliminate chance, once and for all? And what of the philosopher? What would remain of the future if nothing were left to surprise us, if everything were rather predictable? As Jacques Derrida will affirm in a short essay entitled ‘As If It Were Possible, “Within Such Limits”...’, insofar as the pursuit of truth aims toward the effacement of what instigates it, then what ensures its survival can only be the irreducible possibility of its inadequacy.

*inadequation* must *always* remain *possible* for interpretation in general, and the response in turn, to be *possible*. This is an example of the law that binds the possible to the impossible. An interpretation that was without flaw, a self-comprehension that was completely adequate would not only mark the end of a history exhausted by its very transparency. By prohibiting the future, it would make everything *impossible*, both the event and the coming of the other, the coming to the other.<sup>1</sup>

Derrida invites us thus to consider the two seemingly opposite definitions of chance as inextricably intertwined, to imagine, in other words, the lexical ambiguity of chance as a necessity. It is because there is chance, Derrida posits, because the chance of chance persists despite our best efforts to determine and evade its force, that our studies become

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘As If It Were Possible: “Within Such Limits”...’ in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 360.



possible in the first place, that they stand a chance. Appealing to what he calls in the same essay ‘a new thinking of the possible’,<sup>2</sup> Derrida proposes thereon to conceive of the limit of reason as its indispensable, structural condition, the impossible as what comes to pass.

Are we destined to err, then? And who will decide our fate? Reductive and unsophisticated readings of Derrida’s work often tend to misconstrue this affirmation of the necessity of chance as a sterile veneration of indeterminacy that simply signals the futility of traditional philosophical aspirations and the hollowness of philosophical rigor. Hence, uncritical supporters of Derrida embrace, for instance, deconstruction’s committed antifoundationalism as philosophy’s liberation, its lucky break so to speak, while his inflexible critics condemn it by the same token as philosophy’s inexorable ruination, its dead-end. And whereas the former understand deconstruction to be an affirmation of the future’s ultimate unpredictability, a joyful acceptance of life’s contingencies, the latter interpret it as a resignation before the responsibilities of the present instead, the dreadful foundation of an a-political, chaotic nihilism. In truth, however, Derrida’s work resists both these readings at once. And it resists them absolutely and unconditionally; deconstruction is neither a probabilization nor a relativization of truth.

As this thesis will show with reference to a wide range of texts, the deconstructive questioning of the essential presuppositions that have shaped the history of western metaphysics – if such a thing exists – should not be mistaken for the mere inversion of the significance of chance in favour of its second, more positive definition. On the contrary, the ‘experience of the impossible’, as Derrida defines deconstruction, is the articulation of the inherent and constitutive duplicity of chance, an affirmation of

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 361.

its necessity that does not seek to control, evade or overcome its disconcerting effects. Rather than the negotiation of the two contradictory consequences of ‘perhaps’, deconstruction constitutes the remarking of their nonnegotiable, irreducible incompatibility. Chance, we will argue, forms the *necessary* and *impossible* condition of every mark, every concept and every event; it is ‘an impasse of the undecidable through which a decision cannot not pass’:

But how is it possible, one will ask, that that which makes possible makes impossible the very thing that it makes possible, thus, and introduces – as its chance – a non-negative chance, a principle of ruin into the very thing it promises or promotes? The *im-* of the im-possible is indeed radical, implacable, undeniable. But it is not simply negative or dialectical: it *introduces* the possible; it is its *gatekeeper* today; it makes it come, it makes it turn [...] [H]ere is an impasse of the undecidable through which a decision cannot not pass. All responsibility must pass through this aporia that, far from paralyzing it, puts in motion a new thinking of the possible. It ensures its rhythm and its breathing: diastole, systole, and syncope, the beating of the *impossible* possible, of the impossible as condition of the possible. From the very heart of the impossible, one hears, thus, the pulsion or the pulse of a “deconstruction.”

Hence, the condition of possibility gives the possible a chance but by depriving it of its purity. The law of this spectral contamination, the impure law of this impurity, this is what must be constantly reelaborated.<sup>3</sup>

Any attempt to present or re-present this ‘law of spectral contamination’ remains, of course, impossible by reason of the law itself. The ‘constant reelaboration’ of the ‘impure law of *this* impurity’ presupposes that one submits to the law’s unbearable demands. The affirmation of the necessity of chance cannot but put chance to work. As if it were possible then, this study will venture to elucidate some of the most fundamental aspects of his thought through a concentrated analysis of the paradoxical economy of chance.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 361-2.

Chapter 1 will interrogate a number of critical texts that seek to capture Jacques Derrida's thought and propose that deconstruction's critical force rests on the unidentifiability of a deconstructive methodology. Chapter 2 will analyse, in turn, more closely the unidentifiability of chance itself with regard to the deconstructive compositional space, and thereby demonstrate that deconstruction's theoretical coherence is an effect of the untenability of a deconstructive theory. Chapter 3 will revolve around the problematic relationship between deconstruction and pragmatism. Through close readings of Aristotle, Freud, William James and Richard Rorty on account of their shared 'belief in chance', it will suggest that the history of philosophy can be read as a constant renegotiation of the significance of chance that strives to maintain its possibility as the possibility of its regulation. Chapter 4, lastly, will confirm that the necessity of chance inevitably destabilizes the clear-cut distinction between literary and non-literary writing. Through the detailed analysis of two short stories by Edgar Allan Poe in light of Derrida's writings on the singularity of the literary text, it will argue that, contrary to our most fundamental critical presuppositions, the literary event cannot be identified with the text that makes it possible; it bears within itself, as a necessary condition of its structure, the chance that it is other than itself.

# 1. READING CHANCE

I will thus attempt to resist once more the impulse toward or expectation of position taking. To those who are waiting for me to take a position so they can reach a decision, I say, "Good luck."<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1. Un-introducible

Every treatise on Jacques Derrida's work assumes a grave responsibility. In order to respond, and before the response, one makes a commitment: to faithfully present Derrida, to do justice to his work. As soon as one decides to write something on, about, against or in the name of Derrida, one is first of all required to establish his viewpoint in relation to a particular subject, to situate his oeuvre within a certain philosophical or historical context, furthermore to pinpoint and clarify some of his most significant propositions, to outline the fundamental principles or motifs of his thought and, when necessary, even to try to break down his line of argumentation. Derrida says: 'Even before speech, in any case before a discursive event as such, there is necessarily a commitment or a promise [...]. From the moment I open my mouth, I have already promised; or rather, and sooner, the promise has seized the I which promises to speak to the other [...]. This promise is older than I am.'<sup>2</sup> A promise then is at the origin, the

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'For the love of Lacan' in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascal-Anne Brault & Michael Naas, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p.41.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'How to Avoid Speaking: Denials' in *Languages of the Unsayable: The Play of Negativity in Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser, trans. Ken Frieden (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 13-4.

necessary condition of every critical response to Derrida. It is a promise, however, one cannot keep. Because no matter how insightful a response might be, it is destined to fall short of its task; no matter how celebratory or accusatory, it is bound to eventually miss, to betray Derrida. Every treatise on Jacques Derrida's work is founded on an impossible contract.

Even when not this explicit, a certain awareness of an essential failure that comes with the very attempt to read and explain Derrida, to represent his thought, permeates all the critical studies devoted to his work. Deconstruction, commonly a metonym for Derrida's body of work and the abundant scholarship it has inspired in its wake, rather than an identifiable theory, movement or method, often seems to stand for an emblematic figure of elusiveness and indeterminability, the 'proper name' of the impossibility of naming. '[I]s there some *thing* called deconstruction? This is a crude question, crudely asked', Julian Wolfreys remarks, as he proceeds to investigate at great length a whole host of actual and potential misconceptions of Derrida's legacy.<sup>3</sup> His rich and meticulous monograph *Deconstruction\*Derrida*, neatly arranged into the 'Introduction: "Deconstruction, if such a thing exists..."', 'Part I: The Make-Believe of a Beginning', 'Part II: Preparatory to Anything Else' and 'Part III: Some Supplementary Afterword(s)', reads overall more like an introduction to introductions: in its evident unwillingness to define, so as not to betray, deconstruction, in its desire to respond without responding, it never really begins. The same can be said for the majority of such texts, prefaces, forewords and other commentaries that assume and address Derrida's work as a whole. As Martin McQuillan shrewdly observes in his own introduction to *Deconstruction: A Reader* 'perhaps an introduction (with its suggestions of rigour, unpredictability, marginality, deceptiveness and paradox) is the proper place for this

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<sup>3</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Deconstruction\*Derrida* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 25.

thing [deconstruction], if it were not for the fact that it makes the “proper” one of its abiding objects of study.’<sup>4</sup>

In this light, Nicholas Royle’s indispensable *Jacques Derrida*, part of the *Routledge Critical Thinkers* series, deserves perhaps the most attention. Right from the get go and without biting his tongue, Royle puts into question the usefulness, the possibility even, of a book like the one he has been assigned to compose, which by definition and in its very program would claim mastery of Jacques Derrida’s oeuvre and thus the ability to introduce him to the uninitiated, to simplify, summarize and explicate his texts. In the first chapter, entitled ‘Why Derrida?’ in accordance with the publishing guidelines, Royle interrogates the problematic assumptions that a question of this sort entails and so he exposes its baffling absurdity. Similarly, in the ensuing chapter entitled ‘Key Ideas’, rather than Derrida’s key ideas, Royle lays bare the inapplicability of the notion of ‘key ideas’ when it comes to this particular thinker. In this spirit, Royle’s book unfolds then as an extensive, paradoxical argument against its own promise, a warning off any study like his own that seeks to determine and delimit Derrida. Summing things up in the conclusion, ‘After Derrida’, Royle writes:

[Derrida’s] thinking is fundamentally incompatible with the project of a text (such as this one was supposed to have been) that sums up the author’s work, beginning with a neatly packaged explanation of why this work might be worth reading and ending with a likewise neatly packaged survey of what it was all about and what impact it has had on other thinkers.<sup>5</sup>

But could it really be otherwise? Indeed, as one might argue, every major philosopher’s work is equally challenging; that no single response can claim to convey

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<sup>4</sup> Martin McQuillan, ‘Introduction: Five Strategies for Deconstruction’ in *Deconstruction: A Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 143.

its significance, exhaust its implications or contain its effects should go without saying really. Grappling with a thinker as prolific, ambitious and influential as Jacques Derrida cannot be anything but a daunting task, and a supplementary reminder may therefore strike one as a tedious academic cliché, and a suspiciously superfluous one at that. After all, doesn't one have to give it a shot and respond regardless of the cost? And in fact, hasn't one always already responded? Doesn't Royle himself undertake the very project he seems to renounce? Agreed, 'every other is every bit other [*tout autre est tout autre*]', as Derrida's famous dictum goes.<sup>6</sup> But when all is said and done, insofar as it does not constitute an excuse for not venturing to respond at all, this sort of quandary about the difficulties and risks involved could very well be taken as a thinly veiled excuse for a critic's rather inexcusable shortcomings, or else, even worse, as a euphemism of Derrida's essential incomprehensibility.

If Derrida's advocates have a hard time convincingly dismissing this sort of scepticism toward deconstruction, it is actually because it is not unfounded. This is why the preeminent Derridean scholars do not even attempt to dismiss it; on the contrary. The truth of the matter is that, strangely enough, Royle is indeed echoing here the remonstrations of all those vocal adversaries and despairing students of deconstruction, who contend that Derrida is just too difficult, impenetrable, virtually unreadable and hence outright refuse to deal with deconstruction and 'deconstructionists' alike. Rather than challenging or contradicting their reluctance, all serious Derridean scholarship in fact seems to justify the reasons behind it. 'Derrida is hard to follow', Derek Attridge admits in his turn, playing exactly on the phrase's inherent ambiguity, on the always possible possibility that the other takes it at 'face value', so to speak, that is, the

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<sup>6</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 68.

possibility or the hazard, that the other takes it out of its context and repeats it otherwise.<sup>7</sup> Of course, as anyone familiar with Derrida's work will lose no time clarifying, as if to put things right, this alleged difficulty is by no means attributable to a lack of rigor on Derrida's part, just as it is also not simply reducible to the complexity of his analyses or to his unconventional and oftentimes inscrutable prose; despite appearances, these are actually the effects rather than the causes of Derrida's resistance to the interpretative grasp. What is it that makes Derrida so difficult then? And what makes this difficulty remarkable? What makes 'deconstruction' so singularly indeterminable? For better or for worse, as this chapter will demonstrate with reference to a number of excerpts from Derrida's writings, it remains that this difficulty, this indeterminability, is impossible to attribute to anything whatsoever; it is absolutely unanalyzable, undialectizable, unaccountable, and as such absolutely determinative; there will have been no right context for it, no correct meaning attached to it; it remains to be thought.

'We cannot get a grip on deconstruction', in Gayatri Spivak's words.<sup>8</sup> It is well understood; deconstruction is un-introducible; this is the first rule of the deconstructive club, its 'opening lines', to recall the subtitle of Marian Hobson's excellent book on Derrida's work.<sup>9</sup> As easy as it is to repeat and paraphrase this over and over again, it remains nonetheless tremendously challenging to consider its import and implications, to follow through its consequences. For Derrida *is* disarming, and 'fundamentally' so, as

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<sup>7</sup> Derek Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility: Deconstruction's Traces* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'At the *Planchette* of Deconstruction is/in America' in *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 244.

<sup>9</sup> Marian Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).



Royle says. And like Attridge, we should ‘not expect to catch up’.<sup>10</sup> Taking a closer look at two particularly inventive texts, Nicholas Royle’s *After Derrida* (1995) and Geoffrey Bennington’s ‘Derridabase’ (1993), which against all odds endeavour to account for the constitutive indeterminability of Derrida’s thought, this chapter will confirm that, in the first place, deconstruction will have been the assumption of the grave responsibility of one’s response, without guarantees.

## 1.2. Double bind

As soon as I enter into a relation with the absolute other, my absolute singularity enters into relation with his on the level of obligation and duty. I am responsible to the other as other, I answer to him and I answer for what I do before him. But of course, what binds me thus in my singularity to the absolute singularity of the other, immediately propels me into the space or risk of absolute sacrifice.<sup>11</sup>

While every response to the other necessarily entails the sacrifice of the other’s singularity, as Derrida persistently reminds us, the impossibility to determine and faithfully represent specific Derrida’s viewpoints is nevertheless incommensurable to the impossibility to determine and faithfully represent any other’s viewpoints. And the reason is that precisely this impossibility, this untranslatability, constitutes the subject of Derrida’s work; it is Derrida’s viewpoint as such. As in this passage from *The Gift of Death*, so throughout his career, with every single lecture, essay and interview, Derrida indefatigably strives to display or, better still, to allow for the irreducible resistance of the other to interpretative appropriation, to reckon with the effects of the inherent and therefore necessary limitations of responsiveness, with the incalculability of

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<sup>10</sup> Attridge, *Reading and Responsibility*, p. 55.

<sup>11</sup> Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, p. 68.

responsibility. In this way, however, he raises the stakes for his own readers: it is not only, not simply, not at all, not anymore, that they cannot avoid betraying the singularity of Derrida's texts; rather, they absolutely must do so. In order to be faithful to Derrida, one is obliged, first and foremost, not to. The failure that accrues specifically to the responses to his work is therefore heterogeneous to the very order of success and failure; it carries within itself a chance. And hence a critical reader's admission of guilt before Derrida can be neither overlooked nor mistaken for a passing, sterile comment on the role of critical discourse in general; despite itself, it constitutes in fact a reading of Derrida. Conceding the impossibility to determine Derrida, one will have just begun determining Derrida.

Reflecting on the chances of his own venture to offer an introduction to the philosopher's oeuvre, Geoffrey Bennington, another prominent reader of Derrida, writes:

Programmed excuses: it is, of course, impossible to write a book of this sort about Derrida. I do not mean the – real – difficulties of reading or comprehension that his texts appear to put up against a first approach. [...] But a difficulty which is as it were structural, which has nothing to do with the competence of such and such a reader of Derrida (me, as it happens). This difficulty hangs on the fact that *all* the questions to which this type of book must habitually presuppose replies, [...] are already put to us by the texts we have to read, not as preliminary or marginal to the true work of thought, but as this work itself in its most pressing and formidable aspects.<sup>12</sup>

Bennington's plea is again unequivocal: it will have been impossible to respond to Derrida, to describe and define deconstruction, since deconstruction 'itself', 'in its most pressing and formidable aspects' puts into question precisely the possibility of definitive descriptions. What is particularly interesting about this passage from 'Derridabase' is

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, 'Derridabase' in *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 8.

actually its position within the text. Not by chance, Bennington's 'programmed excuses' do not simply precede his exposition of Derrida's thought in the guise of some preliminary foreword. Instead, they form part of its main body, of its program, setting off its second section which goes by the title 'Remark'. Bennington immediately adds: 'Our little problems of reading-protocol cannot therefore remain enclosed in the space of a preface: they are already the whole problem.'<sup>13</sup> Reflecting thus on his chances of doing justice to Derrida, Bennington will have already taken a chance; which is also to say that one can no longer speak of 'reflection' here. Bennington's excuses for the necessary limitations of his text will have been part of the text he seeks to exonerate; they *are* that text. Offering his apologies in advance for betraying Derrida, Bennington will have already been betraying him. It will have always been too late. Why proceed then? Why begin in the first place? And yet, by the same token and for the same reason, conceding his inability to successfully illuminate and represent Derrida's thought, Bennington will have already been doing just that. A chance: recognizing the impossibility of writing this book, this book will have been made possible. This is the closing remark of 'Remark': 'It turns out that what makes our work a priori impossible is precisely what simultaneously makes it possible. Give the chance of this encounter a chance.'<sup>14</sup>

The resistance of the Derridean text to presentation, to systematization, to summary expositions and straightforward simplifications is neither some kind of misfortune that just happens to befall his readers, as if by accident and despite their best intentions to 'get it right', nor some parasitical side-effect of Derrida's attempt to communicate his thoughts as clearly as possible. On the contrary, resistance constitutes

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

the guiding thread of Derrida's texts, its necessary corollary, and as such its primary directive to its addressees. In Royle's succinct, essentially contradictory, possible impossible, formulation: 'If there is a key idea in Derrida it has to do with an interrogation of the "key idea".'<sup>15</sup> The acknowledgment of one's inability to elucidate with accuracy Derrida's texts constitutes as a consequence neither an innocuous word of caution nor a blunt display of modesty; most certainly, it has absolutely nothing to do with a pragmatic, relativistic avowal to nonetheless 'give it one's best'. Rather, it constitutes the *remarking* of Derrida's affirmation of the paradoxical law that delimits every response to the singular other and binds infinite responsibility with infinite sacrifice. That does not make it successful of course; to surrender in advance is not to avoid defeat. Insofar as Derrida's affirmation inevitably complies with and breaches the law it proclaims, the same is *a priori* true for the critic's remark. Whether retracing or repeating as such Derrida's movement, one will have already passed him by. Betrayal is the condition of responsiveness; fidelity to deconstruction presupposes infidelity. It is a double bind, an experience of aporia:

So what are we to do? It is impossible to respond here. It is impossible to respond to this question about the response. It is impossible to respond to the question by which we precisely ask ourselves whether it is necessary to respond or not to respond, whether it is necessary, possible, or impossible. This aporia without end paralyzes us because it binds us doubly. (I must and I need not, I must not, it is necessary and impossible, etc.) In one and the same place, on the same apparatus, I have my two hands tied or nailed down. What are we to do?<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Royle, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'' in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. and trans. David Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), p. 19.

Derrida returns on a number of occasions explicitly to the unsettling effects of the double bind.<sup>17</sup> Yet one could actually argue that the *experience* of the double bind haunts his oeuvre in its entirety, insofar as all of his readings venture to reckon precisely with the rupture of identity, the destabilization of authority, the spectralization of presence, the unanalyzable and undialectizable suspension of meaning. Rather than their overarching or underlying theme then – the conceptual space within which Derrida's texts take place, the experience of the double bind constitutes instead the trail that Derrida's texts trace. Haunted by the double bind, Derrida's texts turn themselves into ghosts; their driving force is also the principle of their undoing, their condition of possibility is also a condition of impossibility. His brilliant essay entitled 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering"' exemplifies the situation, as it turns itself, its own impossibility, into its explicit 'theme'.

Derrida's primary concern here is to caution his audience against the very tempting and increasingly popular reduction of the deconstructive gesture to a form of 'ethics', to a 'higher responsibility and a more intractable [*intraitable*] moral exigency',<sup>18</sup> whereby the dreadful confrontation with its own impasse is construed as the courageous acknowledgment of its inevitable limitations, and the recognition of its groundlessness becomes thus its newly found ground. Simon Critchley's influential *The Ethics of Deconstruction* (1992), coincidentally published a few months earlier than 'Passions', is the most rigorous attempt to salvage precisely along those lines the purpose and the identity of deconstructive criticism from the perceived deadlock of its essential double bind, an attempt to provide a satisfactory answer to the question that

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<sup>17</sup> See for instance Jacques Derrida, 'From Signponge' in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, trans. Richard Rand (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 344-69 and Jacques Derrida 'Resistances' in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, pp. 1-38.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida, 'Passions', p. 14.

opens his book: ‘Why bother with deconstruction?’<sup>19</sup> In contrast, Derrida is more than eager to dissociate deconstruction’s name from the convenience of any sort of cushion, ‘ethical’ or otherwise, that would circumscribe its irremediable, destabilizing force. What he is interested in is to leave the question reverberate: ‘What are we to do?’<sup>20</sup>

By way of an ‘example’, then, he turns to the present moment, to the situation he finds himself in, right there and then, which is, of course, not unlike every situation he finds himself in, everything that happens to him. ‘Clearly’, as he will remark, ‘[t]he example itself, as such, overflows its singularity as much as its identity. This is why there are no examples while at the same time there are only examples [...] The exemplarity of the example is clearly never the exemplarity of the example.’<sup>21</sup> It is certainly not a coincidence that, while originally written in the context of David Wood’s *Derrida: A Critical Reader* and in response to the excellent essays included there, ‘Passions’ was later republished in another context,<sup>22</sup> as if it could apply indeed to any context, like a response to responsiveness *as such*, the introduction to introductions *par excellence*. Derrida turns, then, to *this* text and patiently proceeds to demonstrate that while the call of the other – in this instance David Wood’s invitation to participate in this collection of essays – is what makes his essay possible in the first place, the

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<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, and to his credit, it should be noted, Critchley supplemented the original publication with an appendix entitled ‘An Attempt at Self-Criticism’ where in response specifically to ‘Passions’ he conceded his rather ‘precipitous use of a number of philosophemes [...] before which Derrida’s cautious rigor would doubtless hesitate’. Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p.251.

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed discussion on the bearing of ethics on deconstruction see Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Deconstruction and Ethics’ in *Interrupting Derrida* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, ‘Passions’, p.15.

<sup>22</sup> See Jacques Derrida, ‘Passions: “An Oblique Offering”’ in *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 3-31.

conflicting ethical demands that this call entails simultaneously render any conceivable response on his part, *any* text, as inappropriate as a non-response, *no* text. In this manner, the subject of 'Passions' becomes effectively its own radical unjustifiability, which is the radical unjustifiability of deconstruction in general. What makes Derrida's response eventually possible, he shows, right here and now, is the ascertainment of its impossibility. Invisible in its visibility, readable in its unreadability, Derrida's illustration of the impossibility of doing justice to the other is therefore fundamentally split, divided in its origin, and its duality is incommensurable both with the order of performativity, since its performance already undercuts its claims, and with the orderliness of a metalinguistic self-reassurance, since its claims already undercut their reflection. His text remains thus above all incommensurable, irreducible to an 'ethics': the acknowledgment of its impropriety, of its unjustifiability, the remarking of its own impossibility, is anything but its overcoming. The question, no, not even that, the force of the question is all that remains: 'What are we to do?'<sup>23</sup>

As a result, 'Passions' confounds his audience: on the one hand, it proscribes the possibility of a suitable response to its call, as it fends off categorically any attempt to appropriate its import. On the other, however, Derrida's text also seems to predetermine, to dictate really, his audience's response. His illustration of the impossibility of doing justice to the other becomes *eventually*, through an uncanny synchronization, the other's response to his text; always already, it *is* the other's response to his text. With the same movement, Derrida's text proscribes and prescribes

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<sup>23</sup> One of the most interesting additions to the essays collected in *Deconstruction: A Reader* is a little text by Jean-Luc Nancy's entitled "What is to be Done?" which does not explicitly touch on Derrida. Nancy writes: 'What is to be done? The question is on everybody's lips (including the philosopher's), but withheld, barely uttered, for we do not know if we still have the right, or whether we have the means, to raise it.' See Jean-Luc Nancy, 'What is to be Done?' in *Deconstruction: A Reader*, p. 456.

its reading. Samuel Weber arrives at the same ‘position’ upon reading Derrida’s ‘To Speculate: On Freud’: ‘Prescribes and proscribes since that reading – this one, for instance – is, structurally at least, in precisely the same position as the “text” it has been describing; and this “position”, you will have long since realized, is one that in the strict sense it is impossible to occupy, at least for very long.’<sup>24</sup> One can only betray Derrida’s text; but it so happens, one can only do that by following Derrida to the letter; and vice versa. What are we to do? It is impossible to respond here. This aporia without end paralyzes us because it binds us doubly. Not by chance, Derrida speaks in the plural:

But also how is it that it does not prevent us from speaking, from continuing to describe the situation, from trying to make oneself understood? What is the nature of this language, since already it no longer belongs, no longer belongs simply, either to the question or to the response whose limits we have just verified and are continuing to verify?<sup>25</sup>

Who speaks? Is it Derrida or is it the other? Is it Derrida on the other’s behalf or the other on Derrida’s behalf? What remains? What is the nature of this language that responds through the unconditional acknowledgement of the failure to respond? What is the status of this text that negates itself, that takes place in its absence, that appears disappeared, tracing the steps of its immobility, unidentifiable, unlocatable, unassignable, indeterminable, other than itself?

Of what does this verification consist, when nothing happens without some sacrifice? Will one call this a testimony in a sense that neither the martyr, the attestation nor the testament would exhaust? And, as with

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<sup>24</sup> Samuel Weber, ‘Reading and Writing –chez Derrida’ in *Institution and Interpretation*, [expanded ed.] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 99-100.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, ‘Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering’’, p. 19.



every testimony, providing that it never be reducible, precisely, to verification, to proof or to demonstration, in a word, to knowledge?<sup>26</sup>

Everything depends on this. The future of Derrida's thought in the very least.

No question, no response, no responsibility. Let us say that there is a secret here. *There is something secret. [Il y a là du secret]*.<sup>27</sup>

### 1.3. Too literary

The experience of aporia that every commentator of Derrida's work endures, has to endure, derives from his texts as such. Friends and foes would agree to this: the impossibility of determining Derrida is an upshot of his own claims and arguments; the problem lies with Derrida, so to speak, the problem is in Derrida – to be found in his texts. The impossibility of determining Derrida's position is determined by Derrida in advance, always already, dividing his text at the moment it makes it possible. Derrida's indeterminability is his own, if you will, and in this sense his work is therefore exemplarily problematic, the site of an irreducible *polemos*.

Indeed, all the criticism targeted against deconstruction through the years, regardless how blunt or sophisticated, comes down to this constitutive, originary paradox, deconstruction's fundamental difference with itself, its definitive indefinability, its determinative indeterminability. In certain people's eyes, an unconditional immersion in this 'aporia without end' ultimately amounts to an unfounded negativity, an indiscriminate and apolitical questioning of the entire history of philosophy in the name of playfulness. In certain people's eyes, all that

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

deconstruction does is obsessively seek to expose the necessary metaphysical presuppositions of every philosophical thesis and the limitations of every intellectual response and from an imaginary position of superiority discard it as worthless. As one commentator puts it, '[w]hat Deconstruction urges is not a new system of thought but scepticism toward all the old ways, which are construed as really one way.'<sup>28</sup> Viewed in this way, Derrida's absolute resistance is essentially testament to the inconsequentiality of his texts, at best to their literariness or else their infinite 'deconstructibility'. At the end of the day, the impossibility of meeting Derrida's texts head-on and appropriately responding to his thought only serves to establish the pointlessness of even trying.

As must be clear by now, the issue is not to defend Derrida's legacy from its critics. Not so much because this has already been done extensively, and with considerable success,<sup>29</sup> but, more interestingly, because Derrida himself repeatedly addresses these resistances to deconstruction with the utmost earnestness; one might even argue it is all he ever does. In 'Resistances', he writes:

What drives [*pousse*] deconstruction to analyze without respite the analysistic and dialecticistic presuppositions [...] of philosophy itself, what resembles there the drive and the pulse of its own movement, a rhythmic compulsion to track the desire for simple and self-present originarity, well, this very thing –here is the double bind we were talking about a moment ago– drives it to raise the analysistic transcendentalistic stakes. It drives deconstruction to a hyperbolicism of analysis that takes

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<sup>28</sup> Qtd. in Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 12.

<sup>29</sup> For a response to the most severe and less intelligent responses to Derrida see Simon Critchley, 'Derrida: the Reader' in *Derrida's Legacies*, ed. Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1-11. For a broader discussion that addresses Habermas's hostility and other misconceptions of deconstruction, see Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction and the 'Unfinished Project of Modernity'* (London: Athlone Press, 2000).

sometimes, in certain people's eyes, the form of a hyperdiabolicism. In this sense, deconstruction is also the interminable drama of analysis.<sup>30</sup>

While many of Derrida's self-proclaimed supporters often seem particularly eager to affirm that he is not a dangerous nihilist and sweepingly dismiss any objections to his work as mere symptoms of a certain philosophical conservatism,<sup>31</sup> Derrida himself makes room for his critics' concerns and carefully delineates their rationale. And, in fact, rather than refuting these concerns, he simply attributes them to a difference in perspective instead. Thematizing the deconstructive double bind, directly addressing his work's indeterminability, Derrida incorporates in effect his critics' point of view and thus raises the stakes once again: it is because deconstruction is impossible, indeed, he affirms, because it *is* not, that it becomes possible in the first place; it is because it takes place as its self-annihilation, in the non-space of its finitude, as a work of mourning, that it resists infinitely. Above all, then, Derrida does not need defending from his hard-headed critics because his work actually presupposes their scepticism; more than that, it is constituted in anticipation of this scepticism. In a way, deconstruction is no more than the response to the criticism it engenders, a polyphonic, 'tragicomic drama', as Weber will also say,<sup>32</sup> highly political because lacking *a* politics. Elsewhere, and in response to Paul de Man's diagnosis that 'the deconstruction of metaphysics, or "philosophy", is an impossibility to the precise extent that it is "literary"',<sup>33</sup> Derrida writes that

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<sup>30</sup> Derrida, 'Resistances', p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> For instance see Simon Glendinning, 'Preface' to *Derrida's Legacies*, pp. xi-xxvi.

<sup>32</sup> Weber, 'Reading and Writing –chez Derrida', p. 92.

<sup>33</sup> Paul de Man, 'Rhetoric of Persuasion (Nietzsche)' in *Allegories of Reading* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), p.131.

the most rigorous deconstruction has never claimed to be foreign to literature, nor above all to be *possible*. And I would say that deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible; also that those who would rush to delight in that admission lose nothing from having to wait. For a deconstructive operation *possibility* would rather be the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches. The interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible.<sup>34</sup>

What these excerpts clearly illustrate, then, is that the resistances to deconstruction are in fact indissociable from the resistances of deconstruction. The denigration of Derrida's work, even the frustrated refusal to read his texts at all, is indissociable from the impossibility of doing so successfully. 'Of course, there is not reading and there is not reading', as Royle reminds us in his seminal *After Derrida*.<sup>35</sup> Still, that 'many of those opposing [Derrida] on the grounds that his work is "nihilistic", "unintelligible", "meaningless" and so on had not read Derrida's texts', as he says, is certainly not unconnected to the fact that in a sense 'Derrida's work will never be readable. The reading of Derrida's texts is always still to come', as he immediately goes on to argue.<sup>36</sup> And although he seems reluctant to affirm that connection explicitly here, *After Derrida* stands out precisely for its exceptional courage to bear its consequences.

Unlike many of Derrida's 'legatees', Royle proves admirably sensitive to deconstruction's originary crisis, to the desperate exigency of the deconstructive response, the impossibility of the challenge that is writing 'after Derrida' – later than, in agreement with, in the manner or in pursuit of Derrida, as he explains in the book's introduction. What safeguards the identity and the identifiability of deconstructive

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'From Psyche' in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Catherine Porter, pp. 327-8.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholas Royle, *After Derrida* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 160.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

criticism, if ‘deconstruction is not an operation that supervenes afterwards, from the outside, one fine day’, as Derrida says, but ‘always already at work within the work’?<sup>37</sup> And how should one respond to Derrida’s work itself, if ‘deconstruction is justice’, as he writes elsewhere, even more so, if it is ‘indeconstructible’?<sup>38</sup> From a number of different angles and on account of various close readings, Royle contemplates on the after effects of such questions and investigates scrupulously the nature and history of the problematic relationship between deconstruction and deconstructive criticism, between Derrida and his readership.

Most notably, on account of Derrida’s professed inability to read and respond to Samuel Beckett, ‘whom’, as he says in an interview, ‘I will thus have “avoided” as though I had always already read and understood him too well’,<sup>39</sup> Royle considers the limits and the chances of his own response to Derrida himself. In Derrida’s silent resignation before Beckett, his freezing ‘identification’<sup>40</sup> with Beckett’s work, Royle recognizes precisely the overwhelming, impossible demands of his own task. And in the same way that Derrida seems to appropriate Beckett’s work, Royle subtly appropriates Derrida’s response to it: ‘How could I write, sign, countersign performatively texts which “respond” to Beckett? How could I avoid the platitude of a supposed academic metalanguage?’<sup>41</sup> In light of these absolute and undialectizable affinities then, between

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<sup>37</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’ in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*. ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida’ in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, p. 61.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Derrida and Beckett, on the one hand, himself and Derrida, on the other, Royle goes on to suggest that perhaps Derrida's work '*does not go far enough* with its deconstruction of the subject, and that a deconstructive resituating of the subject calls to be further radicalised.'<sup>42</sup> Thereon and in response to the typical and typically vague claims that Derrida's work is 'too literary', Royle provocatively suggests that, on the contrary, Derrida's work has perhaps not been "'literary" enough'.<sup>43</sup> Pointing to Geoffrey Bennington's 'Derridabase', which attempts to provide an account of Derrida's oeuvre without quoting a single sentence of his (we turn to this more fully in a moment), Royle speculates then, in response to Derrida, after Derrida, on the possibility of an excitational text, where quotations marks will have disappeared and Derrida's signature will have been completely effaced ('is this not basically what I have always meant to say', Derrida avows, as we will see<sup>44</sup>), his 'theory' infused into language, into a new literature that is no longer simply opposable to theory or even distinguishable from it. He envisages the possibility of another kind of writing, 'a theoretically vigilant, rigorous and inventive writing which would be radically excitational',<sup>45</sup> indeterminable, unassignable, unpresentable, other than itself, a writing that would not claim to 'respond to Derrida', because always already in response, always already responsible, in deconstruction.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Royle, *After Derrida*, p. 168.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Circumfession' in *Jacques Derrida*, p. 33.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> Nicholas Royle's novel *Quilt* (Brighton: Myriad Editions, 2010) cannot be read outside the context of this foresight and it could certainly be described in just those terms. One can also not help but think in this light of Hélène Cixous's literary writings and their indisputable affinities with 'deconstructive theory',

What Royle's daring and thought-provoking reflections above all serve to remind us here is that if Derrida was ever in need of defending, it would rather be against the temptation to soften the radicalism of his claims and play down the disturbing theoretical consequences that it implicates anyone's response with. Aphoristic denouncements of deconstruction, as intolerably dense and unworthy of consideration as they might sometimes appear, do not contradict or challenge Derrida's work *per se* and so should be neither ignored nor quickly dismissed as if they were misconceptions of deconstruction's supposedly proper significance. If there ever was a danger for Derrida's legacy, it would rather consist in the blithe reduction of Derrida's essential indeterminability to some form of liberal openness to meaning in order to better accommodate his work, 'deconstruction' as such, to the academic status quo. And in fact, as Timothy Clark shows in *The Poetics of Singularity* (2005), this is anything but a hypothetical threat. Under the pretence of defending Derrida's writings, critics consistently assimilate the deconstructive desire with a presumably liberating, 'supposedly natural drive towards self-assertion in self-definition'.<sup>47</sup> In this manner, Clark astutely observes, 'Derrida's insight is turned into a methodological tool for describing once more the interaction of various competing groups striving for autonomy. Deconstruction is absorbed as a move or movement in what is basically the same old set-up.'<sup>48</sup>

Throughout his career, Derrida will never cease to repeat that

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her ex-citational incorporation of Jacques Derrida's thought. For instance see, Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, *Veils*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 22.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[d]econstruction is not a doctrine; it's not a method, nor is it a set of rules or tools; it cannot be separated from performatives, from signatures, from a given language. If you want to 'do deconstruction' – 'you know, the kind of thing Derrida does' – then you have to perform something new, in your own language, in your own singular situation, with your own signature, to invent the impossible and to break with the application, in the technical, neutral sense of the word.<sup>49</sup>

And the reason he never ceases to repeat this<sup>50</sup> is that in truth there is really no end to the ways one can misinterpret it. In fact, one can only misinterpret it, and it has only been misinterpreted. Whether one takes it as no more than an authorization of irresponsibility or as a declaration of intellectual independence, as a prop to a relativistic linguisticism or as a call for a return to 'ethics', as the core of a systematically atheoretical antisystematicity or as what is misconstrued in this way, deconstruction remains unverifiable; it must remain. If it 'bears witness to a possibility that exceeds it, this exceeding remains, it (is) the remainder, and it remains such',<sup>51</sup> as he will say in his conclusion to 'Passions'. At once too literary and not literary enough, deconstruction is 'the remaining of the rest [*la restance du rest*]',<sup>52</sup> as he puts it in 'Resistances', whose resistance is infinite 'because, very simply, it is not. The rest *is* not or *est* not [*Le reste n'est ou n'este pas*].'<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'As if I Were Dead: An Interview with Jacques Derrida' in *Applying: to Derrida*, ed. by John Brannigan, Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (London and New York: Macmillan Press, 1996), pp. 217-18.

<sup>50</sup> For its fullest and most characteristic articulation see Jacques Derrida, 'Letter to a Japanese Friend' in *Derrida Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 269-76.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, 'Passions', p. 25.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, *Resistances*, p. 26.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*



To conclude then, if Derrida's indeterminability should never be confused with a sterile indeterminacy, in the sense of a pointless, programmatically ambiguous experimentation outside the limits of reason, or with 'mere literature', it is also and by the same token not equivalent to a light-hearted, open-minded respect for the unpredictability of the other and the future 'as such'. The deconstructive gesture, as its name would indicate, is not simply negative and destructive, as has been noted countless times, but it is also not simply affirmative, in the sense of a carefree positivity, since what is being affirmed is no more than an unknowable unpredictability that is absolute and therefore as threatening as it is promising. It is with the full force of this uncertainty in mind that Derrida's often repeated and much quoted proposition that 'deconstruction is what happens [*ce qui arrive*]'<sup>54</sup> should be read. The same goes for Martin McQuillan's insightful definition of deconstruction as 'an act of reading which allows the other to speak',<sup>55</sup> as well as, finally, Jean-Luc Nancy's salute to 'philosophy as chance'.<sup>56</sup> Deconstruction is chance. And like 'chance', it is double, and it *is* not: neither an unregulated accident nor a lucky break, and yet both at once; neither a gamble nor an opportunity, and yet both at once. In Royle's take: 'Deconstruction is an earthquake.'<sup>57</sup> Derrida summarizes everything on our behalf, in response to a question from the audience during a discussion in London, on 8 March of 1996:

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<sup>54</sup> See for instance 'I Have a Taste for the Secret', Jacques Derrida in conversation with Maurizio Ferraris, in *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> McQuillan, 'Introduction' in *Deconstruction: A Reader*, p.6.

<sup>56</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy and Lorenzo Fabbri, 'Philosophy as Chance: An Interview with Jean-Luc Nancy', trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 33/2 (Winter 2007).

<sup>57</sup> Royle, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 25.

I use the word deconstruction “as if” there were such a thing. Initially, this word encountered so many objections and such hostility, reproaching it with being nihilistic, destructive, negative, that I had to insist again and again that deconstruction does not mean destruction, and is not negative. But perhaps this strategy was somewhat dangerous, because it is not true, there *is* destruction. There is something destructive, not a negative destruction but in the sense that we cannot not destroy. So I’m a little uneasy about my own insistence on the non-destructive character of deconstruction. But it was not simply out of strategy that I constantly insisted on its affirmative dimension, on its ‘yes’. [...] Even when I address someone with a question I have already affirmed *that* I address them, and this affirmation is implied in every question and in every negation. It is not an orthodox “yes” but a “yes” absolutely prior to everything. [...] Before the word there is a “yes”. [...] Now, for the affirmation of deconstruction to be an affirmation, it implies the perhaps. I couldn’t repeat or resign the “yes”, I couldn’t say “yes, yes” without the space and time opened by the perhaps. *Even more ‘radical’ than destruction is the affirmation of the “yes”, and more radical than that is the perhaps, our relation to the other* [CD’s emphasis]. This relation is not destructive, but the possibility for it to be so must remain open. [...] The perhaps is already implied in the affirmation, an affirmation implied by deconstruction. This is why I say that deconstruction is justice.<sup>58</sup>

#### 1.4. Success itself

‘Roughly’ chance or the modality of the perhaps or *destinerrance*<sup>59</sup> is what Geoffrey Bennington evokes in order to account for the ‘challenges’ that await every response to Derrida’s work. He writes:

The challenge to any philosopher attempting to present Derrida’s work is that of explicating why the ‘conditions of possibility’ discovered by that work are always also simultaneously ‘conditions of impossibility’ (roughly: what makes it possible for a letter to arrive at its destination

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<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Perhaps or Maybe’ in *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, ed. Jonathan Dromsfield and Nick Midgley, *Pli* 6, *Warwick Journal of Philosophy* (1997), pp. 16-17.

<sup>59</sup> For a focused discussion of Derrida’s neologism see J. Hillis Miller, ‘Derrida’s *Destinerrance*’ in *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009). We will come back to ‘destinerrance’ and to Miller’s essay specifically in the course of the second chapter.

necessarily includes the possibility that it might go astray; this necessary possibility means that it never completely arrives; or, what makes it possible for a performative to be brought off ‘happily’ necessarily includes the possibility of recitation outside the ‘correct’ context; this necessary possibility means that it is never completely happy), and what effects this has on thinking.<sup>60</sup>

Bennington’s essay ‘Deconstruction and the Philosophers (The Very Idea)’, first published in 1988, addresses some of the earlier and most thorough attempts to present Derrida’s thought as a coherent whole, to organize its fundamental principles and thus to reconstitute its philosophical rigor, in contrast to its ‘lighter’ literary applications. Focusing primarily on Rodolphe Gasché’s *The Tain of the Mirror* (1986), Bennington exposes with unparalleled eloquence and insightfulness the essential and inevitable limitations of these attempts. The problem with ‘explicating’ Derrida, as he summarily puts it here, is that Derrida’s work shows that explication is only possible in its impossibility. As a result, any ‘successful’ reading of Derrida, any reading that ‘arrives at its destination’, only becomes possible insofar as it ‘necessarily includes the possibility’ that it never completely arrives, which therefore means that it is never absolutely successful, never ‘completely happy’.

But can this ‘challenge’ ever really be met, as Bennington seems to imply by calling it that in the passage above? Does Bennington himself, for instance, meet this ‘challenge’ with this essay of his? Or else, are these ‘effects on thinking’ that Derrida’s work necessitates, and to which Bennington refers after that long parenthesis, curiously cutting them off from the rest of the sentence, as if insignificant and themselves parenthetical, are these ‘effects on thinking’ then really to be thought? ‘Deconstruction

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<sup>60</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, ‘Deconstruction and the Philosophers (The Very Idea)’ in *Jacques Derrida: Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers*, vol. II, ed. Zeynep Direk and Leonard Lawlor (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 355-6.

is not what you think' is the title of a little essay of his, coincidentally written on the same year.<sup>61</sup> Derrida from 'Envois' countersigns, in other words:

[o]ne of the paradoxes of destination is that if you wanted to *demonstrate*, for someone, that something never arrives at its destination, it's all over. The demonstration, once it has reached its end, will have proved what one should not demonstrate.<sup>62</sup>

And from *Margins*, in other words:

To insist upon thinking *its* [philosophy's] *other*: its proper other, the proper of its other, an other proper? In thinking it *as such*, in recognising it, one misses it. One reappropriates it for oneself, one disposes of it, one misses it, or rather one misses (the) missing (of) it, which, as concerns the other, always amounts to the same.<sup>63</sup>

And again from 'Resistances', in yet other words:

By definition a double bind cannot be assumed; one can only endure it in *passion*. Likewise, a double bind cannot be fully analyzed: one can only unbind one of its knots by pulling on the other to make it tighter.<sup>64</sup>

Bennington takes up the 'challenge' to present Jacques Derrida's work in 1991. What makes his 'Derridabase' extremely intriguing in comparison to all the other introductions to Derrida which more or less unsuccessfully set out to capture the totality of the philosopher's thought is that it seems to propose a way out of the deconstructive double bind and its paralyzing effects. As we will see, however, this is only to better

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<sup>61</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, "Deconstruction is not what you think" in *Deconstruction: A Reader*, pp. 217-9.

<sup>62</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Envois' in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 123.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins: of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984), p. xi-xii.

<sup>64</sup> Derrida, 'Resistances', p. 36.

demonstrate the absolute impossibility of doing so. ‘Derridabase’ will have been the most spectacular and the most sophisticated determination of Derrida’s indeterminability.

Contrary to Derrida’s forewarning, ‘Derridabase’ appears indeed at first glance to ‘assume the double bind’. And the way it does this seems astoundingly simple. Fully aware that he cannot offer a just response to Derrida’s texts, Bennington decides to do away with them altogether, refraining from quoting a single sentence by the philosopher himself. By never addressing Derrida’s work as such, ‘Derridabase’ can claim in effect that it does not respond to ‘Derrida’s work’, properly speaking, or else to respond without responding, as it would seem most proper. On top of that, Bennington’s exposition is also supplemented by a text written by Derrida himself, entitled ‘Circumfession’, which runs at the bottom of each page as an extended footnote, and to which the critic has no access in advance, namely, before he has completed his response. As a consequence, the subject matter of ‘Derridabase’ is not identifiable with ‘Derrida’s work’ in the first place, insofar as one part of it, Derrida’s newest piece, will have been necessarily excluded from its scope.

The book’s apparently authorless and untitled exergue outlines its program, ‘its rules of composition’ clearly:

This book presupposes a contract. And the contract, itself established or stabilized on the basis of a friendly bet (challenge, outbidding, or raising the stakes), has determined a number of rules of composition. G.B. undertook to describe, according to the pedagogical and logical norms to which he holds, if not the totality of J.D.’s thought, then at least the general system of that thought. Knowing that there was to be a text by J. D. in the book, he saw fit to do without any quotation and to limit himself to an argued exposition which would try to be as clear as possible. [...] As what is at stake in J.D.’s work is to show how any such system must remain essentially open, this undertaking was doomed to failure from the start, and the interest it may have consists in the test, and the proof, of that failure. In order to demonstrate the ineluctable necessity of the failure, our contract stipulated that J.D, having read

G.B.'s text, would write something escaping the proposed systematization, surprising it.<sup>65</sup>

Written on the basis of this double condition then, the project entitled simply *Jacques Derrida* and comprising Bennington's 'Derridabase' and Derrida's 'Circumfession', along with rich biographical information and bibliographical references, presents itself as the perfect demonstration, if not the solution, of deconstruction's inherent contradictoriness and Derrida's fundamental and 'ineluctable' indeterminability. Synchronizing its responsiveness with that to which it professes to respond and confine in its interpretative reach, it lays bare the impossibility of its undertaking, that is, the impossibility of a full correspondence. Together, student and teacher seem to stage in this manner the latter's ungraspability and his authorial supremacy before his audience. Making sure he will have had the last word, they safeguard his unpredictability; calculatedly, they program, they predetermine Derrida's chance.

It is not by chance that 'Circumfession' actually ends one page before Bennington's text. The last page of 'Derridabase' is reserved exclusively for the final section of the critic's response to Derrida's thought, the last piece of his proposed 'general system of that thought', which is suggestively entitled 'Envoi'. Here, Bennington turns to his audience directly and doubling or supplementing Derrida's confession he concedes: 'We have, obviously enough, been clumsy. Trying to repeat faithfully the essential features of Derrida's thought, we have betrayed him.'<sup>66</sup> In place of a proper conclusion, Bennington has no qualms admitting now what he actually knew all along, what his book tried to demonstrate in the first place and what is after all at stake in all of Derrida's work, its necessary condition and its inevitable consequence,

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<sup>65</sup> Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, p.1.

<sup>66</sup> Bennington, 'Derridabase', p. 316.

that is, the irreducible openness of ‘deconstruction’, the impossibility of its systematization. Quite appropriately, Bennington seals his treatise negating his own endeavour: ‘This is why this book will be of no use to you others, or to you, other, and will have been only a hidden pretext for writing in my own signature behind his back.’<sup>67</sup> No wonder Richard Rorty’s verdict, which features in the book’s back cover, hails ‘Bennington’s account of what Derrida is up to’ as ‘the least pretentious’ he has ‘ever read’.

‘Circumfession’ itself, on the other hand, seems to serve the project’s program perfectly, as it consolidates in a number of ways the unpredictability of Derrida’s discourse, his absolute resistance to any text that would seek to delimit its force, first and foremost that by Bennington which simultaneously unfolds above itself. First of all, in its style of composition: spread across a sequence of fifty-nine sections, each one of them a single paragraph containing a single sentence, ‘Circumfession’ reads at times more like the transcript of an experiment in automatic writing than the meditations of a meticulous philosopher; its language is literally unbound, uncontrollable. In addition to its breathtaking rhythm, however, ‘Circumfession’ is also surprisingly intimate, all too autobiographical, indeed, for a proper, re-presentable philosophical work, as Derrida recounts plenty of details from his private life, particularly with relation to the hospitalization of his dying mother, and shares with his readers some of his most personal thoughts, memories, feelings and experiences. Finally and most importantly, throughout the course of this unique text, Derrida addresses directly Geoffrey Bennington, who of course can neither listen to him nor respond, and he comments on his friend’s endeavour to organize and explicate his body of work. In this manner, silently interrupting Bennington’s train of thought, always one step ahead, Derrida

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

remarks again and again the space that the student's response cannot possibly cover, the limit of his proposed systematization – in a word, the futility of his venture. The following passage is characteristic:

[...] people will say that I'm giving G. a jealous scene, [...] fighting with him over the right to deprive me of my events, i.e. to embrace the generative grammar of me and behave as though it was capable, by exhibiting it, of appropriating the law which presides over everything that can happen to me through writing, what I can write, what I have written or ever could write, for it is true that if I succeed in surprising him and surprising his reader, *this success, success itself*, [CD's emphasis] will be valid not only for the future but also for the past for by showing that every writing to come cannot be engendered, anticipated, preconstructed from this matrix, I would signify to him in return that something in the past might have been withdrawn, if not its content at least in the sap of the idiom, from the effusion of the signature, [...] that would be my rule here, my law for the duration of these few pages, to reinscribe, reinvent, obliging the other, and first of all G, to recognize it, to pronounce it, no more than that, to call me finally beyond the owner's tour he has just done, forgetting me on the pretext of understanding me [...]<sup>68</sup>

Reflecting on the 'generative grammar' that seeks to contain him in representing him, to tie him within the confines of a certain past, a determinable future, an identifiable *self*, Derrida disrupts or surprises its coherence. If Derrida succeeds, indeed, it is because he cannot fail. Unknowably, inappropriably and all so inappropriately, *a priori*, the 'I' resists by reason of itself, necessarily. 'Reinscribing' himself, Derrida 'reinvents' himself. The one who says 'I', who confesses 'himself' right there and then, makes himself possible and singularly irreducible by subverting or circumventing 'himself', his 'grammar' – necessarily. And how could it be otherwise? One makes oneself possible only by exceeding oneself, always already other than oneself. Nothing fails like 'success itself'; if Derrida cannot fail, it is because he cannot succeed. A promise will have been at the origin. That is, the subversion, the circumvention, the

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<sup>68</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Circumfession', pp. 31-3.



surprise, *chance*, will have always been part of the structure of ‘oneself’; it will have always been its necessary supplement, just like Derrida’s text is the necessary supplement to the grammar it appears to oppose, participating in it without belonging to it, its visible/invisible footnote, always never *there*. In the first place, the singularity of the mark will have been its originary division. It survives.

‘In the best case, we have said everything about deconstruction *except* the supplementary remark whereby it is named in texts signed by Jacques Derrida’, Bennington affirms.<sup>69</sup> Insofar as he concedes that he has already failed, he too cannot fail; which is also to say, he too cannot succeed: the ‘invulnerability’ of his ‘programming machine’, Derrida’s grammar, Derrida ‘*himself*’, will have been its constitutive ‘transformability’. In advance, Bennington knows, what Derrida knows, it will have been impossible to determine Derrida, to define deconstruction, to appropriate the other and reduce the other’s unpredictability. It will have been impossible for this text to fulfil the promise of itself. That is its catastrophe and its chance: before the other, it is responsible for itself. Incidentally, ‘Derridabase’ proves ‘faultless’. Derrida continues from above:

and it is as if I were trying to oblige him to recognize me and come out of this amnesia of me [...] and if it is right, and it is, faultless, not only will I no longer sign but I will never have signed, *is this not basically what I have always meant to say* [CD’s emphasis], and given that, for something to happen and for me finally to sign something for myself, it would have to be against G., as though he wanted to love in my stead, and to stop him I was finally admitting some perjury that his programming machine couldn’t providentially account for, a thing all the more improbable in that his matrix, i.e. mine, that which faultlessly he formalizes and which in the past seized hold of me, *but when will this giving birth have begun, like a “logic” stronger than I* [CD’s emphasis], at work and verifiably so right down to so-called aleatory phenomena, the least systemic, the most undecidable of the sentences I’ve made or unmade, this matrix nevertheless opens, leaving room for the

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<sup>69</sup> Bennington, ‘Derridabase’, p. 316.

unanticipatable singularity of the event, it remains by essence, by force, nonsaturable, nonsuturable, invulnerable, therefore only extensible and transformable, always unfinished, for even if I wanted to break his machine, and in doing so hurt him, I couldn't do so, and anyway I have no desire to do so, I love him too much.<sup>70</sup>

Deconstruction is unidentifiable with itself; this is its very condition of possibility. In order to remain remarkable, recognizable, indeed readable, in and as itself, Derrida's text must remain 'by essence, by force' open to the other's determination, to Bennington's 'programming machine', for example, which seeks to formalize its import and arrest its significance. Which is also to say that 'Derridabase' in its turn, and by the same token, will have had to remain open as well, 'extensible, transformable, always unfinished', incommensurable with its subject – with itself, 'leaving room' for the 'unanticipatable singularity of the event', for yet another reading, such as Derrida's 'Circumfession', for example, which at once disrupts and affirms its coherence, disrupts it in order to affirm it. It is because 'deconstruction' remains indeterminable that the possibility of its determination remains fathomable to begin with.

As this chapter has tried to demonstrate, the indeterminability of Derrida's work is constitutive. It denotes neither this work's ultimate meaning nor a relativistic reservation before its ultimate meaning; one can neither ignore nor contain its force. Chance is put to work with the work, at the moment of its coming to be and as the condition of its coming to be. In a word, the incalculable in Derrida's work is this work's incalculability; unverifiable. The deconstructive trace attests to a possibility which exceeds itself, to 'a "logic" stronger than I', as Derrida says, indistinguishable from itself, yet unidentifiable with itself, before itself, yet always to come. 'But when will this giving birth have begun?'

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<sup>70</sup> Derrida, 'Circumfession', pp. 33-6.

## 2. WRITING CHANCE

In truth I always dreamt of writing a *self-centred* text; I never arrived at that point – I always fall upon the others. This will end up by being known.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1. The obvious

What does Derrida believe about chance? Naturally, it will have been impossible to determine his viewpoint on chance. Not only because his work is essentially indeterminable, in the sense that we had occasion to demonstrate in the course of the first chapter, but because chance itself is, of course, indeterminable. In order to be itself, chance must be invisible; to determine chance would be first and foremost to betray it, to eliminate its chanciness. The logic of this oxymoron seems no doubt obvious enough. This is not, however, because it is trivial; far from it. The invisibility of chance is all too obvious, indeed, because it is inseparable from the very possibility of seeing, of a ‘point of view’ in general, and as such it constitutes no less than the necessary condition of phenomenality, of presence, of what comes to pass, what takes place, right here and now, before our eyes. The invisibility of chance is obviousness as such (from the Latin *ob+viam*: ‘in the way of’, ‘in front of’).

Indeed, what would be the foundation, the status and the significance of a viewpoint, of this viewpoint for example, once it seriously acknowledged the reality of

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘My Chances/ *Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies’ in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*, trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronell, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), n.1, p. 31.

chance, once it unequivocally gave way to the possibility of indeterminacy in reality? How could it avoid succumbing itself at that very moment to its contaminating force? Whence would it derive its authority henceforth? Each and every discourse that subscribes to reason and aspires to truth is obliged to exclude chance from its scope. Philosophy only becomes possible, properly philosophical, on condition that it maintains the essential evasiveness of chance, its irreducible resistance to intellectual appropriation, on condition that it maintains, in other words, the ‘chanciness’ of chance, which is also to say, its ‘insignificance’. Insofar as its gaze is directed towards the essential, the knowable, the calculable, the presentable, the thing in itself, philosophy must always, in the first place, dispense with precisely the accidental, the circumstantial, the parasitical. To allow for chance, for the ‘always possible otherwise’, the ‘always possibly not’ of an essential unpredictability in the structure of its trace, would amount to giving up on everything else. To speak of chance, to determine and face up with its consequences, is to let everything else collapse under its weight.

‘The sole aim of philosophical enquiry is to eliminate the contingent.’<sup>2</sup> Hegel’s summary, self-assured definition of the philosophical task leaves no room for doubt. There is reason, only insofar as there *is* no chance, insofar as chance remains indeterminable – beyond reason. There is philosophy, as long as it stays clear of chance. There is no such thing as a viewpoint on chance.

Things, however, happen to be a little less straightforward than that. Robert Smith in his *Derrida and Autobiography* (1995) picks up on Hegel’s assertion and with

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<sup>2</sup> Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, ‘Introduction: Reason in History’ in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 28.

a brilliant, in-depth analysis goes on to question its unsettling implications.<sup>3</sup> No doubt, philosophy's task is to eliminate chance – Hegel affirms the obvious. The problem with his dictum, however, as Smith demonstrates, lies precisely in its *self*-assurance, that is, its groundlessness. Philosophy's law seems *self*-evident because it is instituted solely by reason of its enforcement, at the moment it is enforced, in the name of no more than itself. The problem, as Smith puts it, is that '[p]hilosophy can only be as scientific as it is legislative.'<sup>4</sup>

Smith's argumentation here follows two lines, which essentially amount to the same. His language is extremely sophisticated and his reasoning seems as a result particularly intricate, but in reality Smith invokes first and foremost common sense. In response to Hegel's dictum, he contests: can one ever positively and utterly eliminate the contingent, the chance of chance? Isn't chance, by reason of its very nature, that which can never be excluded? Isn't the possibility of the irruption of the unforeseeable, the incalculable, precisely that, always possible?

It is *always possible* that contingency will startle philosophic anticipation; it takes the form of the future and opens historical change. And, being *always possible* it amounts in its invariant categoriality to a necessary condition or a priori, therefore also taking the form of the (absolute) past. As such, any philosophy worth its salt will be obliged to take it, the always possible chanciness of contingency, on board. But paradoxically, doing so brings on the destitution of philosophy: chance, which is necessarily a-philosophical, the limit of reason, is where philosophy runs out; a non-philosophical a priori.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 13-28.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

To eliminate the contingent is therefore philosophy's task as much as it is its limit; an insoluble problem, an impossible challenge, motivates philosophy by keeping it in suspense.

In consequence, and more rigorously still, Smith points out that insofar as philosophy becomes possible at the moment and on condition that it bars chance from its view and effectively represses its effects, this must mean that it is also essentially contingent on its imminence, that is, on the threat of indeterminability. If the sole aim of philosophical enquiry is to eliminate the contingent, as Hegel proposes, this must be because the contingent will have always been possible. In order to justify its role as the purveyor of truth, the guardian of the determinable and the knowable, philosophy must necessarily presuppose the hazard of haphazardness. What would become of philosophical enquiry if there was no contingency to be eliminated, if there was no accident to distinguish the essential truth from? The problem at hand here is essentially one of framing. As the limit of reason, chance remains incommensurable with philosophical enquiry only because it is exactly what circumscribes its identity and safeguards its *raison d'être*. In Smith's words again:

Philosophical enquiry cannot send the contingent away, on the grounds that doing so would mean its method falling into redundancy directly afterwards, thus jeopardizing philosophy's scientific status. Philosophy must never *with absolute success* send the contingent away, is what we mean. Rather it must maintain the contingent in its power of recurrence, only playing at its despatch. That is what contingency is, a kind of ontological flicker.<sup>6</sup>

Philosophy exists only insofar as it remains haunted by the ghost of chance, insofar as the possibility that there be chance persists in its absence. Chance would be then philosophy's ruination, philosophy's 'destitution' as much as, because, it is

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

philosophy's chance. More accurately still, chance is philosophy's impossible condition of possibility.

Reason can neither eliminate nor accept chance then; it can neither contain nor evade its effects. As this chapter will argue, deconstruction constitutes precisely the enactment of this double, contradictory directive. On the one hand, Derrida breaks away from the philosophical tradition he inherits by putting into question the *a priori* exclusion of chance that underlies philosophical propriety. In this sense, he embodies, indeed, the 'new breed of philosophers' that Nietzsche once envisioned, those 'whose taste and inclination are somehow the reverse of those we have seen so far – philosophers of the dangerous Perhaps in every sense'.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, however, this is not to say that he simply lifts the veil on chance and embraces its consequences, even less so that he surrenders unconcerned to its force. No viewpoint on chance is to be found in Derrida's texts; obviously so, since no such thing exists. In Smith's rather perplexing, because too accurate, formulation: 'Derrida's is the impossible science of accommodating chance as an *a priori*, allowing for a principle of indeterminacy that removes any hope of allowing for it...'<sup>8</sup> Deconstruction is an experience at odds with itself. Setting off from a close reading of Derrida's lecture 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', this chapter will show that the *compositional* exemplarity of his 'impossible science' consists in re-marking the fundamental, inevitable implication of chance with what every discourse, including his own, purports to argue or represent.

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<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* [1886], ed. Rolf-Peter Hortsman and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 6. Derrida discusses thoroughly this passage and the modality of the 'perhaps' in Nietzsche's work. See Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London and New York: Verso, 1997), pp. 26-48.

<sup>8</sup> Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 24.

## 2.2. *Pas de chance*

As a rule, Derrida refrains from speaking of ‘chance’ [*hasard*] in his work.<sup>9</sup> Instead, he usually opts for one of its various substitutes, such as the ‘unpredictable’, the ‘unforeseeable’, the ‘incalculable’ or his neologism, ‘*destinerrance*’. Not by chance, the two most notable exceptions to this tendency to conceal ‘chance’ itself constitute simultaneously the most emphatic validations of its underlying rationale. The first one is none other than Derrida’s own frequent recourse to the idiomatic expression ‘not by chance’ [*pas par hasard*], by which he likes to mark the necessity of some of his findings, that is, precisely, the lack of ‘chance’ in deconstruction. The second, and more significant, is Derrida’s rather surprising decision to make ‘chance’ the explicit subject of his address on the occasion of a symposium about the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature that took place in 1981, a lecture later published under the title ‘My chances/*Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies’. Here too, however, rather than speaking of chance, presenting or defining chance, as we will see, Derrida proves still first and foremost concerned with tracing the consequences of its invisibility, with making its absence felt.

The opening statements of ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’ are ‘revealing’; an incredible and incredibly dense passage, without a doubt, thrown at the very outset and left hanging, at once it releases and seals Derrida’s treatise on chance.

Did I choose this theme haphazardly or by chance? Or, what is more likely, perhaps it was imposed upon me in that chance offered itself for

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<sup>9</sup> The word ‘chance’ appears of course frequently in his writings, but in French it designates exclusively the sense of ‘opening’, ‘opportunity’, ‘possibility’.



the choosing as if I had fallen upon it, thus leaving me with the illusion of a free will. All this involves a very old story, which, however, I shall not endeavour to recount.<sup>10</sup>

‘Haphazardly or by chance?’ A peculiar tension kicks things off and sets the tone for what is to follow. Are ‘haphazardly’ and ‘by chance’ supposed to be contrasting alternatives here? Or, on second thoughts, what is more likely, proffered otherwise ‘or by chance’ serves actually as an explanatory parathesis, simply elaborating further on ‘haphazardly’? And yet, just before it is completely dissolved, the tension is suddenly intensified. Derrida’s answer to his own question, introduced by yet another ‘or’, presumably in order to mark a second – or a third? – possibility, is that in fact *he* did not even ‘choose’ his subject to begin with. His choice was rather ‘imposed upon’ him, determined despite himself. By what? By whom? Yet again, by chance! And what’s more, by replacing or supplementing his free will, says Derrida, chance also ensured in fact its upholding, at least illusorily, allowing him to appropriate as his own a choice he was actually forced to make. How is all this possible? How is it even thinkable? So mysteriously and marvellously enticing, and yet, the passage ends by disavowing its own significance and even its pertinence. Derrida explicitly asks his reader to ignore it and quickly move on; as if having already said too much, he simply refuses to explain or elaborate. After all, he would rather stay clear from the age-long conflict between necessity and chance over the exclusive rights to free will – to his chances.<sup>11</sup> What will follow henceforth are precisely the consequences of this primary speech act, which pulls down the curtain over ‘chance’, ending the discussion there at once.

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<sup>10</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> We will return to the ‘old story’ of free will in the course of the next chapter, specifically in the context of William James’s protest against determinism.

Instead of a thesis *on* chance then, Derrida's thirty-page essay comprises very brief, at times one might say even rushed, and in any case very loosely connected, as if by chance, readings of a large number of texts by various authors. J. Hillis Miller's summary outline of Derrida's itinerary here is quite accurate:

The essay-lecture itself wanders from a beginning with –guess who?– Heidegger, to Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius, to Heidegger again, to Lacan on Poe, to Derrida's own essay on Lacan on Poe, to Epicurus again, as referred to by Poe, to Baudelaire's translations and essays on Poe, and finally to Freud, who was presumably meant to be the centre of this lecture on psychoanalysis and literature.<sup>12</sup>

On top of all that, one notes that along the way Derrida also has recourse to many of the fundamental motifs and themes of his own work, and again inevitably in a somewhat coded form – the encounter and the event, the proper name and numbers, systematicity and 'the law of destabilization', the 'general structure of the mark', the divisibility or 'internal difference' of the letter vis-à-vis the 'ideal iterability of the letter' – to the effect that 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*' reads at times almost as an outline of deconstruction, an impossible summary of 'the experience of the impossible'. And even though, as one might rightly observe, each and every one of Derrida's texts presupposes in some degree a good grasp of his thought, what clearly distinguishes 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*' is that while repeatedly referring to himself, and jumping from one text to the other, from one point to the next, its author has actually very little to say on the very topic of his address. One soon realizes in fact that Derrida is rather compelled to refer to himself and to jump from text to text, *because* he has so little to say on chance itself. 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*' is subject-less.

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<sup>12</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'Derrida's *Destinerrance*' in *For Derrida* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), p. 35.

In an effort to account for this admittedly peculiar strategy, Miller suggests that ‘wandering’ constitutes actually a common feature of Derrida’s style of procedure, and that especially when it comes to chance, or more specifically *destinerrance*, Derrida’s essays tend to ‘mime the thing that they talk about.’<sup>13</sup> In Miller’s view, then, “‘Mes chances’ is about the chances, good and bad, that befall the thinker or lecturer, Derrida in this case.’<sup>14</sup> He concludes:

Derrida, I conclude, does not just name *destinerrance* as an objective fact. Nor does he just exemplify it in the local style and overall structure of his essays. He is also himself the joyfully willing victim, as one might call it, of *destinerrance*. A playful exuberance, or joyful wisdom, a *fröhliche Wissenschaft*, is an evident feature of Derrida’s writings. However hard he tries to stick to the point, he is destined to wander. That is his *chance* or *méchance*, his good or bad luck.<sup>15</sup>

Miller’s interpretation, if one can call it that, is hard to refute in view of the facts. Indeed, above all, Derrida here performs chance. Nevertheless, Miller also seems to simplify matters considerably and in this way to lend support, even if unintentionally, to the two most common misreadings of ‘chance’ in relation to Derrida’s work: that which reduces chance to a certain ‘playful’ style of writing, and that which associates chance with a ‘joyful’ randomness in his argumentation.<sup>16</sup> As expected, things are far more serious than this: for ‘play’ entails rules, ‘joy’ entails a victory and ‘wandering’ itself entails a destination. Above all, what Miller’s reading seems to erase in its light-hearted

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 37.

<sup>16</sup> Miller thoroughly responds in fact to just those misreadings elsewhere. For instance see J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading: Kant, de Man, Eliot, Trollope, James, and Benjamin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) and J. Hillis Miller, *Speech Acts in Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001).

tone here is the ‘arduousness’ that Derrida’s text entails, or else the *significance* of chance. Yes, Derrida performs chance, but this is not quite the same as saying that he performs by chance. His text is dictated by chance, indeed, but for that reason it is all the more necessary, all the more determined. Unpredictability and necessity do not exclude one another; quite the contrary. After all, what is more surprising than the arrival of death or the fulfilment of a prophecy? ‘*Pas de chance*’, as Derrida notes, can mean both ‘no chance, no luck, and the step of luck’.<sup>17</sup>

In his essay ‘From Dread to Language’, Maurice Blanchot attempts to distinguish between the different forms that writing – by, with, on or against chance, under the rule or in pursuit of chance – might take, between the different strategies that a writer might adopt in order to appropriate or at least approximate chance. He writes:

It will always be harder for man to use his reason rigorously and adhere to it as to a coincidence of fortuitous events than to force it to imitate the effects of chance. It is relatively easy to elaborate a text with any letters at all taken at random. It is more difficult to compose that text while feeling the necessity of it. But it is extremely *arduous* [CD’s emphasis] to produce the most conscious and the most balanced sort of work while at each instant comparing the forces of reason that produce it to an actual game of caprice.<sup>18</sup>

Although stemming from a wholly other context, Blanchot’s qualifications and the customary rigour of his prose are extremely helpful here, as he manages to illuminate with uncanny precision, that is, with the utmost thorough obscurity, the distinctiveness of Derrida’s ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’. Neither presumptuously necessary, as sober philosophical propriety would require, nor capriciously chancy, just for the sake of it,

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<sup>17</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Maurice Blanchot, ‘From Dread to Language’ in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. Adams Sitney (New York: Station Hill, 1981), p. 17.

and yet in a way both at once, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’ constitutes indeed ‘the most balanced sort of work’.

### 2.3. Interface

As Derrida will explicitly state, what is at stake here is a ‘certain interfacing of necessity and chance, of significant and insignificant chance’, or else a certain determinability in the structuration of chance, a certain order in the chaos, to put it in more familiar terms, or, what amounts to the same, a certain chanciness in the structuration of the determinable.

As if anticipating Miller’s reading of ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’ as evidence that he is the ‘victim’ of chance, at once confirming and refuting his friend’s praise, which is also an accusation, Derrida cautions that

[i]f I stress the multiplicity of languages, and if I play on it, you should not take this for a mere exercise or a gratuitous and fortuitous display. As I make my way from digression to deviation, I wish to demonstrate a certain interfacing of necessity and chance, of significant and insignificant chance: the marriage, as the Greek would have it, of *Ananke*, of *Tukhe* and *Automatia*.<sup>19</sup>

Halfway through his wandering, Derrida returns here to the text’s onset and to his specific subject with yet another self-reflective comment on the text itself that the author is delivering at that very moment – on its haphazardness and on its chances. An interruption of the text, a pause rather than a step in the course of its development, this little passage does not strictly belong as such to the text of ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’ then, or else, it belongs to it without participating in it as such. Just like that initial question (‘did I choose this theme haphazardly or by chance?’) it could just as well fit

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<sup>19</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 6.

into any other of his texts. It goes without saying, therefore, that it demands our most concentrated attention, even more so in that its confessional, forthright tone seems to summon no less than the secret of Derrida's text, unequivocally to disclose his strategy, to foresee the destiny of his chances: 'I wish to demonstrate a certain interfacing of necessity and chance', he declares. But then the question would be, just how does this labyrinthine, unruly text ultimately demonstrate that? How is this 'interfacing of necessity and chance' demonstrable to begin with? In fact, what does this 'interfacing of necessity and chance' even mean?

In returning to the essay's opening lines Derrida re-inscribes his commitment to silence 'on' chance. Here too, his words fend off any possible effort to grasp them; as soon as they offer themselves to reading, they withdraw immediately from view. So that analyzing them one would be really missing their primary implication. Attempting to understand what Derrida says here on the subject of chance, one would be turning a deaf ear to his resounding silence on it. To fool oneself that some sort of thesis on chance is *there* to be found, if only one looks closely enough, is to blind oneself to this passage's place or out-of-placeness within the text; it is to overlook its enigmatic solitude which is also its universality, its irreducible independence, to take no notice of its shell-like nature that confines it in a non-dialectical secrecy. One can do little more than repeat or at best paraphrase Derrida's 'apotropocalypsis', to borrow John Leavey's neologism, 'the uneasy hymen of the apotropaic and the apocalyptic.'<sup>20</sup> A serious rereading of Derrida's avowal will 'reveal', indeed, that his secret is precisely that, an absolute and irreducible secret, and his chances, likewise, no more than a matter of chance, inevitably

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<sup>20</sup> John P. Leavey, Jr., 'Destinerrance: The Apotropocalypitics of Translation' in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 38.

indeterminable, necessarily unpredictable. ‘Defensive disclosure: reveal just a bit in order not to reveal, in other words reveal in order not to reveal’.<sup>21</sup>

It remains, Derrida says nothing of chance – and in this way only says too much. His seemingly straightforward declaration simply serves to remind his addressees of – the theme that is – chance. Even if not strictly *about* chance, Derrida affirms, he has not been speaking *by* chance either. His lecture will have been with regard to chance from the start; everything said so far and everything to be said henceforth will have been *in relation* to chance. What would that relation be then? What would be its direction?

Things start to clear up when a little later, in the same spirit and along the same lines, Derrida interrupts himself once more in order to reassure us again that, in fact,

[i]t would be possible to demonstrate that there is nothing random in the concatenation of my findings. An implacable program takes shape through the contextual necessity that requires cutting solids into certain sequences (stereotomy), intersecting and adjusting subsets, mingling voices and proper names, and accelerating a rhythm that merely gives the *feeling* of randomness to those who do not know the prescription – which incidentally, is also my case.<sup>22</sup>

Not only does he not perform by chance, Derrida asserts now, even more confidently, despite appearances his text has been unfolding according to a very specific, an ‘implacable’ program. No doubt, he concedes, in its complexity it might give the ‘feeling of randomness’ to some; this is nevertheless merely because they do not know the ‘prescription’ in advance and thus cannot determine its principles with certainty after the fact. Still, and in any case, this is just a ‘feeling’ and no more. The rigorous, meticulous philosopher that he is, Derrida confirms here unconditionally his allegiance to reason and rationality; after Socrates, after Hume, after Hegel, he affirms that

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 14.

‘chance’ is only an effect of our ignorance. No, Derrida avows, in truth, everything is determinable; in truth nothing happens by chance; and especially not ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’.

‘Incidentally’, though, he adds, and here is the twist, the deconstructive turn, or else the deconstructive ‘incision’ at the very heart of philosophy, the displacement of ‘philosophy’ as such, ‘incidentally’, this happens to be ‘his case’ as well. ‘Incidentally’, that is, insignificantly, as if by *coincidence*, he also has this feeling of randomness; he also happens to ignore the ‘prescription’; he is also blind to the reason behind his text. But how is this possible? If Derrida himself is not aware of the program of his address, then who could ever claim to be? If the proprietor of speech cannot determine its intent, safely govern its despatch and guarantee its destination, then who can? Insofar as indeterminability inheres in one’s own discourse, insofar as it forms part of the very structure of *logos*, then philosophy as we know it goes out of the window; knowledge as we know it becomes impossible. Yes, Derrida avows, in truth everything happens by chance; for example ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’.

Hence what we called a moment ago, for clarity’s sake, the ‘self-reflective’ character of these excerpts, which decidedly distinguishes them from the rest of the text, while they are also the ones most faithful to its theme. Chance only emerges shrouded in veils, on the text’s margins, as the residue of a failed endeavour to metalanguage, and chance stays obscured throughout ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, as Derrida ‘makes his way from digression to deviation’, an untold story, *because* chance will have always been *there*, a spectral omnipotence, within and without the text, its ‘*phantasmatic author*’, to recall Timothy Clark’s term for the sense of ‘psychic transformation



ascribed to artistic inspiration.’<sup>23</sup> Indeed, one cannot help but read Derrida’s account here alongside those ‘variously bizarre and variously reliable accounts of the process of composition as a crisis in subjectivity’ that form the subject of Clark’s thorough analysis in his groundbreaking *The Theory of Inspiration*.<sup>24</sup> Chance is never confronted as such, and never to be confronted, as a subject to be analyzed by the philosopher, because chance takes place *with* the text, *despite* the philosopher. A treatise in pursuit of chance as such would be an exemplary failure in that respect. Chance itself is not there, in the text supposedly about it, because chance is that which makes that text possible and dictates its unfolding. As E. M. Forster once put it: ‘How do I know what I think until I see what I say’.<sup>25</sup> ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’ is chance then, ‘chance in other words’, as the title of Ann Wordsworth’s reading of it has it.<sup>26</sup> Derrida does not thematize chance, *because* chance thematizes deconstruction instead and calls upon its principles one by one. A fateful chance is that which summons all these texts that Derrida falls upon, one after the other; chance founds all of his findings. ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’ is *subjectless* because it is *subjected* to chance; which incidentally answers Derrida’s ‘first and preliminary’ question:

The first and preliminary question, as if thrown on the threshold, raises the issue of the downward movement. When chance or luck are under consideration, why do the words and concepts in the first place impose the particular signification, sense, and direction (*sens*) of a downward movement regardless of whether we are dealing with a throw or a fall? Why does this sense enjoy a privileged relation to

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<sup>23</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 26, p. 15.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Qtd. in Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 24.

<sup>26</sup> Ann Wordsworth, ‘Chance in Other Words’, *The Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 12, no. 1-2 (1990), pp. 227-32.

the non-sense or insignificance which we find frequently associated with chance? What would such a movement of descent have to do with luck or chance? From what viewpoint can these be related (and we shall see how precisely, in this place, vision comes to be missing)? Is our attention engaged by the ground or the abyss?<sup>27</sup>

As another Jacques would have replied to the philosopher: ‘Because it was written up above’.<sup>28</sup>

#### 2.4. Only chance

Writing will have always been *of chance*. Derrida’s chances will have been prescribed by chance, right from the start:

It was in 1966, during a symposium in the United States we were both participating in. After some friendly remarks about the talk I had just given, Jean Hippolyte added: “That said, I really don’t see where you are going.” I think I answered him more or less like this: “If I saw clearly and beforehand, where I was going, I really think I would not take even one more step to get there”.<sup>29</sup>

But just how literal or metaphorical are we being here? How serious and how playful is Derrida being here? How much chance is there after all in his ‘chances’, in the prescription named deconstruction? It is no doubt a valid question. The problem, however, which Derrida’s discourse as a whole confronts us with and which ‘My

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<sup>27</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, pp. 4-5.

<sup>28</sup> This is the answer to all the mysteries and questions of life for the protagonist of Diderot’s labyrinthine novel, *Jacques the Fatalist*. See Denis Diderot, *Jacques the Fatalist* [1796], trans. David Coward (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in ‘I Have a Taste for the Secret’, Jacques Derrida in conversation with Maurizio Ferraris, in *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), p. 47.

Chances/*Mes Chances*' epitomizes, is that chance is precisely unquantifiable; more than that, it is unquantifiability as such: *incalculable*. The problem, in other words, is that one cannot be half-serious about truth. As we saw earlier on in this chapter, in order to be itself philosophy cannot acknowledge a margin of error or a percent of uncertainty in its findings, and it cannot tolerate therefore any ambiguity in its proclamations; 'the sole aim of philosophical enquiry is to eliminate the contingent', to recall Hegel's dictum, not to negotiate its force and pertinence. And this is not negotiable.<sup>30</sup> A law that allows for a possibility of irregularity is not a law, strictly speaking. Insofar as there is chance, even the chance of chance, then nothing is safe. And Derrida is dead serious about truth. In truth, he affirms, nothing is safe. Stating that he ignores the 'prescription' and the destination of his address, Derrida acknowledges unconditionally that, as a matter of fact, indeterminability necessarily contaminates every discourse. Acknowledging that 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*' is a text about chance in that it is *because* of chance, he suggests that every work is likewise, above all, a work of chance. Just like that moment in Naples, on the 25<sup>th</sup> of May, 1994, when Maurizio Ferraris asks him '[w]hat, then, is the relation between the incalculable and calculation, chance and strategy' and Derrida, recalling the question he asked himself in 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*' ('did I choose this theme haphazardly or by chance?') happens upon these words:

A decision has to be prepared by reflection and knowledge, but the moment of the decision, and thus the moment of responsibility, supposes a rupture with knowledge, and therefore an opening to the incalculable – a sort of 'passive' decision. One has to calculate as far as possible, but the incalculable happens [*arrive*]: it is the other, and singularity, and chance, without one's being able to do one's part; the parting between

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<sup>30</sup> In the context of a discussion around Richard Rorty's pragmatic appropriation of deconstruction in Chapter 3, we will argue that the regulative 'probabilization' of truth forms precisely the impossible attempt to negotiate the irreducible force of chance by undercutting its significance.

reason and its other, the calculable and the incalculable, the necessary and the aleatory, is without example; it does not obey a logic of distinction, it is not a parting with two parts. If it is not a parting – a division into shares, or a distribution into parts – then the space of rationality can be totally invaded by or surrendered to what we call the incalculable, chance, the other, the event. *Here* is the enigma of this situation in which I get lost; but it is *this* enigma that erases the difference between calculative rationality and its other; and *this* enigma complicates and entangles all questions of decision and responsibility. [...] And I could, naturally, give a great many examples; it is the law of everything I write and of everything that happens to me [*qui me arrive*].<sup>31</sup>

The ‘parting between reason and its other, the calculable and the incalculable’, is ‘without example’. The ‘interfacing of necessity and chance’, which was supposed to be the theme of ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, is not re-presentable; what Derrida ‘wished to demonstrate’ will have never been demonstrated, because it is not demonstrable. Insofar as chance, the other of reason, the limit of reason, part-icipates in the event, then reason is already outright dissolved. As soon as the space of rationality is ‘invaded by’ chance, presence loses itself and everything that *is* surrenders to the aleatory’s force. If chance cannot be eliminated, if it is necessary, then necessity *is* chance; if what happens is necessarily unpredictable, then the unpredictable *is* what happens, necessarily. Hence, Derrida affirms, and the apparent contradiction is the key to this passage, he could ‘naturally, give a great many examples’ of what ‘is without example’; all too many, indeed. Because this, ‘*this* enigma’, *this* absolute secret, *this* un-re-presentability, is ‘the law of everything that happens to [him]’; indeterminability determines his fate. ‘This is why there are no examples while at the same time there are only examples’, as he says

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<sup>31</sup> Derrida, ‘I Have a Taste for the Secret’, pp. 61-2.

in 'Passions'.<sup>32</sup> And this is why 'the law of the law is what measurelessness will have always been', as he puts it in 'The Time is out of Joint'.<sup>33</sup>

If anything, Derrida is *too* serious about truth. Yes, he refuses categorically to abide by the normative repression of chance that aims to safeguard the natural coherence and the sovereignty of reason and thus philosophy's identity. That is not to say, however, that he seeks to establish some sort of 'doctrine of indeterminacy' in its place, in place of rational speculation; far from it. His 'chance' allows for none of the complacency of an instrumentalist scientism, to which it is frequently and clumsily compared, and the radicalness of his gesture is likewise incommensurable with the relativism of a liberal moralism that would like to appropriate his fame. If Derrida appears to question the self-regulating authority of reason and to resist philosophy's primary law, he nevertheless does this through reason, with the utmost rigor and *in the name* of philosophy. His perpetual fascination with the giants of western thought, his compulsive attentiveness to their work, his unreserved respect and humility before their heritage, only serves to confirm this. The deconstructive break from the history of metaphysics – if such a thing exists, and it is one – cannot but re-inscribe itself in its movement; and while it resolutely contests both empiricist and transcendentalist presumptuousness, it does not denounce the adventure of truth as such. Rather, deconstruction takes its chances, even if taking a chance amounts to sacrificing its own integrity, effacing its own signature. That Derrida traces and exposes the limits of philosophical enquiry is really because the limits of philosophical enquiry constitute simultaneously its chance. An aporia, yes; but '[t]hese aporias are anything but

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<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'' in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. and trans. David Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Time is out of Joint' in *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 34.

accidental impasses that one should try to force at all costs into received theoretical models. The putting to the test of these aporias is also the chance of thinking.<sup>34</sup> For there to be philosophy, reflection and knowledge, decisions and events, Derrida testifies, there *must be* chance. For philosophy to be possible, it must be impossible. Quoting Zarathustra quoting himself, Nietzsche countersigns: ‘Verily, a blessing it is and no blasphemy when I teach: “Above all things stand the heaven of Chance, the heaven of Innocence, the heaven of Coincidence, the heaven of Exuberance.”’<sup>35</sup>

What remains then? What is the nature of this language that in and by itself affirms its blindness, its disjointedness from itself, its impropriety, the other as its origin and telos? What is the status of a discourse that ‘owns up’, as Robert Smith likes to put it,<sup>36</sup> to the insurmountable impossibility of its promise, when it is precisely the ‘ownness’ of this ‘owning up’ that this discourse puts into question, when, as Nicholas Royle observes, ‘[a]ll of Derrida’s work can be characterized by a concern to question and rethink the “ownness” of the “proper”’?<sup>37</sup> Introducing the texts that comprise the collection entitled *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*, which includes Derrida’s lecture itself, Kerrigan and Smith write:

What above all distinguishes the postmodernist analysis is the methodological necessity of including itself in the issue and the problem, accepting responsibility for its own reflexivity of error. Postmodernist discourse wants to field its rebound – to abandon a tradition of self-certainty, to stand aside from the conditions of sense defined in this

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘To Do Justice to Freud’: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis’ in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, Pascal-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 79.

<sup>35</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* [1883], trans. Thomas Wayne (New York: Algora Publishing, 2003), p. 126.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 18, p. 39, p. 46.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 120.

tradition, without lapsing into mere unintelligibility. [...] In postmodernism the rebound of statement upon itself is not suffered passively or received in embarrassment, as somehow silencing, but actively embraced. Discourse has been reconstituted about precisely this instability.<sup>38</sup>

That is reassuring; and utterly misleading. Deconstruction cannot and should not be confused with a 'postmodernist analysis', even in this particularly sophisticated version of it. And the reason is simply that deconstruction can bear no 'methodological necessity' in its name. Historicizing Derrida's oeuvre in this manner and reducing its disruptive force to some sort of happy-go-lucky 'affirmation of its own impossibility' is quite tempting, and thus quite common. It is still a horrendous blunder, which of course can withstand no serious questioning. And one should question it, relentlessly. Just how, and by what, is this 'rebound of statement upon itself' 'embraced'? What makes a discourse about its own 'instability' possible in the first place? How and where is discourse 'reconstituted', once it has accepted 'its own reflexivity of error'? What discourse? Whose error? What reflects and what is reflected?

What remains? The question remains. For what comes to pass is no more than the enforcement of an irreducible enigma's law – from dread to language, to recall the title of Blanchot's essay. '[O]ne cannot deny the destinerrant indirection as soon as there is a trace. Or, if you prefer, one can only deny it',<sup>39</sup> Derrida posits. Deconstruction is chance; surrendered to the other, unidentifiable, off course, adrift, out of reach. Necessarily. From his early essay 'Force and Signification', and in response to Merleau-Ponty's assertion that '[m]y own words take me by surprise and teach me what I think', Derrida affirms: 'It is because writing is *inaugural*, in the fresh sense of the word, that it is dangerous and anguishing. It does not know where it is going, no knowledge can keep

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<sup>38</sup> William Kerrigan and Joseph Smith, 'Introduction' in *Taking Chances*, pp. x-xi.

<sup>39</sup> Derrida, 'Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'', p. 24.

it from the essential precipitation toward the meaning that it constitutes and that is, primarily, its future.’<sup>40</sup>

## 2.5. *Déjà vu*

And yet, on the other hand, an ‘implacable program’ takes shape. From the same interview with Maurizio Ferraris, Derrida says:

If anyone found it amusing to follow this game or this necessity, they would discover that there is not a single text of mine that was not precisely, literally and explicitly announced ten or twenty years beforehand. [...] [I]n everything I’ve published there are always touchstones announcing what I would like to write about later on – even twenty years later on [...]. I have a feeling not just of continuity but a sort of immobility, a movement *sur place*. [...] This motion *sur place* does not prevent me from being constantly surprised, from having a feeling of being always on the verge...<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, anyone even mildly familiar with Derrida can testify to this ‘continuity’. While his published work is massive in size and covers pretty much the entire canon of western philosophy, while his language and style vary considerably from text to text and sometimes even within the same text, fluctuating with ease from confessional intimacy to scrupulous close readings and back, from erratic, capricious acrobatics to elegant, aphoristic exactness, from exuberant playfulness to painstaking meticulousness at once, what’s more, while his primary concern throughout, as we saw in the first chapter, is none other than a reckoning with the ineluctable discontinuity and incalculability in the ‘thing in itself’, with the irreducibility of an absolute

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<sup>40</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Force and Signification’ in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 11. Cf. Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, ‘I Have a Taste for the Secret’, p. 46.



indeterminability in ‘what happens’, and while, finally, this absolute indeterminability cannot but determine his own chances too, his work itself being by his own admission ultimately blind to its own program, as we saw in this chapter, despite all that, a careful reading of Derrida will invariably reveal that there is not the slightest contradiction or misstep in his texts, no trace of uncertainty and no hint of hesitation in the deconstructive event. Nothing is ‘out of place’. Nicholas Royle confirms it:

[Derrida] presents the rather awesome case of someone having everything sewn up from the start. His work seems, from the beginning, to be all of a piece, even if it is not a piece that we could characterize as unified, finished or finishable. There is something almost incredibly consistent, always already *in place*, about Derrida’s work.<sup>42</sup>

And Marian Hobson proves it; her *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines*<sup>43</sup> is the most concentrated and most thorough account of this improbable, uncanny contiguity of deconstruction’s structure, the oneness of its multiplicity, the familiar unfamiliarity of its trace. As if the destination of *destinerrance* were predestined, as if the work of chance were fated, that which is not always returns to itself, incessantly retracing the effects of its absence; forever amiss – forever *there*; always the same – always anew. How is this possible?

Derrida acknowledges that his experience of writing entails such a double and seemingly contradictory condition. On the one hand, he says, ‘[e]very time I write something, I have the impression of making a beginning [...] everything appears *anew*’.<sup>44</sup> On the other, however, ‘I’m well aware of the fact that at bottom it all unfolds according to the same law’; in a way, he admits, ‘[I am] repeating the same thing all the

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<sup>42</sup> Royle, *Jacques Derrida*, p. 104.

<sup>43</sup> Marian Hobson, *Jacques Derrida: Opening Lines* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>44</sup> Derrida, ‘I Have a Taste for the Secret’, p. 47.

time.’<sup>45</sup> Formulated in this way Derrida’s experience sounds like a perpetual *déjà vu*, ‘a certain “*toujours déjà vu*”’, to borrow a phrase of his from *Specters of Marx*,<sup>46</sup> that would also be its opposite then, a *jamais vu*, whereby the same keeps repeating itself as if for the first time and every first time feels all too familiar indeed. And as a matter of fact, Derrida will attribute here the constitutive, programmatic ‘immobility’ of his work, his ‘motion *sur place*’ that nevertheless ‘does not prevent [him] from being constantly surprised, from having a feeling of being always on the verge’, precisely to a ‘*certain amnesia*’.<sup>47</sup>

“‘*Déjà vu*’ will have initiated the program’, as Nicholas Royle will affirm in conclusion to his thrilling discussion on the significance of this peculiar experience.<sup>48</sup> To start with, *déjà vu* is *not* ‘the illusory feeling that one has previously experienced a present situation’, as the OED’s skewed definition has it, thus erasing its uncanny specificity, but the concurrence of that ‘illusory’ feeling with a synchronous ‘*correct*’ feeling that one has *not* previously experienced that situation. One feels that one is experiencing something again, while one also and at the same time feels that this is actually the first time, that what appears as the same is in reality new. *Déjà vu* is precisely the disconcerting affect of this irreducible undecidability, the certainty, in other words, that one or the other feeling can’t be right, even though both are equally strong. It is a double experience at odds with itself, an experience of duplicity, the moment when one can’t decide whether something – and hence one’s self – is present or past, novel or timeworn, for it works both ways, it feels as if it is both – a moment in

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 14.

<sup>47</sup> Derrida, ‘I Have a Taste for the Secret’, p. 47.

<sup>48</sup> Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 313.

suspense. As Royle puts it: ‘*Déjà vu* is the experience of the double *par excellence*: it is the experience of experience *as double*.’<sup>49</sup>

Which is then to say that *déjà vu* is also its double, infinitely reversible, infinitely repeatable as other. Indeed, according to the OED again, *déjà vu* can also occasionally denote ‘the correct impression that something has been previously experienced’. In confirmation, Royle will show that this will have been precisely Freud’s ‘position’ on the phenomenon. In *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud argues then that *déjà vu* is rather, ‘on the contrary’, the concurrence of a ‘correct’ feeling that one has previously experienced a present situation – as an unconscious phantasy – with an ‘illusory’ feeling that one has never previously experienced this situation. According to Freud, *déjà vu* is when one feels that one is experiencing something for the first time *because* one does not know that it is a repetition; what appears as new, he affirms, is in reality the same.<sup>50</sup> So which one will it be? But most importantly, what would be the difference? What would be the difference between *déjà vu* and *déjà vu*, between *déjà vu* as ‘reality’ and *déjà vu* as ‘illusion’, when *déjà vu* is exactly the impossibility of telling the difference between them, the always possible possibility of substituting the one for the other, ‘the uncanny figure of that which is irreducible to the psychical or the real, an undecidable trembling that phantomizes the possibility of ‘belief’’, in Royle’s exacting definition?<sup>51</sup> Affirming his ‘belief’ in *déjà vu* and claiming to explain it away, Freud can only re-inscribe its enigmatic, pervasive eeriness, that is also the limit of analysis. In the first place, *déjà vu* will have always also been its interpretation; already, it is its repetition as other than itself.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 183.

<sup>50</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* [1901], trans. Anthea Bell (London and New York: Penguin Books, 2002), pp. 229-48.

<sup>51</sup> Royle, *The Uncanny*, p. 178.

Deconstruction is *déjà vu*. And that is both an affirmation and a question. For what is *in* question here, to return to Derrida's writing, is not a singular instance of *déjà vu* that happens to interrupt his experience of continuity, but a '*toujours déjà vu*' which rather insures the continuity of his experience as interruption. 'And interruption does not interrupt the relation of the other, it opens the relation to the other.'<sup>52</sup> As we saw, Derrida *always* feels that he is making a new beginning, that everything is anew, while he also *always* feels that he is repeating the same thing; and so do his readers. How is this possible? The answer will have always been before us.

## 2.6. Amnesiac

It is also a *certain amnesia* [CD's emphasis] that accounts for this taste of mine, which may be considered a strength or a weakness. I won't say that I know how to forget, but I do know that I forget, and that this is not entirely a bad thing even if I suffer from it.<sup>53</sup>

Derrida forgets. Not that he forgets sometimes or some things; it is not a certain 'type' of amnesia that he 'suffers from', but a 'certain' amnesia as such. He forgets in general then, that is, always. His forgetfulness is to thank and to blame for knowing neither where he is going nor, as a result, where he is, while also feeling as if he has already been *there*. This is why everything appears to him as if for the first time and every first time feels like a repetition of the same. It will have all begun with amnesia. Is this possible? Of course not. In the first place and above all, because amnesia can never be a permanent condition or a general trait; one can never *have* it. By reason of itself, amnesia is that which one precisely never has. Once it happens to one, and it only ever

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<sup>52</sup> Jacques Derrida, qtd. in Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 276.

<sup>53</sup> Derrida, 'I Have a Taste for the Secret', pp. 47-8.

happens once, one no longer has it, one is no longer oneself. Amnesia is always of the other; it is the coming of the other itself in oneself.

When complete, a memory loss results in the loss of one's pastness, and by the same token, in the loss of one's sense of selfhood altogether, radically disconnecting oneself from oneself. This cut, this violent incision into one's life, necessitates as a consequence an unconditional opening of oneself to chance, to the future, to the other's determination. That is well understood. Medically it is defined as 'retrograde amnesia', in opposition to 'anterograde amnesia', which leads to an inability to recall merely the recent past, while long term memories remain intact. But what if amnesia was a permanent state, a perpetual predicament, as Derrida claims is his case? What if amnesia was at the origin? What if every moment, every mark, every text, was yet another amnesic incision into one's life, one's oeuvre, into the present state, into itself? Obviously, it would no longer be possible then to distinguish between retro- and anterograde amnesia. But more than that, it would actually be impossible to even distinguish amnesia as such, since now the 'amnesiac' would not forget anything, except for himself, that is, strictly speaking, nothing at all. Forgetting would be what happens to him, all that happens to him, but for that reason it would also never be his own. Not by chance, a combination of retro- and anterograde amnesia is medically defined as '*transient* global amnesia'; if it were not transient, it would not be a 'condition' at all; *one* cannot *have* it. So if amnesia forces one to surrender unarmed to the mercy or to the whims of the other's determination, to let the other decide one's fate in order to become possible, *in the present*, a recurring, originary amnesia also and simultaneously prevents one from ever appropriating the other's determination, thus making one impossible, *non-present*.

Now, what if everyone and everything suffered from such a chronic, recurring amnesia? This is precisely what Derrida's entire oeuvre invites us to think, after Heidegger but without Heidegger's nostalgia: that everything that *is*, everything that takes place, every mark as such, is *constituted out of* an essential and ineluctable forgetfulness of itself, of its being, or else, the lack of a secure and stable 'bond' to a past and a future, an origin and a destination, a meaning and a referent – in a word, the lack of a *self*, leaving thus nothing *that* forgets, nothing *to* forget, nothing but forgetfulness itself, as the residue of the impossible desire to forget it. In the *Ear of the Other*, Derrida writes: 'It's not that something has been forgotten; rather, one wants to forget that there is nothing to forget, that there has been nothing to forget [...], that there has never been an intact kernel.'<sup>54</sup>

In the seminal essay 'Signature Event Context' (1977) and in response to speech act theory, Derrida elaborates on the seemingly paradoxical structure of this law, which is the law of everything that happens, under the name of 'iterability', which in its etymological particularity (from *itera*, meaning *other* in Sanskrit) serves to illustrate this co-implication of repetition and alterity. Unsurprisingly, he deems necessary to return to it in summary form in the context of 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', as testament to the indemonstrable interfacing of necessity and chance:

To be a mark and to mark its marking effect, a mark must be capable of being *identified*, recognized as the same, being precisely *re-markable* from one context to another. [...] But [...] the identity of a mark is also its difference and its differential relation, varying each time according to context, to the network of other marks. The ideal iterability that forms the structure of all marks is that which undoubtedly allows them to be released from any context, to be freed from all determined bonds to its origin, its meaning, or its referent, to emigrate in order to play elsewhere, in whole or in part, another role. [...] This iterability is thus

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<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), p. 115.

that which allows a mark to be used more than once. It is more than one. It multiplies and divides itself internally. This imprints the capacity for diversion within its very movement. In the destination there is thus a principle of indetermination, chance, luck, or of *destinerring*.<sup>55</sup>

What makes something possible in the first place, Derrida affirms, presentable in the present moment, identifiable as itself, is its *re-markability*, that is, the possibility that it is determined otherwise the next moment, transcribed as such elsewhere and by another – its perpetual amnesia in other words. This possibility dissolves in effect the limit that separates the ‘present moment’ from the ‘next moment’ and destabilizes thus the linearity of time altogether. A chronic amnesia, let’s not forget, is also the amnesia of chronicity as such. The possibility of contamination, dissemination, *destinerrance* is not reducible therefore to a future modality; rather, it forms an essential property of a mark’s coming-to-presence, right here and now.

One should not rush to interpret this ‘principle’, this ‘condition’, as the warranty of a mark’s infinite purity or of a fundamental innocence before the other. Nor is it, at the other extreme, anything like the free pass to a self-indulgent linguisticism or some form of relativism, as the neo-pragmatic reading of Derrida’s reading of Heidegger would have it.<sup>56</sup> Even if there is no remedy for it, as Heidegger would also come to realize, the forgetfulness that inevitably befalls oneself does not amount to a perpetual irresponsibility; one can neither appeal to it as a transcendental imperative nor empirically appropriate its effects.<sup>57</sup> And the reason is, quite simply, that this radical forgetfulness proscribes the very possibility of a self-identical ‘forgetful’ subjectivity to

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<sup>55</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 16.

<sup>56</sup> This will be the focus of our discussion in the section entitled ‘Pragmatic Circumspection’ in Chapter 3.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida’s thorough responses to the resistances that ‘iterability’ was met with and the misreadings it still gives rise to complement his original essay ‘Signature Event Context’ in the indispensable edition: Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

begin with. A-mnesia is not the subject's *loss* of memory but the subject's *lack* of memory. In other words, a mark's amnesiac remarkability is not an accidental property superimposed on an already unified and a priori identifiable entity; it is rather its structural presupposition, and as such it remains unverifiable, 'quasi-transcendental', as Derrida will say of 'iterability', as of his other organizing 'lexemes' (*supplement, différance, hymen, trace, parergon, etc.*), as unverifiable as a global amnesia that forgets even, or above all, amnesia, whose truth, and *it is true*, requires nonetheless that it annuls itself at the moment it is enforced and by reason of its enforcement, that it *is not*; from the platonic truth as *anamnesis*, to the deconstructive truth as *unamnesis*. Memory is not as the retrieval of what was once *there*, the reconstitution of a dislocated identity, but 'a constitutive act', in Timothy Clark's words, 'to the degree that it must destroy the very anteriority of the past in order to elaborate its figure in the present, and entrust it [...] to the iterability of a code whose projective nature is inherently one of repetition, the effacement of any possible immediacy.'<sup>58</sup>

Iterability is what marks the presentness of presence, the subjectivity of the subject, the self-sameness of the self, with a constitutive, originary impurity, contaminating what comes to pass with an unpardonable guilt, an unpayable debt and hence with the always already of an infinite responsibility. Simply put, one can never

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<sup>58</sup> Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 274. This is why Derrida will hesitate in *Memoires* to identify deconstructive work with 'memory work'; in the first place, deconstruction is the radical displacement of the significance of 'memory work': 'Since the destructive force of deconstruction is always already contained within the very architecture of the work, all one would finally have to do to be able to deconstruct, given this always already, is to do memory work. Yet since I want neither to accept nor to reject a conclusion formulated in precisely these terms, let us leave this question suspended for the moment.' Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 64.



start ‘anew’. ‘For the other is not the new’.<sup>59</sup> *One* will have never started; one will have always found oneself in suffering, and from precisely this.

Paranamnesia.

Prescribed by chance, and yet, an implacable program takes shape. How is this possible, we ask ourselves? What are the chances? In truth, however, we know already, an incredible coincidence always lies in the shadow of an ineluctable necessity. For what is the ‘work of chance’, that which happens to happen, despite our best calculations and deliberations, that which falls from above and catches us off guard, if not that which could not have happened otherwise? What is that which opposes our desire, our desire for knowledge, for truth, for oneness, limiting and giving rise to our desire at once, limiting it in order to give rise to it, what makes this text impossible in order to make it possible, what is *this* but necessity? It is because Derrida keeps on repeating the same thing, because he repeats ‘himself’, that he is always other, always indeterminable. And inversely: it is because Derrida submits unconditionally to the other, because his writing is determined by chance, that his entire oeuvre is marked with the incredible consistency of an unfailing program.

## 2.7. Improvisation

‘The experience of deconstruction, if such a thing were possible,’ Peggy Kamuf writes, ‘would be the singular experience of a repeating singularity, always someone’s.

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<sup>59</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘*From Psyche*’ in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, trans. Catherine Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 343.

But whose? Whose experience is it? To whom does it belong?'<sup>60</sup> While Gianni Vattimo strives to force out of Derrida the confession of an ultimate origin and purpose in deconstruction, some kind of ethical justification for the deconstructive gesture, some reason, at least a subject in control, disarmingly Derrida admits his disarmament:

It is not I who deconstruct; rather, something I call 'deconstruction' happens to the experience of a world, a culture, a philosophic tradition: 'it' deconstructs, *ça ne va pas*, there is something that budges, that is in the process of being dislocated, disjointed, disadjoined, and of which I begin to be aware. Something is 'deconstructing' and it has to be answered for.<sup>61</sup>

Prescribed by chance, determined by the other, it is not I, says Derrida, it is not I, says the other. Is deconstruction the automatic transcription of a possessed medium after all? Is Derrida a mad prophet, attuned to the 'budging' of a 'world', a 'culture', a 'philosophic tradition'? Of course not, would be the short answer. Nevertheless, deconstruction is certainly not foreign to an experience of automaticity (just as, and for the same reason that, it is not foreign to a certain experience of literature). *Automatia* is the surname of *Tukhe* as Plutarch tells us; and Derrida will unequivocally avow his incalculable debt and responsibility to it: 'I am hovering around a hypothesis, a logic, an analysis, and suddenly a word appears as the right one to exploit, thanks to its formalizing economy... The feeling I have is not of having invented or of having been the active author of this thing, but of receiving it as a stroke of luck.'<sup>62</sup> Taking

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<sup>60</sup> Peggy Kamuf, 'The Experience of Deconstruction' in *Book of Addresses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 154.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, 'I Have a Taste for the Secret', p. 80.

<sup>62</sup> Qtd. in Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 23-4.

inspiration from comparable accounts of the process of composition, Timothy Clark affirms:

The subject of enunciation is a multiply contaminated one: the source of the work is neither a commanding conscious intentionality, nor the impulses and drives of the somatic or the unconscious, nor the structures and constraints of the discourse at issue, but the temporary and incalculable co-working of all these factors in a non-linear space that, at its most extreme, may be experienced by the writer as a reversal of cause and effect.<sup>63</sup>

To attempt a somewhat crude comparison, Derrida's work might be seen as an inverse surrealism: rather than striving to achieve an unmediated expression of selfhood by turning fate into chance, Derrida waves goodbye to selfhood and allows chance to turn into his fate instead.<sup>64</sup> Acquiescent to Mallarmé's grave forewarning that a throw of the dice will never annul chance,<sup>65</sup> Derrida decides to play along, to take the game seriously and to 'raise the stakes' as he likes to say. And it works; how could it not? 'The glue of chance makes sense.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, pp. 23-4.

<sup>64</sup> Of course, as Maurice Blanchot shows in his precious, illuminating essay 'Reflections on Surrealism', the possibility of that inversion is already inherent within the surrealist ideal itself: to express oneself without mediation is also to lose oneself in the medium of that expression. Indeed, is it the self or the word that realizes and manifests itself in the surrealist text? Is it the subject or language that is set free? Whose destiny does the automatic message ultimately fulfil? See Maurice Blanchot, 'Reflections on Surrealism' in *The Work of Fire* [1949], trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 85-98. See also Timothy Clark, 'Surrealism, Inspiration and the Mediations of Chance' in *The Theory of Inspiration*, pp. 191-221.

<sup>65</sup> This is the title of one of Mallarmé's most famous poems. See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: New Directions Books, 1982), pp. 103-27.

<sup>66</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 140.

As we have been quoting for a while now from Derrida's interview with Maurizio Ferraris and Gianni Vattimo, published under the title 'I Have a Taste for The Secret', it is worth noting that Derrida's interviews would seem to embody perfectly this peculiar interfacing of necessity and chance. As has been widely acknowledged, yet insufficiently scrutinized in its own right, Derrida's interviews shine with an astonishing rigour and clarity, an uncanny coherence that makes them practically indistinguishable from his written, his 'proper' body of work. In fact, Derrida's improvised and summary responses to the unpredictable questions posed to him often seem even more thorough and systematic than the texts they presumably 'refer to' or 'originate from'. Paradoxically then, one might say, yet actually in perfect accordance with Derrida's contention that the implacability of deconstruction is actually indissociable from its 'chanciness', just when Derrida is most concretely and literally abandoned to chance, his discourse attains to the most programmatic. Improvisation will have been the most precise.

'Improvisation' seems in fact to draw together all the intertwined threads that this chapter has been tracing, if not as a magic 'key' to its enigmas, then at least as a suitable subtitle to it. "'Improvisation" is appropriate', Timothy Clark confirms, 'because the emergent text [...] arises from an incalculable multiplicity of lines of intersection between all the vectors that play across the blank page.'<sup>67</sup> From the Latin *improvisus*, meaning 'unforeseen', 'unprepared', 'improvisation' suddenly appears, indeed, as the right word to exploit, thanks to its formalizing economy. On the one hand, improvisation bears witness to a fundamental rupture of the rational subject, an improbable suspension of its cogito. On the other, however, 'improvisation' becomes significant, or better still, it acquires its significance, on account precisely of the

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<sup>67</sup> Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration*, p. 22.

necessary unity and rationality of the subject that it thus also unquestionably presupposes, on account, in other words, of its impossibility. A mad person, to put it bluntly, a person ‘beside him’ as they say, or just ‘out of control’, in great anger for example, attacked by panic or under the influence of drugs,<sup>68</sup> cannot be said to improvise, or else, and in what amounts to the same, he can *only* improvise. He ‘himself’, in any case, even from a legal standpoint, will never be held fully accountable for the things he says and does. To ‘improvise’ as such, to let oneself be taken ‘beside oneself’, without program or calculation, *as if* dictated by another, one must, above all and more than ever, be *with* oneself. Impossible possible, in and by itself, ‘improvisation’ simultaneously affirms and negates then, affirms by negating, all those fundamental values on which philosophy proper necessarily relies, namely the propriety of authorship, signature, full presence, reason, free-will, and so forth. With the germ of chance that is its limit, the ‘as if’ of an essential fictitiousness in the experience it attests, ‘improvisation’ destabilizes in effect the propriety of philosophy itself vis-à-vis its others: literariness, playfulness, lying, illusoriness, madness, falsehood, contingency.

Naturally, a ‘philosophical improvisation’ would be no more than an oxymoronic, unthinkable monstrosity. Of course, how could a philosopher as such ever improvise? How could an interview, for that matter, ever form part of a philosophical corpus? And yet, on the other hand, how could a philosopher ever do anything but improvise? What would become of the philosopher himself or herself, and what would remain of philosophical enquiry, if everything was rather foreseen, predetermined in advance, only to be repeated and delivered as such (back) at its lawful destination? More succinctly, what would philosophical enquiry be, if it was provisional?

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<sup>68</sup> See Jacques Derrida, ‘The Rhetoric of Drugs’ in *Points...: Interviews 1974-1994*, ed. Elizabeth Weber, trans. Michael Israel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 228-54.

During an interview and in response to a question about ‘improvisation’ with reference to an older article of his on jazz music,<sup>69</sup> David Wills, another prominent reader and writer after Derrida, notes:

I have the impression that the more one pays attention to one’s own language, the more one is worked on by the signifier. The more one works on programming signifying effects at the level of the word, the more the words come to light out of obvious places that escape one, or from distant, buried or unknown places. That would be another hightechnological effect of language, or perhaps its viral-type mutation, or some sort of autoimmune effect: the more one tries to narrow down the choice of words in order to achieve precision, the more nuanced or poetic one’s language, the more words one mobilizes, puts in play.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, it is when one pays no attention to one’s words, when one does not calculate the effects of what one writes and completely ‘lets go’ to the other, that words come out the most clearly, the least contaminated; to be precise, one must improvise. Not simply because ‘programming signifying effects’ has its limits, but more radically still because ‘programming signifying effects’ has the opposite effect: ‘the more one pays attention to one’s own language, the more one is worked on by the signifier.’ Immediately, one cannot help but wonder: Will this have been an improvisation? Is Wills paying attention to his own language here? This is not a marginal, parenthetical question, as we will see. Nor is it reducible to the fact that this is an interview ‘conducted via email’ as its editors inform us, and an ‘edited transcript’ of it for that matter, a quasi-interview then, although this coincidence does enhance of course the question’s urgency.

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<sup>69</sup> David Wills, ‘Jazz Annotations: Negotiating a Discursive Limit’, *paragraph*, 21 (1998), pp. 131-49.

<sup>70</sup> David Wills in ‘Dorsal Chances: An interview with David Wills’, *Parallax*, 13:4 (2007), p. 14.

In keeping with the context of his extremely interesting study on ‘dorsality’<sup>71</sup> that occasions this interview, Wills goes on to attribute his ‘impression’ to a ‘hightechnological effect of language, or perhaps its viral-type mutation, or some sort of autoimmune effect’. It certainly sounds as if he is improvising here. In any case, Wills refrains from elaborating on this undoubtedly stimulating list of regulatory abstractions and instead allows its almost stuttering uncertainty to reverberate, in the echo or the rhythm of its irreducible, determinative ‘perhaps’. Having said that, however, rather than compromising, as one might have expected, the truthfulness or even the persuasiveness of his ‘impression’, Wills’s apparent inability or reluctance to anchor with confidence this ‘necessity to improvise’ in some kind of comprehensive, originating principle actually serves to validate it even further. Insofar as what he attempts to describe with precision here is the necessary failure that accrues to one’s attempt to describe with precision, his failure to do so constitutes simultaneously a success. What Wills’s account ends up verifying in consequence, albeit despite itself, is exactly that the more ‘one tries to narrow down the choice of words in order to achieve precision, the more nuanced or poetic one’s language, the more words one mobilizes, puts in play.’ His reflection on the other turns out to be a reflection of the other on itself, without a self then, without a point of origin, always already spectral: improvisatory. Improvisation does not belong; it is what does not belong; it is always of the other. What Wills’s ‘improvisation’ verifies is that, as Derrida says in another interview, ‘[s]o, one has to, one fails to improvise [*Improviser il le faut, donc*].’<sup>72</sup> It is true; the more one tries to objectify or, inversely, to submit to improvisation, in a word, the more one tries

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<sup>71</sup> David Wills, *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>72</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Ja, or the *faux-bond* II’ in *Points....: Interviews 1974-1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, p. 51.

to *represent* improvisation, the more one is exposed to its effects. Every attempt to account for the fatefulness of chance, for the interfacing of the necessary with the contingent, cannot help but re-inscribe its enigmatic unaccountability in the moment itself – the unaccountability of the moment itself.

One cannot help but wonder: Will *this* have been an improvisation? One will never know for sure. Improvisation will have always been unverifiable. Necessary, yes; impossible, absolutely; always never there. In an unpublished interview from 1982, Derrida, as quoted in the film *Derrida*, improvises the following:

So I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation. But always with the belief that it's impossible. And there where there is improvisation I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it's what I will see, no, I won't see it. It's for others to see. The one who is improvised here, no I won't ever see him.<sup>73</sup>

In reference to just this quotation, Gary Peters saves for 'Derrida the Improvisor' the last word of his recent monograph, *The Philosophy of Improvisation*.<sup>74</sup> And as if to justify the purpose of his study itself, Peters reassures us there that in fact 'Derrida has things the wrong way around.'<sup>75</sup> Why? Well, because, as he explains, 'to lose oneself – one's self – in this incessant and dis-tracted movement where everything that is *there* [...] can be *given* again and afresh, this is not the death of improvisation but its true beginning.'<sup>76</sup> A peculiar criticism indeed, since, to Peters's surprise no doubt, Derrida might have actually subscribed to this, albeit with a little less enthusiasm, a little more alert to its implications. 'A beginning', Peters concludes jubilantly, 'that the improviser is, by placing him or herself *outside* of the moment, responsible for beginning again,

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<sup>73</sup> Qtd. in *Derrida*, dir. Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick (Zeitgeist Films, 2004).

<sup>74</sup> Gary Peters, *The Philosophy of Improvisation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2009), p. 167.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p. 169.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 170.



and again... eternally.’<sup>77</sup> That is, exactly, never; in any case, never him or herself, never *inside* the moment. For an eternal beginning is also, of course, its *telos*; no improvisers anymore. ‘There always remains improvisation, and that is what counts here’, Derrida declares.<sup>78</sup> Which, incidentally, brings us back to the start.

## 2.8. Synchronicity

To begin with: ‘No chance of nullifying chance – a priori’.<sup>79</sup> This will have been Robert Smith’s point of departure, the ‘Incipit’ of his remarkable monograph *Derrida and Autobiography*. And what makes it remarkable is precisely this: that it does not stop there. While acknowledging, in acknowledging, that ‘“by definition” there can be no response [...] to the chancy eventuality that pre-empts, disarms and circumvents in advance rational response’, Smith persists.<sup>80</sup> And to this exceeding that is the remains of his quest, its impossible condition of possibility, Smith will give the name ‘autobiography’. A risky choice, no doubt, at odds with itself and threatening it from within, but for that reason all the more appropriate: in the first place, *Derrida and Autobiography* will have been the resistance to the constitutive danger it presents to itself. Indeed, what appears to be Smith’s primary concern, on the back of ‘autobiography’ as it were, is that the inevitable contamination of philosophical propriety by the irrepressible, ‘always possible’ irruption of contingency *does not* reduce the unverifiable singularity of the trace to an empirical, unrepeatable facticity – the ‘subject proper’ of autobiography. On the contrary, he will argue, this contamination

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, *Ja*, or the *faux-bond* II, p. 49.

<sup>79</sup> Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

or *destinerrance* puts into question the very onticness of facticity, and thus of the trace 'itself', its 'autobiographical' remains. To put it more simply, the elusiveness of the 'thing in itself' or of the present moment is not equivalent to its irretrievable immediacy; rather, 'immediacy' or 'automaticity' is merely how one is accustomed to think of and account for this elusiveness. If autobiography can never fulfil its promise then, to bridge the distance between oneself and oneself as other, this is because it is itself split, itself autobiographical, always already other than itself. If the autobiographical necessarily parasitizes the philosophical, as the contingent necessarily parasitizes the necessary, it is not as an unavoidable potentiality of its mark, but as this mark's unavoidable actuality.

To repeat: the 'interfacing of necessity and chance' is not simply the necessary possibility of accidents; it is also their inevitability. If chance is necessary, then chance is what was meant to be. As Smith notes, this 'non-negotiability has something like the force of destiny or fate. Chance shuns the dimension of reason [...], yet repercussing there as if by godly caprice.'<sup>81</sup> A coincidence is at the origin: the *co-incidence* of oneself with the absolute other in the moment itself, which effaces but does not annul, eradicate or reduce their essential difference, their disparity and their disjointedness in the moment itself, the discordance of the moment itself. Synchronicity is what happens: urgently, it demands vigilance. 'Something is "deconstructing" and it has to be answered for.'<sup>82</sup>

Derrida writes in conclusion to *Ulysses Grammophone*: 'Only another event can sign, can countersign to bring it about that an event has already happened. This event, that we naively call the first event, can only affirm itself in the confirmation of the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Derrida, 'I Have a Taste for the Secret', p. 80.

other: a completely other event.’<sup>83</sup> And the other cannot be anything but absolutely unpredictable and absolutely necessary. In this case, it takes the form of a car accident. As if to prove his point, that his point is not his own, it never is, Derrida continues: ‘I decided to stop here because I almost had an accident just as I was jotting down this last sentence, when, on leaving the airport, I was driving home after the trip to Tokyo.’<sup>84</sup> One might hastily assume that this little anecdote, which seals Derrida’s text, simply serves wittily to illustrate his preceding insight. But could it not be, perhaps, the other way around, namely, that his insight was born out, necessitated by, in response to this seemingly unrelated incident? What happened first? ‘Just as I was jotting down this last sentence...’

A similar ‘autobiographical’ scene that immediately springs to mind occurs in the *Post Card*. Again, the issue here revolves around the questions of signature, propriety and authorship, the relation of the one who writes with the other, who dictates what is to be written. Specifically, in one of the letters that make up ‘Envois’, the nameless (not by chance, of course) author charges none other than Heidegger, along with Freud and Nietzsche, for never having ‘overturned’ metaphysics, insofar as they have never seriously questioned ‘that Socrates did not write, that he came before Plato who more or less wrote at his dictation’.<sup>85</sup> And just then, at the very moment he makes this claim – ‘the name of Heidegger had *just* been written, after “Freud”, in the letter I am in the process of transcribing in the machine’,<sup>86</sup> by coincidence, his

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<sup>83</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Ulysses Grammophone’ in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Tina Kendall and Shari Benstock, p. 309.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Envois’ in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 20.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid, p. 21.[translation modified]

telephone rings. The United States. The American operator asks me if I will accept a “collect call”... from Martin (she says Martine or martini) Heidegger. As is often the case in such situations, which I know only too well, since I must often call collect myself, I can hear vaguely familiar voices at the other end of the intercontinental line: someone is listening to me, awaiting my reaction. What is he going to do with the ghost or the Geist of Martin? I can hardly summarize the entire chemistry of the calculation that led me, very quickly, to refuse [...] Who, in short, pays: the addressee or the sender? Who ought to pay? The question is very difficult, but this morning I thought that I ought not to pay, apart from adding this note of thanks.<sup>87</sup>

Synchronizing thus his ‘rejection’ of Heidegger’s work<sup>88</sup> with the rejection of Heidegger’s actual call, merging the necessary, as a philosophical thesis is supposed to be, with the contingent, as a random telephone-call should be, Derrida (or is it the other?) blurs once more the borders that separate them, puts into question the hierarchy that organizes them and destabilizes in effect all our commonsensical certainties about the relation of the demonstration to the demonstrated, the interpretation to the interpreted, the example to the exemplified, the constative to the performative, the theoretical to the actual, the philosophical to the autobiographical, the pure to the impure. And this, incidentally, *this* destabilization will have been his (whose?) intention right from the start: it is just *this* enigma, this peculiar structure of synchronicity, the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. [translation modified]

<sup>88</sup> Of course, it is not a straightforward ‘rejection’. Derrida clarifies this: ‘All this should not create the impression that there is no telephonic communication which ties me to the ghost of Heidegger, as well as to more than one other. On the contrary, the network of my connections [...] is rather cluttered and more than one exchange is required to absorb the overload. Simply, my correspondents of this morning should know that [...] my private relation to Martin does not go by the same line.’ Samuel Weber discusses precisely this scene and throws light to deconstruction’s ‘unpayable’ debt to Heidegger in his brilliant essay ‘The Debts of Deconstruction and Other, Related Assumptions’ in *Taking Chances*. See especially pp. 34-6, pp. 58-63.

polyphony within the voice itself or else the essential divisibility of the mark as such, chance, *this*, this is indeed just what is at stake and what Derrida strives to ‘demonstrate’ throughout the monumental, seismic event that is ‘Envois’. Whose entire program, it should be noted, is actually necessitated, dictated by Derrida’s chance finding of an 18<sup>th</sup> century *carte-postale*, which happens to depict Socrates writing at Plato’s dictation instead of the other way around.

Finally, and most characteristically, Derrida concludes his response to Ferraris on the ‘relationship between the calculable and the incalculable’ by remarking the coincidence of a coincidence that by coincidence remarks another – for the first time, there and then, an improvisation of an impossible synchronization comes to him from the other, as if to save his life:

Right now, since you and I are talking together in a hotel room in Naples there is a point in the text that I am writing – it’s there on the table behind you – where, though I am speaking of psychoanalysis, archives, Freud, religion etc., in a discussion of Freud’s *Gräfin* I remark that I am writing this in sight of Pompeii, at this moment, etc. I have the impression that if I were to efface these traces, these archives of the occasion, I would lose my life, I would make it even more ephemeral and neutralized. I want, if possible, to mark even the most speculative of thoughts with a language and with a date: this came to me, at exactly that moment.<sup>89</sup>

Robert Smith writes: ‘[I]n Derrida’s work the realm of chance, in its unconditioned essential necessity, is the case before it becomes the case for him or her. Or perhaps not *before*, but simultaneously.’<sup>90</sup> ‘Perhaps’? Surely, one will think, the difference here is not small; indeed, everything depends on this. Nevertheless, Smith’s evident uncertainty is not an accidental mishap; or else, if it is, it is essential and programmatic. The tension that this uncertainty attests in any case is irresolvable: it

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<sup>89</sup> Derrida, ‘I Have a Taste for the Secret’, p. 62.

<sup>90</sup> Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography*, p. 26.

must remain. As we saw in the course of this chapter, every mark bears witness to just this undecidable oscillation between chance ‘*before*’ oneself and chance ‘*simultaneously*’ with oneself, between chance as external contingency and chance as determinative ineluctability. Every mark takes place as the interfacing of significant and insignificant chance, *Ananke* and *Automatia*; it is *in* deconstruction. Derrida’s work is precisely the experience of the unknowability of chance’s provenance, the re-marking of the always possible possibility that it is otherwise, elsewhere – of the necessity of chance. Fortunately, one will never know for sure whether chance is ‘before’ or ‘simultaneously’; one will never reduce the difference, that is difference as such, between the one and the other, between identity and difference, repetition and alterity, necessity and chance. Which is also to say: one will never know whether there will have ever been a difference to begin with. One can only keep faith. As we will verify in the next chapter through a discussion of ‘belief in chance’, all that remains is the impossible desire to annul difference, to bridge the distance that it opens up, to be *one*, at the origin; impossible because its fulfilment would also be its annulment, because its impossibility is also its condition of possibility. It is *destinerrance*. It remains. The trembling of this dangerous ‘perhaps’ is the case.

### 3. BELIEF IN CHANCE

If I might be permitted to put this forward, some sensitivity to superstition is perhaps not a useless stimulation for the deconstructive desire.<sup>1</sup>

#### 3.1. A coincidence

Early on in his lecture ‘My Chances/*Mes chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies’, Jacques Derrida notes as if in passing that ‘to believe in chance can just as well indicate that one believes in the existence of chance, as that one does *not*, above all, believe in chance, since one looks for and finds a hidden meaning at all costs.’<sup>2</sup> It is true, the phrase ‘to believe in chance’ can carry two meanings: it can indicate that one believes that accidents, fortunate and unfortunate, can and do occur irrespective of our best calculations, sometimes even in spite of our best calculations, that ‘mere’ chance can and hence does have an effect on the course of things. Or, and ‘just as well’, as Derrida points out, ‘to believe in chance’ can actually indicate the opposite, namely that one believes that any apparent accidents in life do not just happen to happen, but instead always happen for a reason, in accordance with a logic which may be invisible to us but remains nonetheless purposeful and as such interpretable.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘My Chances/ *Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies’ in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*, trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronell, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

The chance of winning the national lottery, to take this obvious example, is no doubt infinitesimal. Now, oddly enough, belief in chance would constitute both the reason one nevertheless decides to give it a go, to take a chance, *and* the reason that another opts to pass. The reckless gambler and the prudent rationalist share this much: both believe in chance. What separates them is their *perception* of chance, or else, their respective ‘believing attitude’.<sup>3</sup> Hence, in the first case the believer would be prone, for instance, to choose the numbers he bets on with great deliberation and to double-check the results. Similarly, if he lost, he would surely consider himself a little unlucky, whereas if he actually happened to win, he would rather feel rewarded for his faith. While the other, again because he believes in chance, would argue that it is so unlikely to win that there’s no point even bothering. Even if he were somehow forced to take part, he would most likely pick a few random numbers in haste and perhaps even forget to check the results on the same day. And if he were the one who ended up winning, he would feel so absurdly lucky, that he might even be converted; that is, he might stop believing in chance and start believing in chance.

In short, ‘belief in chance’ constitutes simultaneously a testament to rationalist sobriety and to superstitious credulity. It is impossible to determine whether in ‘believing in chance’ one actually believes in chance or one does not, in fact, believe in chance. Both the rationalist and the superstitious would agree that accidents can happen, that certain events do come about unpredictably. Both would readily acknowledge that even the extremely improbable is possible. But whereas the one believes that chance is

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<sup>3</sup> Derrida uses this term specifically in the context of his discussion around Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and the relationship between psychoanalysis and superstition. The notion of ‘attitude’ will be one of the key guiding threads of our entire analysis in this chapter. Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 24.



insignificant, a matter of chance and no more, the other believes that on the contrary, chance is significant and therefore anything but chancy.

As it turns out, Derrida's ostensibly insignificant, fleeting observation itself will have been extremely significant for the purposes of his demonstration. Soon after, he will proceed to show that it is precisely the effects of this co-implication of rationalism and superstition that Freud has a hard time evading when in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* he affirms that, presumably in contrast to the superstitious person, he actually 'believes in chance'. Opposing, as Derrida notes, 'one belief to another, a belief to a credulity'<sup>4</sup> with the aim of legitimizing psychoanalysis's scientific status, Freud ends up putting its very rationality and rigor into question.

We will return to this in more detail in due course. What this chapter will demonstrate, however, is that the problem at hand is not restricted to psychoanalysis, even if, to be sure, psychoanalysis constitutes in a way the very confrontation with its exigency. Every rational discourse, that is, every discourse abiding by the normative values of truth, knowledge, reality and so forth, entails an affirmation of faith in chance, just like that of Freud. Reasoning becomes possible only insofar as it acknowledges *a priori* a margin of indeterminacy, conceived of in its broadest generality as the 'always possibly otherwise' within the event's structuration. Indeed, one cannot but 'believe in chance'. A reappraisal of the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, and the propagators of the 'pragmatic' tradition in general will confirm this. The essential unpredictability of what is to come is that which makes room for reason's mark. At the same time, however, in accepting chance unconditionally, in good faith as they say, every rational discourse also compromises its teleological constitution, what distinguishes it precisely from superstition and fiction. Hence, as we will establish

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

through an analysis of Richard Rorty's reading of Derrida, rather than a 'pragmatic', a-philosophical acknowledgment of the necessity of chance, what deconstruction exemplifies and calls for is the uncompromising face-off with its consequences. Allowing for the chance of chance, reason's trace relinquishes the right to determine with certainty what is, to distinguish truth from untruth, to defend the lawful coherence of its findings, of its subject – of itself. Believing in chance, it forsakes its chance.

This is the problem then: one cannot but believe in chance, indeed, but only insofar as one *also*, and above all, does not believe in it. If reason is constituted out of the possibility of inexplicable, unforeseeable divergence, it remains the regulative restraint of that possibility. To recall Robert Smith's succinct formulation, 'any philosophy worth its salt will be obliged to take it, the always possible chanciness of contingency, on board. But paradoxically, doing so brings on the destitution of philosophy: chance, which is necessarily a-philosophical, the limit of reason, is where philosophy runs out; a non-philosophical a priori.'<sup>5</sup> In other words, the duplicity of 'belief in chance' is no accident; it is actually necessary. To paraphrase Derrida: to believe in chance *must* indicate that one believes in the existence of chance, as well as that one does *not*, above all, believe in chance. Constrained by this double imperative that threatens its sanity and the stability of its limits, philosophy finds itself forced to qualify 'chance', to circumscribe its indispensable, constitutive, explicit or implicit, 'belief in chance' within specific contexts and under specific conditions, to certain extents and in certain degrees. In order to preserve its right mind, the possibility of itself, it strives to maintain both senses of 'belief in chance' without the one contaminating the other at the moment of its enunciation; so that, more simply, one can say 'I believe in chance' and 'I do not believe in chance' without contradicting oneself;

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Smith, *Derrida and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 23.

so that the rationalist, as in the example above, can say ‘I believe in chance, but only in *a sense*; in another, I don’t believe in it’, and so dissociate rationality from superstition, truth from fiction, reason from madness. Through a series of close readings of texts by Aristotle, Freud and William James, this chapter will show that philosophy will have always been the impossible attempt to appropriate chance and to delimit its significance. Impossible because, as Derrida argues in ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’,

the limits cannot be actual and static or solid but rather only the effects of contextual circumscription. Neither linear nor indivisible, they would arise instead from an analysis that I will call (with some circumspection) *pragmatological*, at the intersection of a pragmatics and a grammatology. Open to a different sense of the dispatch (*envoi*) and of dispatches (*envois*), pragmatology should always take the situation of the marks into account; in particular that of utterances, the place of senders and addressees, of framing and of the sociohistorical circumscription, and so forth. It should therefore take account of the problematics of randomness in all fields where it evolves.<sup>6</sup>

That is to say, regardless how one perceives chance, what one means and what one believes one means when one ‘believes in chance’, it remains: ‘To believe in chance can just as well indicate that one believes in the existence of chance, as that one does *not*, above all, believe in chance.’ To believe in chance is as necessary as it is impossible.

### 3.2. In context

At first glance, Derrida’s remark might seem rather tedious and inconsequential. As one might object, the tension between the two oppositional meanings of the phrase ‘to believe in chance’ is no more than a rectifiable linguistic infelicity, an unfortunate accident. Even if ‘to believe in chance’ is necessarily double, as Derrida suggests, then it simply calls for a supplementary, explanatory confirmation of its intended, proper

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<sup>6</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, pp. 27-8.

meaning. ‘If I stress the multiplicity of languages’, he reassures us, ‘and if I play on it, you should not take this for a mere exercise or a gratuitous and fortuitous display. [...] I wish to demonstrate a certain interfacing of significant and insignificant chance’.<sup>7</sup> But the question is: what makes this demonstration significant in the first place? At the end of the day, what one believes in when one believes in chance is a matter of context, and that is all.

‘This depends, as they say, on the context’, Derrida himself will not hesitate to admit.<sup>8</sup> And of course, how could one deny it? ‘They’ would be indeed *everyone*, or else common sense. ‘But’, Derrida will add immediately, as if arguing against common sense, in spite of what ‘they say’, ‘a context is never determined enough to prohibit all possible random deviation.’<sup>9</sup> As if in confirmation of his critics, who view deconstruction as some sort of relativistic linguisticism, instituted on the impossible grounds of a stubborn defiance of reason, it would seem that Derrida is acknowledging here, presupposing even, the obscurity of his address, and accordingly, the exclusivity of a certain, self-aggrandizing ‘deconstructive’ audience as its sole and rightful recipient. He lets on the same impression again a little later, when he states that ‘[i]ndeed there are *those of us* who are inclined to think that unexpectability conditions the very structure of the event.’<sup>10</sup> And once more, as counter-intuitively: ‘*for some of us* the principle of indeterminism is what makes the conscious freedom of man fathomable.’<sup>11</sup> Provocatively enough, Derrida seems to affirm thus the exceptionality of his own, of a select few determinable through their common espousal of

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., pp. 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 8

indeterminability, the unsustainability of the limits that, incidentally, sustain their distinctiveness. With the presumptuousness of a calculated absurdity, it appears, he assigns to 'us' and only 'us', the truth of the impossibility of truth.

Absolutely. Derrida's critics will be surprised to hear that he would gladly subscribe to their criticism, even if not in exactly those terms; quite possibly, he would rejoice even in their perceptiveness. For the 'absurdity' they detect is the 'absurdity' that he has been trying to call attention to; it is exactly what his discourse sets out to investigate. It is true; 'we' are determinable on account of 'our' indeterminability, by reason of the instability of the limit that separates 'us' from 'them', 'our' sense from 'theirs'. But how is this possible? It is true; it is not.<sup>12</sup>

In challenging common sense, the sense of common sense so to speak, or in his words 'the culture of common sense that is marked by a powerful scientifico-philosophic tradition',<sup>13</sup> Derrida does not simply seek to disprove or to qualify its assumptions; most certainly, he does not seek to replace common sense with something else. If yet again he remarks its limit, that is the irreducible, ineradicable and infinitely re-markable possibility of 'random deviation', if he insistently puts into question its naturalness, the security of its borders, this is not in the name of a sterile playfulness. Obviously, there will have always been reasonableness and its other: insanity, stupidity, fiction, etc.; that is not the issue here. What remains in question, indeterminable, *in deconstruction*, he affirms, is what authorizes and regulates the distinction itself. Contrary to popular belief, Derrida is not on some kind of mission to 'blur the limits', as it is often unwittingly posited. Simply, he asks: who sets those limits and according to

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of deconstruction's 'obliqueness', particularly in relation to questions of 'duty', 'responsibility' and 'ethics', see: Jacques Derrida, 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering"' in *On The Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. David Wood (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), pp. 3-31.

<sup>13</sup> Derrida, 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', pp. 24-5.

what? What renders reason to reason itself? Is it unreasonable to ask? Perhaps: ‘Are we obeying the principle of reason when we ask what grounds this principle which is itself a principle of grounding? We are not – which does not mean that we are disobeying it, either.’<sup>14</sup> As Derrida argues in this spellbinding passage from a little essay entitled ‘The Principle of Reason’, the deconstructive desire and responsibility has to be oblique, misapprehensible, in order to be itself:

Is it rational to worry about reason and its principle? Not simply; but it would be overhasty to seek to disqualify this concern and to refer those who experience it back to their own irrationalism, their obscurantism, their nihilism. Who is more faithful to reason's call, who hears it with a keener ear, who better sees the difference, the one who offers questions in return and tries to think through the possibility of that summons, or the one who does not want to hear any question about the reason of reason?<sup>15</sup>

‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’ takes place precisely in the space opened up by this question. As he often likes to do, Derrida turns to the text he is delivering in the moment itself, before the Forum on Psychiatry and the Humanities of the Washington School of Psychiatry, in October 1982. Already in the very first page he avows: ‘[L]et me tell you this much at once: I do not know to whom I am speaking. Whom is this discourse or lecture addressing here and now? I am delivering it to you, of course, but that doesn’t change the situation much.’<sup>16</sup> Saying that, of course, Derrida is not disputing the distinctiveness of his potential addressees; on the contrary, as we just saw, he will not miss any opportunity to remark the unquestionable differences that separate the one from the other. By the same token, however, he does not presume to know what those

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<sup>14</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils, trans. Catherine Porter and Edward P. Morris, *Diacritics* 13: 3 (Autumn, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, pp. 1-2.

differences are either. Of course, there will have always been ‘us’ and ‘them’, the enlightened or plain mad ‘Derrideans’, for example, and the rest. The limit, however, he attests, which demarcates their identity and renders them cognizable as such, the limit *within* his lecture’s destination which insures its singularity and imparts its significance, remains nonetheless incalculable; it remains, it is the incalculable. That which makes it possible to distinguish between ‘us’ and ‘them’ in the first place, as between the commonsensical and the obscure, normality and abnormality, truth and untruth, is precisely the ‘possibility of random deviation’, that is, the impossibility of doing so with absolute certainty. It is to this impossibility, to the necessity of chance, that every demonstration owes its chances, be it reasonable or unreasonable, right or wrong, entertaining or boring: one will never know which; it will always be decided – always by the other.

Therein lies accordingly the performance of ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’: ‘You will understand why I say this’, Derrida continues from above. ‘And once you find this intelligible, it becomes at least possible to demonstrate that [...] my lecture has not simply and purely missed its destination.’<sup>17</sup> The very condition of his lecture’s unconditional readability, of its ‘intelligibility’, is none other than the unpredictability of its destination. Its unavoidable susceptibility to the possibility of naïve misinterpretations and violent misappropriations is that which safeguards its incommensurability to the specific context which gives rise to it, its incommensurability to a ‘deconstructive audience’ as much as to ‘deconstruction’ in general, to the corpus of which it forms part, its incommensurability, in a word, to its proper name. It is true, ‘the principle of indeterminism is’ what makes ‘us’ possible, ‘what makes the conscious freedom of man fathomable’; at least ‘for some of us’. As for those, who say, ‘it

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

depends on the context', 'they' would be, indeed, all those that Derrida's lecture will have never had the chance to reach, never been given the chance to reach, 'to touch', but that only because 'they' don't acknowledge the always possible possibility, the chance, that this lecture is in fact addressed to them, that 'they' could be 'you', that 'we' could be 'us', in other words, that the context is never one, 'never determined enough to prohibit all possible random deviation'.

[T]he majority among you belong to the "world" of psychiatry [...], to the "worlds" of psychoanalysis, [...] or to the "worlds" of science, literature, the arts, or the humanities. It is not certain that such "worlds" exist. Their frontiers are those of "contexts" and justificatory procedures currently undergoing rapid transformation. Even if I had at my disposition some information that might clarify this subject, it would still remain overly vague and general; I would have to make rough calculations [...] How indeed could I aim my argument at some singular destination, at one or another among you whose proper name I might for example know? And then, is knowing a proper name tantamount to knowing someone?<sup>18</sup>

And Derrida will never cease to repeat this, always in another context. Just as 'knowing a proper name' is not 'tantamount to knowing someone', so each and every mark, 'all traits in general, phonic or not, linguistic or not',<sup>19</sup> every *trace*, remains irreducible to a knowable intention, to an identifiable, proper meaning, to a self. 'That which they have in common, I will claim, is their insignificance in marking (*insignifiance marquante*). This insignificance marks. It belongs to the mark. It is marked but above all remarkable. This re-markable insignificance destines them'.<sup>20</sup> Derrida will use here as an example the French proper name 'Pierre', which not only bears no meaning in itself, like every other proper name, referring to no one unless in a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 15-6.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 15



specific context – ‘it stands for only one person each time’<sup>21</sup> – but also happens to be the homonym of the French common noun *pierre*, meaning stone: ‘and the multiplicity of Pierres in the world bears no relation to the multiplicity of stones’.<sup>22</sup> Insofar as every mark is in principle and by reason of its very condition of possibility repeatable within other contexts, it remains necessarily incommensurable to any one context. This is how he puts it in *Limited Inc*:

If one admits that writing (and the mark in general) must be able to function in the absence of the sender, the receiver, the context of production, etc., that implies that this power, this *being able*, this possibility is *always* inscribed, hence necessarily inscribed as possibility in the functioning or the functional structure of the mark [...] [T]his possibility is a *necessary* part of its structure.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, there is no ‘right’ context for the mark, for what comes to pass, no context ‘determined enough’, because ‘there is nothing but context’,<sup>24</sup> or else, because ‘there is nothing outside context’,<sup>25</sup> or else, in what amounts to the same, because there is no such thing as an event *as such*. In the interview with Derek Attridge, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’”, Derrida says: ‘What happens is always some contamination. The event comes about, or promises itself initially, only by thus compromising itself by the singular contamination of the singular and what shares it. It

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. [Incidentally, it should be noted, Pierre is the name of Derrida’s son.]

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 48.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Biodegradables’, trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 15:4 (1989), p. 873.

<sup>25</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 136. See also Nicholas Royle’s enlightening discussion of these two quotations in Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 61-9.

comes about as impurity – and impurity here is chance.’<sup>26</sup> Everything that takes place takes part; every linguistic and non-linguistic mark bears within itself the necessary chance that it is determined otherwise (than what?). That is, every mark exceeds its context by reason of its re-markability within other contexts; it exceeds itself by reason of itself. Already, its propositional truth, or else its constative content, to borrow the terminology of ‘speech act theory’, performatively substantiates that there be chance. Every mark affirms in the first place (its) chance. ‘Belief in chance’ is what happens.

And this is so even if one does not believe in it. The undecidability that pertains to the affirmation of chance *itself* would constitute therefore yet another symptom of this essential structure which delimits every mark, circumscribing its identity and sacrificing its singularity at once, making something possible in its impossibility, necessary in its contingency, itself in its multiplicity, present in its spectrality, comprehensible in its irreducible openness to differing interpretations; in short, an example of the necessity of chance. As such, however, it would also constitute an exemplary example; an instance of the law that is also the law itself. Like every event, ‘belief in chance’ attests to a possibility that exceeds itself, the possibility or the chance that it is determined otherwise, ‘depending on the context’. It attests to the very possibility, that is, which it verifies in itself: ‘Being at once of sufficient determination *and* indetermination to leave enough room for the chances to which it speaks in its course’, as Derrida says,<sup>27</sup> ‘belief in chance’ divides itself interminably and yet, at the

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<sup>26</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida” in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 68-9.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida writes this specifically in reference to the expression ‘*destiner au hasard*’, which ‘can have two syntaxes and therefore can carry two meanings in French [...] “*Destiner au hasard*” could mean resolutely “to doom”, “abandon”, “yield”, or “deliver” to chance itself. But it can also mean to destine

same time, it keeps on falling on itself; it keeps on falling on itself, because it divides itself interminably. Giving itself over to chance it so happens to return to itself. Thus, it becomes possible in its impossibility and *as* the impossibility of itself; its structure is quasi-transcendental. Just as Derrida's most prominent neologisms, such as '*différance*', '*iterability*', '*parergon*' and of course, most notably in this context, '*destinerrance*', so 'belief in chance' happens to be a symptom of its own trajectory, acquiring its significance on account of its insignificance and as that insignificance itself; it is the remainder of itself insofar as it remains other than itself in itself, deferred in its presence, determinable by reason of, and as, the indeterminability it at once refers to and embodies. 'Like that of "*différance*" and several others', as Derrida says of '*iterability*', 'it is an aconceptual concept or another kind of concept, heterogeneous to the philosophical concept of the concept, a "concept" that marks both the possibility and the limit of all idealization and hence of all conceptualization.'<sup>28</sup> Even more precisely: "'concept" or quasiconcept of concept in its conceptualizable relation to the nonconcept'.<sup>29</sup>

What does one believe in when one 'believes in chance'? 'This depends on the context, as they say, but a context is never determined enough to prohibit all possible random deviation', says Derrida. Indeed, no context can safeguard the fate of one's affirmation, because its destination will have always been the other. 'To believe in chance' will have always been subject to the other's determination, up to the other.

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something unwittingly, in a haphazard manner or at random. In the first of these cases, one destines to chance without involving chance, whereas in the second, one does not destine to chance but chance intervenes and diverts the destination. *The same can be said for the expression "to believe in chance".* Derrida, 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 119.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

Simply put, one can never know for sure what the other believes in when the other believes in chance. And likewise, as soon as one declares one's own faith in chance, one instantly gives up any authority over its meaning and loses the right to determine its course. Chance belongs to the other or to oneself as other, necessarily; it belongs to chance. And the other here is not simply another person, whom we can simply ask for clarification, nor is it a potential addressee that might or might not get what we mean or how we mean it. To put it in its simplest generality, the other is not the unreachable, singular interiority from which the words originate or to which the words are destined in its difference from the repeatable and thus misinterpretable words themselves; it is rather the unverifiability of that interiority, or else, the *incalculability of the difference*. The possibility of 'random deviation' is likewise and as a consequence not equivalent to the uncertainty of an unknowable future; it is the absolute, unnegotiable lack of an identifiable present. The possibility of accident, the trembling of the 'perhaps', is not the potentiality of alternative outcomes, effects, destinations; it is the actuality of the envois, of the dispatch as such, in the moment itself. The multiplicity is inscribed in the mark; always already, it partakes in its structuration dividing it from within. To believe in chance 'can just as well indicate that one believes in the existence of chance, as that one does *not*, above all, believe in chance'; either way, and in the first place, one will have always, necessarily, affirmed chance. Whether one is rational or superstitious, as we demonstrated above, one still 'believes in chance'. That is, whether 'one believes in the existence of chance' or 'one does *not*, above all, believe in chance', one does. Whether one wants to or not, whether one knows it or not, one happens to abide by chance. The accident, the indeterminability, is what happens to happen now, what is bound to happen now. 'This insignificance destines'. Chance is necessary. Right here

and now, there is *destinerrance*. In his essay 'No Apocalypse, Not Now', Derrida writes:

The destinerrance of the envois, (sendings, missives, so to speak), is connected with a structure in which randomness and incalculability are essential. I am not speaking here of factors of undecidability or incalculability that function as reservations in a calculable decision. I am not speaking of the margin of indeterminacy that is still homogeneous to the order of the decidable and the calculable. [...] [I]t is a question here of an aleatory element that appears in a heterogeneous relation to every possible calculation and every possible decision.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.3. Pragmatic circumspection

Uncomfortable with Derrida's conclusions, as one should be, but hard-pressed to get around his analytical rigor, the earnestness with which he seems to put into question reason's most fundamental assumptions, one could always resort to another type of criticism. Unable to dispute Derrida's claims, once one has actually read Derrida, one could still evade their disconcerting consequences by arguing that in reality they are relatively insignificant in themselves. Indeed, employing this rather common rhetorical ruse, Derrida's critics will often contend that even though he is admittedly right in what he says, he is just making too much out of it, he is being just too serious about it all. More specifically, they object, even if Derrida is not wrong in saying that no context can fully determine the significance of an event, no language reveal perfectly one's intention, no pure, ideal meaning can be accorded to a signifying process, no knowledge assumed with certainty and no truth held *a priori*, even so, all that does not change the fact that one can still estimate; one can take one's chances. After all, one is constantly

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<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)', trans. Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis, *Diacritics*, 14:2 (Summer, 1984), p. 29.

called upon to form judgments and make decisions. If a risk is always necessarily involved, as Derrida suggests, then so be it. One would be wise in any case to make use of the information and the tools in his disposal in the best way possible and the rest is history, so to speak. And speaking of history, in fact, has mankind not evolved through the centuries precisely thanks to successfully determining this indeterminable world? ‘For’, as J. Fisher Solomon puts it:

there is a difference between “destinerrance,” which eludes restrictive calculation, and probabilistic potentiality, which can admit the hierarchical ranking of possibilities. A post card, after all, stands a better chance, under ordinary circumstances, of being successfully delivered than not.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps, one cannot but believe in chance. Perhaps, Derrida is not wrong. Either way, one also, and above all, needs to be *pragmatic*.

Not by chance, this sort of quasi-criticism of deconstruction, which in declaring its readiness to subscribe to Derrida’s claims seeks to undermine their import and to contain their force, which tolerates deconstruction so as to more effectively marginalise its impact,<sup>32</sup> finds its fullest and most rigorous articulation in the writings of Richard Rorty, the most vocal exponent of the pragmatic legacy in recent years. This is not to suggest, of course, that it simply stems from some determinable set of theoretical, ‘pragmatic’ presuppositions; quite the contrary. ‘Pragmatism’ proper, let us not forget, is constituted in the name of a determinative, programmatic pluralism. William James, who introduced and popularized the word in American university departments of

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<sup>31</sup> J. Fisher Solomon, ‘Between Determinism and Indeterminism: Notes toward a Potentialist Metaphysics’, *SubStance*, Vol. 17, No. 1, Issue 55 (1988), p. 24.

<sup>32</sup> Derrida elaborates on the notion of tolerance in his interview ‘I Have a Taste for the Secret’, Jacques Derrida in conversation with Maurizio Ferraris, in *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. Giacomo Donis, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2001), p. 89.

philosophy in the early twentieth century, made it clear right from the start that it is no more than ‘a new name for some old ways of thinking’.<sup>33</sup> Which is to say, in effect, ‘pragmatism’ will have always also carried within itself the chance of becoming the opposite; in a way, it will have always already also been ‘an old name for some new ways of thinking’.<sup>34</sup> Its ubiquitous deployment nowadays across the entire field of humanities and beyond only serves to confirm this, as do the various points of dispute among ‘pragmatists’ down the years.

Now, chief among those ‘new ways of thinking’ that pragmatism anticipates and thus incorporates in advance, according to Rorty at least, would be none other than deconstruction. As a matter of fact, then, deconstruction’s pragmatic appropriation would rather stem from the constitutive lack of a determinable set of theoretical, ‘pragmatic’ presuppositions. Inassimilable to itself, in and out of context at once, ‘pragmatism’ exceeds, in principle and by definition, the context of its deployment, James’s founding act as much as the work of his academic heirs, its proper name as much as all of its variants. It constitutes ‘a way of thinking’ rather than a system of thought, and what it stands for is precisely this, the primacy of ways of thinking over philosophical systematicity, the irreducibility of the one to the other. Instituted by reason of its re-markability, the ever re-contextualizable, re-definable meaning of its trace, or else the insignificance of itself, what ‘pragmatism’ denotes and epitomizes at once is an essential mistrust towards proper names, towards any claims to propriety –

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<sup>33</sup> This is the subtitle of James’s pivotal book: *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York, London & Bombay: Longmans, 1907).

<sup>34</sup> This is the clever subtitle of an essay by James Kloppenberg which reviews the intricate history of the ‘pragmatic’ tradition in American philosophy over a wide range of topics: James Kloppenberg, ‘Pragmatism: An Old Name for Some New Ways of Thinking’, *The Journal of American History*, Vol. 83, No. 1 (June 1996), pp. 100-38.

philosophical, political, epistemological, ethical or otherwise. It remains a response to and on account of reason's essential lack of sovereignty. Can the same not be said about 'deconstruction'? Inevitably, the question arises: do these two philosophical traditions not represent the same logic, the same desire? Do they not share the same philosophical grounding, insofar as they both refute precisely the very possibility of philosophical grounding?

The numerous studies exploring their relationship and specifically the relationship between the works of Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty would all confirm indeed a certain kinship between the two, an agreement of sorts, along the lines of 'their common rejection of a foundationalist conception of philosophy', as Chantal Mouffe succinctly puts it;<sup>35</sup> and in Simon Critchley's words: 'The deconstructive claim that the ideality of meaning is an effect of the differential constitution of language [...], can be assimilated to a pragmatist conception of meaning as a function of context.'<sup>36</sup> It is certainly unsurprising, then, that Richard Rorty and others would be inclined to treat the indisputable affinities between deconstruction and pragmatism as evidence of their essential correspondence.<sup>37</sup> For some, however, including Derrida, these affinities would be on the contrary just where one has to draw the line. In Rorty's view, 'Pragmatists and Derrideans are, indeed, natural allies. Their strategies supplement each

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<sup>35</sup> Chantal Mouffe, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism and the Politics of Democracy' in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> Simon Critchley, 'Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?' in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p. 19.

<sup>37</sup> Two full-length studies that take up the task to explore and substantiate this correspondence between deconstruction and pragmatism are: Gary Wihl, *The Contingency of Theory: Pragmatism, Expressivism, and Deconstruction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994) and Kathleen Wheeler, *Romanticism, Pragmatism, and Deconstruction* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1993).



other admirably.’<sup>38</sup> And yet for Derrida, on the other hand, they are clearly not: ‘I am, in fact, not at all, truly not at all in agreement with Rorty, especially where he takes his inspiration from my work.’<sup>39</sup> Still, Rorty will disagree with Derrida; that is, he will disagree with Derrida’s insistence to disagree with his agreement with him; he will insist on resisting Derrida’s resistance to deconstruction’s pragmatic appropriation.

A quite unique, no doubt, in philosophical quarters at least, love-hate-hate relationship, and what makes it especially stimulating, as we will see, is that, actually, neither side is wrong, strictly speaking. The tension is in fact irreducible; it is necessary, and any attempt to dissolve its unnerving effects and one way or another settle the score is bound to fall short. This is the case, for example, with Simon Critchley’s essay ‘Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?’. Critchley would like to think that the whole issue simply comes down to a terrible misunderstanding on Rorty’s part. In his view, Derrida is absolutely justified in rejecting the identification of deconstruction with pragmatism, because Rorty, conversely, is outright mistaken in blurring their limits. Rorty only *thinks* that he agrees with Derrida, that is, he *thinks* that deconstruction and pragmatism are one, because in reality he just does not understand Derrida. ‘I would like to disrupt this identification of deconstruction with pragmatism from the perspective of Derrida’s work’, Critchley writes, ‘and raise some critical questions about Rorty’s understanding of deconstruction.’<sup>40</sup> And ‘the question’, he affirms, ‘is whether *deconstruction is pragmatist all the way down*’, as Rorty apparently presumes. ‘That is to say, is

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<sup>38</sup> Richard Rorty, ‘Philosophy Without Principles’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Mar., 1985), p. 462.

<sup>39</sup> Qtd. in Lorenzo Fabbri, *The Domestication of Derrida: Rorty, Pragmatism and Deconstruction*, trans. Daniele Mani (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>40</sup> Critchley, ‘Deconstruction and Pragmatism – Is Derrida a Private Ironist or a Public Liberal?’, p. 19.

deconstruction consistently anti-foundationalist?’<sup>41</sup> ‘Well, clearly’, Rorty would reply; and he would be right, of course. ‘Or is there a foundationalist claim in deconstruction’, Critchley continues undeterred, ‘which cannot be pragmatized: justice, for example, or responsibility to another’s suffering?’<sup>42</sup> Clearly not; and how could ‘justice’ ever be an example to begin with? All too eager to stand up for Derrida, to defend deconstruction from the threat of its ‘pragmatization’ on his behalf, Critchley ends up blatantly misconstruing deconstruction instead. Unable to find just what it is that Rorty misunderstands, to spot the difference between deconstruction and pragmatism, he decides to make Derrida say something other than what he actually does. In truth, however, despite Critchley’s allegations, and contrary to Critchley, Rorty happens to understand Derrida perfectly well. And as Critchley’s rhetoric inadvertently confirms, Rorty is absolutely right: there is no difference between deconstruction and pragmatism; first of all, because there is no such thing as ‘deconstruction’ or ‘pragmatism’.

That is not to say, however, Derrida would contest in turn, that they are the one and the same either. As paradoxical as it may sound, while Rorty is not unjustified in identifying pragmatism with deconstruction, pragmatism in deconstruction, Derrida is also and for exactly the same reasons not unjustified in staunchly refusing to abide by this identification. In fact, it is *because* deconstruction is ‘pragmatist’, and ‘all the way down’ for that matter, that it remains inappropriate, first and foremost to ‘pragmatism’. Taking sides has never been further from the point. What is at stake here is not the intellectual clash between two thinkers, even less so between two ‘schools of thought’, between the ‘pragmatic’ and the ‘deconstructive’ point of view – after all, both are blind to themselves. In question is not deconstruction’s proper meaning vis-à-vis its

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp. 19-20. [original emphasis]

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 20.

pragmatic rendering; rather, it is deconstruction's *significance* vis-à-vis its pragmatic appraisal. As we will verify immediately, rather than a thesis or an argument, it is in fact an *attitude*, or else a way of dealing with blindness, that constitutes the justificatory ground of both Rorty's persistent effort to appropriate Derrida despite Derrida as one of his own, that is, as 'a poor existing individual, somebody who thinks about certain things in certain ways because of certain weird, private contingencies',<sup>43</sup> and Derrida's respective refusal to comply: 'I take extremely seriously the issue of philosophical responsibility. I maintain that I am a philosopher and I want to remain a philosopher.'<sup>44</sup>

Lorenzo Fabbri's summary of Rorty's stance on deconstruction is illuminating. According to Rorty, Fabbri writes,

Derrida has to dismiss the belief that there exists a hidden logical space from where to anticipate the structure of any possible utterance. Instead of foreclosing what might be, of offering transcendental insights on the conditions for the possibility of Being as such, Derrida *should be content* [CD's emphasis] in playing with the vocabularies he finds on his way in order to keep the future coming – the only 'beyond' he should take care of. [...] Rorty concludes that Derrida *should be satisfied* [CD's emphasis] with having given a response to the tradition that is influential to the present of philosophy. A response and not the response because, since the legacy itself is irreducibly plural, there cannot be a sole authentic way of engaging it.<sup>45</sup>

If Derrida is right then, as Rorty clearly thinks he is, if 'there is nothing but context', as he affirms, then certainly, he can no longer claim to be doing 'serious philosophy'. Surely, Rorty protests, the deconstruction of the ontological presuppositions that have shaped western metaphysics cannot maintain those same metaphysical aspirations. All

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<sup>43</sup> Richard Rorty, 'Review: Is Derrida a "Quasi" –Transcendental Philosopher?', *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 36, no. 1 (Spring, 1995), p. 197.

<sup>44</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism' in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p. 81.

<sup>45</sup> Fabbri, *The Domestication of Derrida*, pp. 49-50.

one can do, what Rorty claims he is doing himself, and what he believes Derrida ‘should be satisfied’ he is doing as well, is offer yet another response to the history of philosophical speculation, a response which, of course, does not profess to be the ‘sole authentic’ response. The best one can hope for, in other words, is to come up with a language that sticks with one’s audience, and ‘with luck’, as Rorty puts it in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ‘– the sort of luck which makes the difference between genius and eccentricity – that language will also strike the next generation as inevitable’.<sup>46</sup>

‘Pragmatists’, Rorty proclaims, ‘are supposed to treat everything as a matter of a choice of context and nothing as a matter of intrinsic properties. They dissolve objects into functions, essences into momentary foci of attention, and knowing into success at reweaving a web of beliefs and desires into more supple and elegant folds.’<sup>47</sup> Is this not just what Derrida has been doing all along? ‘Content’ with his ‘success’, he should leave it at that then. He simply ‘cannot have it both ways’, Rorty says. ‘You cannot see these leaps in the dark as the magnificent poetic acts that they are and still talk about “philosophical rigour”’. Rigour just does not come into it.’<sup>48</sup> It is exactly as a means of ‘having it both ways’ that Rorty interprets Derrida’s frequent recourse to the notion of ‘quasi-transcendental’ structures, for instance. Reviewing Geoffrey Bennington’s ‘Derridabase’, Rorty confesses: ‘I do not know how to use the notion of “quasi transcendental” except as a name for the advantage that Bennington claims for Derrida over all the other philosophers [...]. But I am not clear what that advantage is

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 56.

<sup>47</sup> Rorty, *Philosophy Without Principles*, p. 461.

<sup>48</sup> Richard Rorty, ‘Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?’ in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Wood (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), p. 239.

supposed to be, nor that it exists.’<sup>49</sup> It is for the same reason and along the same lines, that Rorty takes issue with Gasché’s attempt to systematize Derrida’s thought by reducing its key concepts into a set of conceptual ‘infrastructures’.<sup>50</sup> Lorenzo Fabbri too, incidentally, and in response to Rorty’s concerns, resorts to the notion of ‘infrastructure’ as evidence of an ‘unpragmatizable’ semi-foundationalism that supposedly safeguards deconstruction’s specificity and philosophical aptness. Coming to deconstruction’s rescue from its pragmatic ‘domestication’, as the title of his monograph has it, convinced that it is in danger, Fabbri construes thus deconstruction as some kind of obscure, self-righteous, metaphorical idealism: ‘Yet, in a certain sense’, he writes, ‘it is not wrong to understand Derrida’s metaphors as infrastructures. For sure, they are the conditions of the possibility of deconstruction, the devices that allowed its discourses to be produced. Without them, Derrida would not be who he is.’<sup>51</sup> Contrary to precisely this sort of tautological claptrap, Rorty thinks then in all seriousness that he is taking deconstruction more seriously than deconstruction is taking itself. His essay ‘Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?’ delineates explicitly the contrast, as he perceives it, between his, the pragmatic, version of Derrida’s work and the ‘deconstructive’ one:

On the one side there are the people who admire Derrida for having invented a new, splendidly ironic way of writing about the philosophical tradition. On the other side are those who admire him for having given us rigorous arguments for surprising philosophical conclusions. The former emphasize the playful, distancing, oblique way in which Derrida handles traditional philosophical figures and topics. The second emphasize what they take to be his results, his philosophical discoveries. Roughly speaking, the first *are content to admire his manner* [CD’s

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<sup>49</sup> Rorty, ‘Review: Is Derrida a “Quasi” –Transcendental Philosopher?’, p. 185.

<sup>50</sup> Rodophe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>51</sup> Fabbri, *The Domestication of Derrida*, p. 49.

emphasis], whereas the second want to say that the important thing is his matter –the truths which he has set forth.<sup>52</sup>

Contrary to his puffed-up disciples, Rorty asserts, contrary to a certain Derrida even, who seems to be making ‘noises of both sorts’,<sup>53</sup> as Rorty admits in conclusion to the same essay, pragmatists are in fact the ones following Derrida to the letter. And truth is that they are; Rorty is right. What he overlooks, and what Fabbri, Critchley and the defenders of deconstruction’s rigor in general also have a tough time getting their heads around, is that *this* is the problem. What they, as much as Rorty, fail to understand is that it is in doing so, in following Derrida to the letter, that one also betrays Derrida. In reality, there will have never been a dilemma to begin with, because there will have never been a ‘correct’ way of reading Derrida: ‘Now, I claim this right to make noises of both sorts in an absolutely unconditional manner. I absolutely refuse a discourse that would assign me a single code, a single language game, a single context, a single situation’.<sup>54</sup>

Rorty ‘cannot understand why Derrida wants to sound transcendental, why he persists in taking the project of finding conditions of possibility seriously.’<sup>55</sup> Like all philosophy, he believes, deconstruction is no more than a private, a-political narrative, destined to absolute chance. But what is more important, unlike ‘all philosophy’, any arguments to the contrary, any arguments that deconstruction is something else, something more, determinable as such, happen to go against deconstruction’s own and most fundamental presuppositions. In a word, ‘deconstruction’ is impossible, and by

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<sup>52</sup> Rorty, ‘Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?’, p. 236.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 243.

<sup>54</sup> Derrida, ‘Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism’, p. 81.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Rorty, ‘Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism’ in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, p. 16.

reason of itself. And, of course, Rorty is absolutely spot-on; any attempt to prove him wrong will have been in vain. And just as one cannot blame him for misunderstanding Derrida, one can also not really blame him for remaining dissatisfied if all that Derrida would suggest in response – always in another context – is that this, the impossible, the absolutely impossible, is *what happens*, what happens to happen, that the irreducible singularity of the mark is in fact the necessary condition of politicization. One cannot, one should not, expect Rorty to ever be satisfied; on the contrary, that is the whole point: he is not *supposed to* be satisfied. This is why we said it will have been a matter of attitude right from the start; therein lies the difference. In the face of impossibility, before the inevitable failure of philosophy's 'project', what Rorty is striving for is the terms of an honourable surrender. Inflicted by an essential blindness, what Rorty yearns for is *contentment*. This is the pragmatic horizon of his work, the horizon of pragmatism in general. Whereas for Derrida, whom ironically enough Rorty likes to portray as more reticent, less radical than himself, this same impossibility, the constitutive, insurmountable aporia of rational thought, amounts to the radical absence of any ethico-political horizon whatsoever. What stimulates the deconstructive desire is distress; all that remains in Derrida is the remainder of dread. And the hyper-tolerant Rorty will not tolerate this; why, of course, he doesn't have to.

In the course of a very interesting interview on the concept of responsibility, Derrida outlines the aporetic structure of 'invention', and in conclusion he resorts to a familiar, 'deconstructive' formulation: 'Invention is impossible, and has to remain impossible in order to be what it is.'<sup>56</sup> But this time, he also has something to add:

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<sup>56</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'On Responsibility' in *Responsibilities of Deconstruction*, ed. Jonathan Dromsfield and Nick Midgley, *Pli* 6, *Warwick Journal of Philosophy* (1997), p. 34.

I am unhappy with this answer, but it cannot be any other way. Nevertheless, when I say “I cannot think otherwise”, and I acquiesce or consent to a law, to an imperative, this has to be the case even if it’s aporetic, paradoxical, or unbearable. I would not want to think otherwise merely to be happy or reconciled, and this is perhaps the rigour or the inflexibility of deconstruction; even if I am not happy with the necessity of what I have to say, I have to say it, and I owe this to the other.<sup>57</sup>

‘Grammatology has always been a sort of pragmatics’, Derrida concedes summarily on a footnote in the ‘Afterword’ to *Limited Inc*, ‘but the discipline which bears this name today involves too many presuppositions requiring deconstruction [...] to be simply homogeneous with that which is announced in *De la grammatologie*.’<sup>58</sup> More specifically, as J. Claude Evans insightfully adds, ‘pragmatics is committed to the in principle decidability of meaning, to the ideal of control and self-regulation’.<sup>59</sup> Even more specifically, we would add here, pragmatics believes in ‘belief in chance’; that is, it believes that it is possible to believe in chance, to know what it is that one believes in when one ‘believes in chance’, that one can control and regulate one’s belief.

Charles Peirce, the logician, philosopher and mathematician, whom William James credited with instituting ‘pragmatism’, and to whose work, incidentally, Derrida turns his attention already in *Of Grammatology*, writes:

Chance pours in at every avenue of sense; it is of all things the most obtrusive. That it is absolute is the most manifest of all intellectual perceptions. That it is a being, living and conscious, is what all the

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 159.

<sup>59</sup> J. Claude Evans, ‘Deconstructing the Declaration: A Case Study in Programmatology’, *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 23, no. 2 (1990), p. 175.



dullness that belongs to ratiocination's self can scarce muster the hardihood to deny.<sup>60</sup>

In a way, 'pragmatism' will have been the consequences of just this affirmation, of this unconditional 'belief in chance' – 'the will to believe' in chance, as James would put it. Since chance is 'absolute', as Peirce declares, one can never fully control the course of the universe; one can neither capture nor amend its laws. What this means for Peirce and for the 'pragmatists' in his wake is that instead of trying to eliminate the contingent, as the positivists and the metaphysicians, the proper 'scientists' and the proper 'philosophers', have been doing for centuries, one should rather be realistic;<sup>61</sup> instead of going after the impossible, one should now resign oneself to what is within reach. In a word, one has to make do with uncertainty. 'Although certainly an early forerunner of deconstruction,' Samuel Weber writes, Peirce 'was from the very start concerned with its other side: the fact that despite the tendency of semiotic processes to be open-ended and relatively indeterminate, determination takes place all the time, has always taken place and will always take place, over and above the efforts of individual thinkers.'<sup>62</sup> Because chance is absolute and it is everywhere, all one can do and, in fact, all one will have been doing all along, even without realizing it, is to try and tame the effects of chance. As Ian Hacking comments in the concluding chapter of his extremely rich and

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<sup>60</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, 'Reply to the Necessitarians', *The Monist* 3, *Papers* 6 (1893), p. 425. qtd. in Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge, New York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 200.

<sup>61</sup> Pragmatic anti-foundationalism has always been homologous with a certain call to 'realism'. Most characteristically, see: Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face*, ed. James Conant (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992).

<sup>62</sup> Samuel Weber, 'The Limits of Professionalism' in *Institution and Interpretation* [Expanded Edition] (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 20.

informative monograph on the scientific groundings and the philosophical implications of probabilism: 'Peirce's history of the universe, in which blind Chance stabilizes into approximate Law, is nothing other than the taming of chance.'<sup>63</sup> Chance is to be stabilized then. In the absence of truth, there remains the approximation of truth: philosophy in regulation.

'Randomness and incalculability are essential', Derrida asserts, to Rorty's approval. But in Rorty's eyes, Derrida is also clearly overplaying his cards; he is investing with significance what is essentially insignificant, insignificance *per se*; that is, above all, 'deconstruction' itself. Pragmatism is in accord with deconstruction, indeed, but *on condition* that deconstruction renounces its own significance. Since 'deconstruction is chance', Rorty reasonably presumes, then it must follow that it is insignificant; which is to say, that 'randomness and incalculability are essential' doesn't really matter all that much. What the undeniable 'obtrusiveness' of chance signals, as he will never stop arguing, is that one can no longer claim for either philosophy or science the right and the possibility to convey and watch over truth as such, to capture reality in its essence. Other than that, however – this is the pragmatic injunction – there is no particular cause for concern. For even if one can never know for sure, one can always hypothesize; even if one cannot determine what *is* with certainty, one can always make assumptions, to be assessed by their effectiveness, or else their 'cash value', as James would say.

In effect, deconstruction's pragmatic appropriation will have always been contingent upon, coextensive with, the probabilistic appropriation of chance. Consider Peirce's pragmatic maxim: 'Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our

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<sup>63</sup> Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, p. 215.

conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.’<sup>64</sup> No doubt, our conception of the effects that constitute meaning is modifiable, in light of new information, new ‘practical bearings’. No doubt, every ‘theory’ is fallible or ‘deconstructible’, if you will, and hence should invariably remain enclosed within quotation marks. Nevertheless, that should not prevent us from forming theories until they are proven wrong, that is, inapplicable, in accordance with Karl Popper’s epistemological tenet. Popper, it should be noted, was another great admirer of Peirce. In *Objective Knowledge* he hails him as ‘one of the greatest philosophers of all times’.<sup>65</sup> And what makes him great, Popper suggests, is the fact that while he shared the belief of his fellow physicists ‘that the world was a clock that worked according to Newtonian laws’, he also

rejected the belief that this clock, or any other, was *perfect*, down to the smallest detail. He pointed out that at any rate we could not possibly claim to know, from experience, of anything like a perfect clock, or of anything even faintly approaching that absolute perfection which physical determinism assumed. [...] Peirce concluded that we were free to conjecture that there was a certain *looseness or imperfection* in all clocks, and that this allowed an *element of chance* to enter. Thus Peirce conjectured that the world was not only ruled by the *strict Newtonian laws*, but that it was also at the same time ruled by *laws of chance*, or of randomness, or of disorder: by laws of statistical *probability*.<sup>66</sup>

At the end of the day, one can always find a middle ground between necessity and chance. Before and against uncertainty, one can draw inferences, establish frequencies, weigh up the pertinence and the usefulness of different propositions and

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<sup>64</sup> Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, v. 5, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1960), par. 402, p. 258.

<sup>65</sup> Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, revised ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p. 212.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 212-3. [original emphasis]

make one's choices accordingly. 'A post card, after all, stands a better chance, under ordinary circumstances, of being successfully delivered than not.' For what it's worth, one can even put forth a thing called 'normal accident theory' if necessary, and be done with it all.<sup>67</sup>

This is all absolutely reasonable, of course; indisputable even. The only problem, however, is that, in truth, as we will shortly confirm, there is no such thing as an 'accident'; as it happens, nothing happens by chance. What Rorty and the pragmatic logic in general omits, by definition, is that if chance is necessary, this is also to say that it is significant. *Because* chance is all there is, in fact, 'this insignificance destines', as Derrida says.<sup>68</sup> The problem, in other words, and in what amounts to the same, is that to believe in chance also means that one does not, above all, believe in chance.

'The minute I open my mouth, I am in the promise', Derrida repeats,<sup>69</sup> as soon as one speaks, one affirms the chance that what one says is not what one means; 'the minute I open my mouth there is a "believe me" at work.'<sup>70</sup> This is what both deconstruction and pragmatism, breaking away from the transcendental questioning of traditional philosophical discourses, give us to think: one cannot but 'believe in chance', believe in the absolute other, without guarantees. But what deconstruction is rigorous enough, indeed, to not let pass, is that, as it happens, chance is unbelievable. What Rorty and the pragmatists refuse to accept, what they choose to ignore rather, in the

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<sup>67</sup> See Charles Perrow, *Normal Accidents: Living with High Risk Technologies* (Princeton, New Jersey and Chichester, West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1999). For an accessible overview of the practical applications of the laws of probability see Leonard Mlodinow, *The Drunkard's Walk: How Randomness Rules our Lives* (New York: Vintage Books, 2009).

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', p. 15.

<sup>69</sup> Derrida, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', p. 82.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

manner of a supposedly uncompromising forthrightness, when really in the name of order and the law, is that, fortunately, it is impossible to ‘believe in chance’, for chance is necessary, and fatefully so.

### 3.4. Freudian slip

Freud believes in chance: ‘I believe in external (real) chance, it is true’.<sup>71</sup> But, of course, as Derrida will respond, Freud does not believe ‘in *actual* chance’.<sup>72</sup> And yet, Freud’s avowal is not a mere slip of the pen; it is actually necessary, it remains analysable. In specific, as we will see, it attests to the very possibility of psychoanalysis.

A large part of Derrida’s lecture ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’ is devoted to the close, meticulous analysis of the last chapter of Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which goes by the title ‘Determinism, Belief in Chance and Superstition’. And what draws Derrida’s attention there is precisely Freud’s assured declaration of faith in chance, in ‘external’ chance to be precise. It is not just that ‘one could find a thousand declarations by Freud’, as Derrida observes, ‘attesting a completely determinist conviction of the positivistic type prevalent in his day’;<sup>73</sup> what makes Freud’s avowal especially intriguing and hence all the more remarkable is that it actually comes in conclusion to the work that more explicitly and more zealously than any other, perhaps, delineates the psychoanalytic task as the unconditional elimination of contingency, in perfect conformity with the positive sciences and traditional

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<sup>71</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* [1901], trans. Anthea Bell (London and New York: Penguin, 2002), p. 244. [translation modified, in keeping with the translation provided by the translators of Derrida’s ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’]

<sup>72</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 24.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

philosophical discourses. Immediately succeeding *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* constitutes in point of fact Freud's arduous endeavour to rationalize and thus to explain away what would appear as the most trivial, the chanciest, effects of chance in one's waking life. Surely then, one would presume, Freud does not, above all, believe in chance; it is impossible that he believes in chance. If serious, his confession to the contrary is simultaneously contradicting the essential premise of psychoanalytic theory, that is, the interpretability of human conduct in its entirety; tempering the solidity of psychoanalysis's very foundation, Freud is inevitably also giving up on its claims to thoroughness.

Not quite, Freud will affirm with his customary candour. One only needs to read his declaration, his 'belief in chance', in its right *context*, he reassures us; any suspicions of inconsistency will be dispelled as soon as one realizes what he *really* means, what he *really* 'believes in'. Of course, there can be no doubt that psychoanalysis is founded on the grounds of a psychic determinism that leaves no room for chance. It is true; for the analyst, every psychological affect is significant, or else, there is nothing but symptoms; this is the principal psychoanalytic maxim. In Derrida's succinct transcription: 'There is no chance in the unconscious. The apparent randomness must be placed in the service of an unavoidable necessity that in fact is never contradicted.'<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, Freud warns us, one needs to be careful. 'One must not confuse the domains, he tells us, nor their proper causalities', as Derrida puts it.<sup>75</sup> If psychoanalysis excludes chance, indeed, if *it* is the exclusion of chance as such, this is exclusively with regard to the internal, psychological 'domain' – its subject proper. When it comes to external things, Freud maintains, psychoanalysis is reasonable enough, pragmatic enough, to accept chance, to

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 24

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

acknowledge the possibility of random deviation. And so he clarifies: 'I believe in external (real) chance, it is true, but not in internal (psychical) accidental events.'<sup>76</sup>

As always, Freud's rhetoric is mesmerizingly clear-cut and so extremely convincing; and as in so many other occasions,<sup>77</sup> it will take Derrida's insightful, painstaking reading to expose its limit, the limit of the 'contextual circumscription',<sup>78</sup> that will have made it possible in the first place, that will have always been (its) chance: between 'internal' and 'external', between 'chance' and 'chance', 'significant' and 'insignificant', between 'belief' and 'belief', in truth and in fiction.

Derrida writes:

We [...] know that in other passages, in other problematic contexts, Freud carefully avoids ontologizing or substantializing the limit between outside and inside, between the biophysical and the psychic. But in the *Psychopathology* and elsewhere he requires this limit not only to protect this fragile, enigmatic, threatened defensive state that one calls "normality" but also to circumscribe a solid context [...], the unity of a field of coherent and determinist interpretation, that which we so calmly call psychoanalysis *itself*.<sup>79</sup>

Having just demonstrated that supposed 'accidents' such as 'slips of the tongue' and 'slips of the pen', 'misrememberings' and 'misreadings', 'errors' and 'combined parapraxes', to quote but a few of the phenomena that *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* deals with, are in fact attributable to retraceable, psychological processes, and hence remain necessary effects of underlying, determinist causes, Freud is now concerned that one might mistake psychoanalysis for a superstitious desire to just not let

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<sup>76</sup> Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, p. 244. [translation modified]

<sup>77</sup> See in particular Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>78</sup> Derrida, 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', p. 25.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

anything pass as ‘mere chance’, for a pathological compulsion to interpret everything that happens to happen, to treat even the insignificant as significant. To pre-empt this threat, Freud needs to establish a safe and secure limit then, a ‘solid context’, in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* more than ever, separating ‘normality’ from ‘abnormality’. Yes, he will concede, he does share a certain ‘compulsion to interpret’ with the superstitious person, ‘an urge not to see chance as solely accidental but to place some kind of interpretation on it.’<sup>80</sup> Yes, just like the superstitious person, he looks for and finds a hidden meaning at all costs; indeed, he does not, above all, believe in chance. But this is only in internal matters, while

a superstitious man will see it the other way around: he knows nothing of the motivation of his fortuitous actions and slips, he believes fortuitous psychic factors exist, and he is inclined to ascribe a significance to outside fortuitous events that will make itself felt in reality, and to see chance as a means of expression for something that is outside him.<sup>81</sup>

The superstitious person, like the religious and the metaphysician, Freud claims, irrationally accords significance to pure, insignificant coincidences in the external world; he pathologically emulates the rational analyst. Freud hence sharply dissociates psychoanalysis from superstition by finding a hidden meaning in superstition itself; it is ‘nothing but *psychology projected into the external world*’.<sup>82</sup>

But can one draw the limits so easily? Can one ever positively ‘distinguish between these two hermeneutic compulsions’, between rationality and superstition? Can one positively dissociate ‘belief in chance’ from ‘belief in chance’? Can one ever

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<sup>80</sup> Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, p. 244.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. [original emphasis]



believe in chance without at the same time, with the same movement, denying chance? That is, can one ever believe in *actual* chance, in chance as such?

Claiming that something happened by chance, or else that an outcome to be determined in the future is ‘a matter of chance’, indicates that the conditions which will have determined an event are essentially unpredictable, either because too unlikely or too complex, as rationality would dictate, or because governed by a capricious, higher will, as superstition would have it. In either case, however, regardless how one interprets chance and whether one thinks it is significant or not, intended or not, to claim that an event happened by chance is not to dispute that it had a specific, determining cause; it is merely to suggest that this cause was incalculable in advance, in other words, that *we*, from our limited perspective, were unable to anticipate and to foresee its coming. In its classical conception and ever since Aristotle, an ‘accident’ attests to our inability to predict it, not the event’s own unpredictable nature. Of course, it is ‘by chance’ that one happens to find a treasure while digging a hole, or that a ship gets carried to Aegina by a storm, to use a couple of Aristotle’s own examples.<sup>83</sup> But that does not mean that these ‘accidents’ are not both caused and necessary.

Even more so, then, to claim that something happened by chance is actually to imply the opposite, to intimate something like the ‘hand of destiny’, and thus to fortify the rigidity of the determinist principle. As an unpredictable incident consists in the interruption of the ordinary, foreseeable causal chain, its unaccountability bears witness but to a certain, momentary suspension of reason. Its remarkability is therefore only an effect of its apparent automaticity, of the invisibility of its cause. That which happens

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<sup>83</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I-IX [The Loeb Classical Library], trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 1933), pp. 289-91. We will return to these examples and to Aristotle’s definition of an accident in *Metaphysics* at the outset of the next chapter.

by chance, that which one could have never seen coming, is precisely that which one could have never prevented from coming. Insofar as something just happened to happen, as it is often said, it should follow that it couldn't but have happened, precisely the way it did. Arriving without warning, uninvited, and totally unexpected, a chance event presents itself as a fateful event.

Strictly speaking, nothing happens by 'chance'. As Hume's dictum has it, 'chance, when strictly examined, is a mere negative word, and means not any real power which has anywhere a being in nature.'<sup>84</sup> Everything, even the most improbable of coincidences, happens for a reason. Whether that reason amounts to the correlation of some complex chain of immeasurable variables that are only retraceable after the fact, or to the enforcement of an unverifiable, unaccountable mystical imperative, still, the accident itself, any unexpected turn of events whatsoever, could never have been avoided. What happened was meant to happen.

To come back to Freud then, would psychoanalysis contest any of this? Does Freud actually believe in 'external' chance, as he claims? Derrida's verdict is categorical, even if not entirely unequivocal: 'I do not believe that Freud believes in *actual* chance in external things.'<sup>85</sup> Of course he doesn't. Rather than challenging the determinist principle, the truth of determinism and the determinability of truth, psychoanalysis constitutes in fact an attempt to universalize its universality, so to speak, to validate its axiomaticity. Rather than allowing for some chance in the external world, as Freud feigns here, psychoanalysis ventures instead to verify its absolute impossibility all the way down to the innermost provinces of the inner self, and so to completely erase the limit between 'internal' and 'external', between physical and psychical reality, to

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<sup>84</sup> David Hume, qtd. in Hacking, *The Taming of Chance*, p. 200.

<sup>85</sup> Derrida, 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', p. 24.

*decontextualize* the mark, uniting thus ‘the science of the psyche [...], in a certain way, with the biophysical sciences’, as Derrida writes.<sup>86</sup> (‘Remember that in 1897’, he reminds us, ‘he confided to Fliess his conviction that no “index of reality” of any sort exists in the unconscious and that it is impossible to distinguish between truth and a fiction “invested with affect”’.<sup>87</sup>) The problem, however, is that in so doing psychoanalysis compromises at the same time its scientificity, if not the very possibility of ‘science’; it sacrifices the distinctiveness of its identity. Not believing in chance, psychoanalysis is left without a chance. Its very condition of possibility renders it impossible as such. ‘The question that thereby imposes itself’ as Samuel Weber formulates it, ‘is: Must not psychoanalytical thinking itself partake of – repeat – the dislocations it seeks to describe?’<sup>88</sup> In excluding the possibility of random deviation and turning everything into a significant, necessary symptom, psychoanalysis is bereft of its authority; its own prescriptive charts destabilize its theoretical sovereignty. The new science that Freud envisions is not to be. This is why he finds himself forced, here and elsewhere, on the back of psychoanalysis as it were, to call upon the limit between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ once again, between pathology and normality, real and imaginary, truth and fiction. He has no other choice; he has ‘to provisionally suspend all epistemological relations to the sciences’;<sup>89</sup> that is, he has to betray psychoanalysis, in order to protect ‘psychoanalysis *itself*’, ‘the unity of a field of coherent and determinist

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 20.

<sup>88</sup> Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. xiv. Weber’s excellent monograph offers an in-depth meditation on the effects of just this constitutive aporia at the heart of psychoanalysis through close readings of various texts of Freud on a number of topics.

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 25.

interpretation'. The only chance for psychoanalysis is its inexorable catastrophe, its annihilation.

As much as he would like to think he does, or at least to convince us that he does, the truth is that in avowing his faith exclusively in 'external' chance '[t]he implicit question to which Freud is responding', as Derrida points out, 'is thus not the larger one of chance (objective or subjective, in things or in us, mathematical or empirical). It is not this question in its modern or classical form. It is only that of the *believing attitude* before the effects of chance, given the two series of causality: psychic/physical, internal/external.'<sup>90</sup> As much as Freud would like to distinguish psychoanalysis from superstition, his 'belief in chance' from the superstitious 'belief in chance', 'internal' from 'external', it remains that neither he nor the superstitious person believes in actual chance, in chance as such, in either 'series of causality'. 'What this means is that they both believe in chance if to believe in chance means that one believes that all chance means something and therefore that there is no chance.'<sup>91</sup> What separates him indeed from the superstitious is neither their 'belief', nor its 'context'; it is rather their 'believing attitude': whereas Freud, 'this Freud here' at least, for strategic reasons only treats the 'internal' as significant, the superstitious person, without a science in his name to defend, rejects altogether, as Derrida says,

the contextualizing and framing but not actual limits between the psychic and the physical, the inside and the outside, not to mention all of the other connected oppositions. More so than Freud, more so than this Freud here, the superstitious person is sensitive to the precariousness of the contextual circumscriptions of the epistemological frames, the *constructs* and the *artifacts* that enable us, for life's convenience and for

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

the mastery of limited networks of knowledge and technics, to separate the psychic from the physical or the inside from the outside.<sup>92</sup>

No doubt, accidents can happen and occasionally do. Whether one is rational or superstitious, one still ‘believes in chance’. No matter how one happens to perceive ‘chance’, one cannot but accept ‘a margin of chance or probability that it would not be normal or serious to want to reduce or exclude’, as Derrida puts it;<sup>93</sup> it is impossible not to believe in chance: there is insignificance (pragmatics). Obviously though, as we have demonstrated here, there is no such thing as a ‘pure’, ‘proper’ accident. No matter how one happens to perceive chance, whether one is rational or superstitious, one cannot possibly believe in chance as such; it is impossible to believe in chance: for this insignificance destines (grammatology).

One has to believe in chance; and yet it is impossible to believe in chance. ‘At the intersection of a pragmatics and a grammatology’, one finds oneself confronted with a paradox: one has to believe in the unbelievable. But is it really a paradox? Can one ever believe in anything but the unbelievable? In *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, Derrida notes in parentheses:

Any testimony testifies in essence to the miraculous and the extraordinary from the moment it must, by definition, appeal to an act of faith beyond any proof. When one testifies, even on the subject of the most ordinary and the most “normal” event, one asks the other to believe one at one’s word as if it were a matter of a miracle. Where it shares its condition with literary fiction, testimoniality belongs *a priori* to the order of the miraculous.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid, pp. 25-6.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>94</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, with Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 75.

In the first place, Derrida's remark of the double significance of 'belief in chance' serves as a reminder that chance constitutes a matter of faith. One can neither see nor grasp chance for oneself, neither appropriate nor identify chance, say 'this is chance' and leave it at that. Inaccessible in itself and un-presentable as such, chance rests necessarily on the other; it is an experience of the wholly other. That is to say, chance requires in essence one's belief in its existence, *because* chance does not exist as such. An act of faith in place and on behalf of what is not there in itself is what makes chance possible in the first place. Essentially invisible, inaccessible, chance exceeds the order of knowledge. More simply, had it been possible to prove the existence of chance, to comprehend and appropriate its effects, one would cease to believe in it. And inversely, had it been possible to disprove chance, once and for all eliminate its possibility, there would no longer be any reason to disbelieve in it. It is because one cannot see chance, know, present, make and even less verify chance, it is because one knows there is no chance, nothing happens by chance, that one believes in chance. It is because one does not, above all, believe in chance, that one does. And from the *Monolingualism of the Other*, in other words:

For one can *testify* only to the unbelievable. To what can, at any rate, only be believed; to what appeals only to belief and hence to the given word, since it lies beyond the limits of proof, indication, certified acknowledgement [*le constant*], and knowledge. Whether we like it or not, and whether we know it or not, when we ask others to take our word for it, we are already in the order of what is merely believable. It is always a matter of what is offered to faith and of appealing to faith, a matter of what is only "believable" and hence as unbelievable as a miracle. Unbelievable because *merely* "credible." The order of attestation itself testifies to the miraculous, to the unbelievable believable: to what must be believed all the same, whether believable or not.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 20.

The declaration of faith in chance attests to the existence and to the inexistence of chance simultaneously; it affirms and denies chance at once; which is to say, one can only affirm chance *on condition* that one also denies chance. By the same token, one accepts, admits, welcomes chance *and* refuses, renounces, excludes chance. With the same movement, hospitable and hostile, one resigns oneself to chance, makes room for chance *and* annuls, dissolves chance. As a consequence, the two meanings of the phrase ‘belief in chance’ cannot be really considered as interchangeable alternatives. Strictly speaking, they are not even oppositional. Rather, as their simultaneity indicates, the one is essentially and inextricably embedded in the other. As soon as one thinks the one, one thinks the other; as soon as one chooses the one, one is chosen by the other. From the moment one believes in the existence of chance, one no longer believes in it.

No, Freud does not believe in chance. Contrary to the superstitious person, he has faith in the psychoanalytic theory, in the necessity of the psychoanalytic explanation, in a truth beyond psychoanalysis, resistant even to psychoanalysis, of chance. Yes, Freud believes in chance. Affirming the possibility of an ultimate psychoanalytic interpretation, Freud will have had accept from the start that psychoanalysis is interpretable, that is, impossible, and by reason of itself. Its constitution will have always been its destitution. A slip is at the origin.

### **3.5. Aristotle and the end of reason**

- Aristotle believes in chance. As a matter of fact, in Book VIII of the *Eudemian Ethics* he saves for *tykhe* a place among the virtues that can lead one to prosperity. ‘But wisdom’, he writes, ‘is not the only thing which acting in accordance with goodness causes welfare, but we also speak of the fortunate as faring well, which implies that

good fortune also engenders welfare in the same way as knowledge does. [...] For that some men are fortunate we see, since many though foolish succeed in things in which luck is paramount'.<sup>96</sup> And so he maintains explicitly: '[chance] must both exist and be a cause [ἀνάγκη καὶ εἶναι καὶ αἰτία εἶναι]'.<sup>97</sup> Chance is necessary.

- Aristotle does not believe in chance. As he affirms in Book VIII of the *Eudemian Ethics*; every event, no matter how unlikely or unpredictable it might seem, still constitutes only a secondary, necessary consequence of a determinable cause. As for those who seem to regularly have luck on their side, as they say, Aristotle is positive: 'the success of the lucky must necessarily be due to either nature or intellect or some guardianship [ἀνάγκη ἢ φύσει ἢ νόῳ ἢ ἐπιτροπίᾳ τινὶ κατορθοῦν]. [...] The people we call fortunate are so not by reason of chance; therefore they are not fortunate'.<sup>98</sup> Chance is necessarily not.

What does Aristotle believe? What does Aristotle believe that he believes? Is it by chance that his overall verdict on chance remains to this day the subject of a heated debate? Indeed, Aristotelian scholars have always been divided over this; whereas some are convinced that he believes in chance, others deem that on the contrary he most certainly does not. It would be, of course, practically impossible to even attempt to sum up here the countless arguments that have been brought forward and reiterated over time by one or the other side, even more so to assess their respective merits. As it happens,

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<sup>96</sup> Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution; The Eudemian Ethics; On Virtues and Vices* [The Loeb Classical Library], trans. H. Rackham (London: William Heinemann Ltd. and Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), p. 457. [Rackham translates throughout the text both 'τύχη' and 'εὐτυχία' as 'fortune', occasionally qualifying the latter as 'good fortune' or 'luck'. I will be modifying his translation by consistently employing 'chance' for 'τύχη' while retaining Rackham's various versions of 'εὐτυχία'.]

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 460-1.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 458-9.



anyway, Richard Sorabji has done just that on our behalf. In *Necessity, Cause and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (1980) he patiently examines Aristotle's plentiful and often ambiguous references to necessity and contingency in light of the various interpretations that have been proposed by his commentators in response. On top of that, he also reflects with admirable rigor on the significance and the implications of Aristotle's thought with regard to a wide array of philosophical discourses that revolve around the related problematics of natural purposefulness and human freedom and culpability.<sup>99</sup>

Sorabji tentatively sides with the 'indeterminists' in the end, but this is not what is important here; as he acknowledges himself in the book's introduction, 'people mean such different things by ascribing determinism or indeterminism to Aristotle, or qualify their ascription in such different ways.'<sup>100</sup> Ultimately, what Sorabji's labyrinthine book testifies to in the first place is precisely the need to interrogate the form of the debate in which it partakes, to up the stakes, as Derrida would say, to question the question itself on account of which it unfolds. His own endless, painstaking qualifications, the successive contextual circumscriptions of Aristotle's 'belief in chance' in terms of a whole host of interwoven concepts, such as 'necessitation', 'causality', 'essence', 'purpose', 'explicability', 'involuntariness' and so forth, as stimulating as they might be, verify above all that the dilemma between 'determinism' and 'indeterminism', the question whether Aristotle 'believes in chance' or 'believes in chance', is not exactly clear-cut. Instead of, or alongside, an investigation of his 'true' or 'conscious' intentions, his 'real' beliefs, what Aristotle's ambivalence, the irreducible inconsistency

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<sup>99</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame: Perspectives on Aristotle's Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1980).

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. x.

between his various statements, calls for is the utmost attentiveness to its very source, the trembling of chance itself, as well as the indissociable constitutive, structural aporias that condition ‘belief’, ‘truth’ and ‘intentionality’ as such. That is to say, more simply, perhaps Aristotle’s ambivalence is not an accident; perhaps, his real ‘belief on chance’ is not a mystery to be solved; perhaps, it is necessary. Because, as Aristotle will marvel himself in Book VIII of the *Eudemian Ethics* – one of the few works, incidentally, missing from Sorabji’s account – perhaps ‘chance is twofold’ [τύχη διττή].<sup>101</sup>

Of course Aristotle ‘believes in chance’; how could he not? The possibility of random deviation constitutes precisely the subject of his analysis in *Eudemian Ethics*; it is what his analysis sets out to regulate; as such it constitutes therefore no less than the very possibility of itself. If he did not believe in chance, if he thought that on the contrary everything is predetermined, he would have *no reason* to begin; that is, it would have been impossible to begin. And of course, Aristotle, above all, ‘does not believe in chance’; how could he? What would safeguard the authority, the reasonableness even, of his analysis, the stability of his regulatory intervention, had he acknowledged *a priori* the possibility of random deviation? If he did believe in chance, it would have been impossible to go on. That there is chance can only be the premise of a philosophical thesis, insofar as it is also the conclusion that covers up its trace.

So, in order for his analysis to become possible in the first place, Aristotle has to assume that, as reason dictates, what seems to happen by chance is nonetheless, just as everything else, contingent upon a superseding, determinable origin, that good chance is therefore simply an effect of ‘either nature or intellect or some guardianship’. Thereon, in search of the hidden meaning behind seemingly chance effects, he proceeds putting to the test one by one each of those three possibilities. What he happens to find, however,

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<sup>101</sup> Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, pp. 464-5.

as we will see in a moment, is that none of them is actually tenable; categorically, he ends up rejecting all of them. Good chance, he affirms, can be attributed neither to ‘nature’ nor to ‘intellect’ nor to ‘some guardianship’; it remains unaccountable. Left with no other choice, then, Aristotle is ultimately forced to conclude, as if himself flabbergasted before the logical impasse, that chance must constitute in fact a distinct cause – *causa sui* – operating under its own principle; which, as we will be reminded, has been what he believed all along; as he had to, of course, in order for his analysis to become possible in the first place.

Chance cannot be a natural effect, Aristotle argues, because it is irregular: ‘But since we see that some people have good fortune on one occasion, why should they not succeed a second time too owing to the same cause? And a third time? And a fourth? For the same cause produces the same effect.’<sup>102</sup> Just as flatly and unreservedly Aristotle rejects also the Socratic dictum that chance is merely an effect of the intellect, whereby wisdom would lead to fortune and ignorance to misfortune: ‘For it is clear that they [the fortunate] do not succeed by means of wisdom, because wisdom is not irrational but can give reason why it acts as it does, whereas they could not say why they succeed –for that would be science; and moreover it is manifest that they succeed in spite of being unwise’.<sup>103</sup> Finally, Aristotle considers the possibility that fortune is ultimately the effect of God’s will, the result of a divine, irregular intervention, ‘as for instance a badly built ship often gets through a voyage better, though not owing to itself, but because it has a good man at the helm.’<sup>104</sup> But he immediately discards this

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 462.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p. 457.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p. 459.

possibility all the same: ‘But it is strange that a god or deity should love a man of this sort, and not the best and most prudent.’<sup>105</sup>

Whilst supposed to evince their ‘real’, underlying cause, as it turns out, chance effects seem to forbid rather their subjection to any conceivable cause whatsoever; it remains, they remain random. But is it not obvious? If chance was attributable to some specific cause, it would not be chance to begin with. Aristotle still wants to understand; he struggles to comprehend chance, to somehow incorporate within reason the very limit of reason; in reality, however, he is only tightening the knot that he is trying to disentangle, he is only lengthening the labyrinth from which he is trying to escape. Notably impatient, he notes down all the evidence in his disposal and carefully pursues their implications, repeating the same arguments over and over again and still arriving nowhere. At long last, he pauses and gives in to the inevitable conclusion, which will have been the point of his departure: that he never should have begun. In the space of just a few lines Aristotle rewinds his entire argumentation; taking no more than one step backwards, he starts over. In a summary that only summons itself, overwriting and thus dispensing with all that precedes it, he writes:

But since we see some people being fortunate contrary to all the teachings of science and correct calculation, it is clear that the cause of good fortune must be something different [δὲ γὰρ ὅτι ἔτι ἐπεὶ τινὲς εἰς τὸ ἀλττιον τῆς εὐτυχίας].<sup>106</sup>

Aristotle, above all, does not believe in chance. Chance does not exist in itself; ‘good fortune’ remains an insignificant derivative. And if its source is neither nature nor intellect nor divine will, then it ‘must be something different’. What could that be?

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., pp. 464-5.

Another invisible pause, and then another ‘but’, disjointed conjunction, swaying undecidedly back and forth.

But is it or is it not good fortune [*ἐκείνη δὲ πότερον ἔστιν εὐτυχία ἢ οὐκ ἔστιν*], whereby a man formed a desire for the right thing and at the right time when in his case human reasoning could not make this calculation?<sup>107</sup>

A subtle syntactical twist here paves the way for the reversal to come. The question of the real ‘cause of good fortune’, which Aristotle’s text has been pursuing all along, and which has just now been posed once more (‘it must be something different’), is abruptly set aside. Aristotle interrupts his text and, as if talking to himself, he affirms that his question is in fact unanswerable, that his inability to discover the real ‘cause of good fortune’ is therefore necessary. Because good fortune, as he just happened to recall, is of course caused by nothing; it constitutes a cause in itself: ‘But is it or is it not?’ *It is*; and is definable as such: ‘forming a desire for the right thing at the right time’. The futility of his effort to discover what produces chance effects, and thus to verify that they are not really chancy, that nothing really happens by chance (‘the people we call fortunate are so not by reason of chance; therefore they are not fortunate’), has now almost imperceptibly turned into an affirmation of chance’s ipseity, above and beyond the Law, natural, human or divine. Rather than simply giving up and admitting defeat, so to speak, Aristotle turns his text against itself, rendering his entire analysis thus far a fictive supplement to the true philosophical work for demonstrative purposes. The true philosophical work begins now. Chance exists; Aristotle believes in it: ‘chance must both exist and be a cause’.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

A third and final ‘but’ seals his ‘conversion’, in quotation marks, since it is only a conversion to be reconverted, already reconverted, a conversion to convertibility, if you will, or else, to chance’s irreducible duality:

But someone may raise the question whether chance is the cause of precisely this [*ᾤρ’ αὐτοῦ τούτου τύχη αἰτία*] –forming a desire for the right thing at the right time.<sup>108</sup>

Chance is a cause in itself then, and it causes ‘precisely this’: what? Chance: ‘forming a desire for the right thing at the right time’. Insofar as it is absolutely unaccountable within reason, then chance can only be an effect of itself. The dazzling oscillation between chance as a primary cause and chance as a secondary effect, between belief and disbelief in the existence of chance, is now suspended. The border separating the two seemingly oppositional positions collapses. Chance occupies henceforth both and thus merges with itself, with itself as other than itself, inevitably annulling itself in effect and disappearing altogether from view. Chance is necessary; that is, its effects are inevitable; what happens by chance is random and predetermined at once, random as predetermined, predetermined because random. The necessity of chance, or else ‘a certain interfacing of necessity and chance, of significant and insignificant chance: the marriage, as the Greek would have it, of *Ananke*, of *Tukhe* and *Automatia*’, as Derrida would have it, at the intersection of determinism and indeterminism, destiny and random deviation, merges effectively fortune with misfortune, good chance with mischance. There is *destinerrance*. Aristotle cannot but confirm it:

Or, on that showing, will not chance be the cause of everything –even of thought and deliberation? Since it is not the case, that one only deliberates when one has deliberated even previously to that deliberation, nor does one only think when one has previously thought before thinking, and so on to infinity, but there is some starting-point;

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

therefore thought is not the starting-point of thinking, nor deliberation of deliberating. Then what else is, save chance? *It will follow that everything originates from chance* [ὥστ' ἀπὸ τύχης ἄπαντα ἔσται].<sup>109</sup>

Simply put, insofar as fortune is a matter of chance, then misfortune must be a matter of chance as well, and in effect everything must be a matter of chance. '[U]nexpectability conditions the very structure of the event',<sup>110</sup> as we saw Derrida declare, in 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*' and elsewhere, only to be met with outcries of relativism and nihilism. 'Would an event', he asks, 'that can be anticipated and therefore apprehended or comprehended, or one without an element of absolute encounter, actually be an event in the full sense of the word?'<sup>111</sup> Absolute chance – absolute necessity; that is, neither complete chaos, nor complete order, and yet both at once; an unconditional indeterminism, which 'could be called, by anachronism, the determinism of the universe.'<sup>112</sup> Everything is predetermined – by chance.

Even this, even the reason why:

[T]he starting-point of reason is not reason but *something superior to reason* [λόγου δ' ἀρχὴ οὐ λόγος, ἀλλὰ τι κρεῖττον].<sup>113</sup>

Aristotle surrenders, his analysis collapses. Philosophy as we know it ends right there and then. And Aristotle is prepared to take the fall. In his finest insight he gives in to the inevitable, to the impossible: 'something superior to reason', and hence superior to his analytical skills; it is what he will thenceforth rather call by the name of God: 'What,

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., pp. 465-7.

<sup>110</sup> Derrida, 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>113</sup> Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, pp. 466-7.

then, could be superior even to knowledge and to intellect, except God?’<sup>114</sup> Unreservedly, Aristotle admits his own essential blindness, the insuperable limit of reason: its very condition of possibility – chance. One cannot but believe in it, even if it renders one impossible. Chance gives rise to *and* prescribes reason; it prompts this very analysis *and* dictates its destiny; allowing for the possibility of reasoning, chance renders reasoning a mere effect of its unconditionally irreducible law. ‘[T]he principle of indeterminism is what makes the conscious freedom of man fathomable’,<sup>115</sup> as Derrida verifies, and the whole paradox is played out in the nuances of his careful wording: ‘fathomable’ – not possible; fathomable because impossible. Aristotle thinks of chance, but chance is why he thinks, chance is what makes him think what he thinks, chance precedes and triggers every single thought of his, fooling him into thinking that he thinks. In truth, this text will have never been his. All of his choices will have always been ‘imposed upon [him], in that chance offered itself for the choosing as if [he] had fallen upon it, thus leaving [him] with the illusion of a free will’,<sup>116</sup> to borrow Derrida’s avowal of defencelessness that sets off ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’.

‘This is why the melancholic even have dreams that are true’, Aristotle will not hesitate to add, pushing the paradox to its extreme, beyond reason, yet on reason’s behalf, ‘for it seems that when reason is fundamentally disengaged it has more strength’.<sup>117</sup> It is because everything is predetermined by chance, he maintains, because everything is necessarily, irreducibly unforeseeable, that some can actually predict and foresee the future; those without reason specifically: ‘For although irrational they

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 467.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>116</sup> Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’, p. 1.

<sup>117</sup> Aristotle, *The Eudemian Ethics*, pp. 468-9. [translation modified]



swiftly attain what belongs to the prudent and wise – prophetic skills.’<sup>118</sup> The gravity of Aristotle’s argument is almost unbearable, calling for the utmost earnestness; we have to take him at his word. To repeat: first of all, insofar as everything is predetermined, the prudent and wise philosopher reasons, then it must be possible to predict the future. And indeed, the prophetic ‘dreams’ of the ‘melancholic’ spirits in the Delphic oracle confirm just that. But why is it only they who have this ability? Because, secondly, insofar as everything is predetermined *by chance*, then in order to do so, to ‘discern aright the future *as well as the present*’, as he says, one must be able to reason with chance, with what exceeds reason: its starting point. One must be unreasonable: ‘For this quality discerns aright the future as well as the present, and these are the men whose reason is disengaged [καὶ ὧν ἀπολύεται ὁ λόγος οὗτοι].’<sup>119</sup> In order to comprehend existence in its totality, one must ‘disengage’ oneself from reason; which is to say, one must, above all, not be a philosopher. And indeed, the very failure of his discourse, his failure to account through reason for the ‘success of the lucky’, for ‘the cause of good fortune’, confirms just that. In order to know truth, and to know it for sure, to arrest the Law and make it one’s own, in order to fulfil, in other words, the ideal of three millennia of metaphysical speculation, transcendental questioning and positivist empiricism, Aristotle concludes, one must forsake reason. To attain reason’s end, ‘what belongs to the prudent and wise’, one must, above all, give up reason.

Derrida writes: ‘Plenitude is the end (the goal), but were it attained, it would be the end (death).’<sup>120</sup> And Geoffrey Bennington begins his essay ‘RIP’ with these prophetic words:

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., pp. 467. [translation modified]

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., pp. 467-8.

<sup>120</sup> Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p. 129.

Philosophy is a discourse that knows all about the future, or at least about *its* future. It knows, and has always known, that it has no future. Philosophy knows that the future is death. Philosophy is always going to die. Always has been going to die. Always will have been going to die. From the beginning, its future will have been its end: and from this end, its future will have been always to begin its ending again. Philosophy happens in this archeo-teleo-necrological solidarity. The end of philosophy is the end of philosophy.<sup>121</sup>

And so on to infinity. Which is to say, if philosophy *survives*, if it is not dead yet, still on its way to death, if it keeps on beginning its end, this is because its very trace defies its teleo-logical orientation, as Aristotle's discourse exemplarily demonstrates; it is because it renounces reason's end by reason of itself, remarking its limit with its every step. It is because reason owes to the other what belongs to itself. If philosophy remains possible, this is because, 'it knows', it will have always been impossible. If it still has a chance, this is because it still has none. And if one still believes in it, this is because, fortunately, it remains unbelievable.

### 3.6. William James: starting over

It is impossible to believe in chance. That nothing happens by chance, that everything happens within the limits of reason, or else, in the superstitious person's words, that everything happens for a reason, constitutes the very condition of rationality, indeed, reason *per se*. 'Nothing is without reason, no effect is without cause', as Leibniz's fundamental principle of reason states.<sup>122</sup> That is, as Derrida comments in his essay 'The Principle of Reason', 'for any truth – for any true

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<sup>121</sup> Geoffrey Bennington, 'RIP' in *Futures of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Richard Rand (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>122</sup> Qtd, in Derrida, 'The Principle of Reason', p. 10.

proposition, that is – a reasoned account is possible. “Omnis veritatis reddi ratio potest.” Or, to translate more literally, for any true proposition, reason can be rendered.’<sup>123</sup> And yet, that very condition, does it not also render reason impossible – other than itself? Does it not reduce rationality into yet another superstition, deferring its principle into a prior, superior source? ‘[W]hat does “render” mean with respect to reason? Could reason be something that gives rise to exchange, circulation, borrowing, debt, donation, restitution? But in that case, who would be responsible for that debt or duty, and to whom?’<sup>124</sup> Insofar as everything is attributable to a calculable cause, then reason itself must be likewise bound to a source that exceeds itself; insofar as existence in its entirety conforms to natural law, then human beings too must be mere spectres, living dead in a predetermined world; insofar as nothing can alter the shape and the course of this world, then free will is an illusion and one’s every act and deliberation is futile after all. An insoluble aporia: the determinist foundation of reason is incompatible with reason itself; the very condition of reason’s possibility is its impossibility.<sup>125</sup>

The prevalent view among commentators, as Richard Sorabji notes, is that the problem never occurred to Aristotle, ‘[r]egrettably, but inevitably’, since it ‘was not discovered until Hellenistic times, perhaps by Epicurus, who was over forty years junior

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<sup>123</sup> Derrida, ‘The Principle of Reason’, p. 10.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>125</sup> It is for this reason, perhaps, that is to say, in the name of reason, that Leibniz’s basic principle will have had to be supplemented from the start by the principle of identity/contradiction, which dictates that the negation of a true proposition must be false. In his remarkable essay ‘This Contradiction’, Paul Davies illuminates the irreducible import of Leibniz’s principle of identity/contradiction and shows why deconstruction should not be confused with yet another fruitless attempt to overcome it. See Paul Davies, ‘This Contradiction’ in *Futures: of Jacques Derrida*, ed. Richard Rand (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), pp. 18-64.

to Aristotle'.<sup>126</sup> 'This account', Sorabji maintains, 'misrepresents the situation';<sup>127</sup> and he is right of course. Not just because Aristotle was unfailingly preoccupied with reason's ends, as we just had occasion to verify through a close reading of *Eudemian Ethics*, and as Sorabji will also go on to demonstrate in his way with reference to a number of other excerpts from Aristotle's body of work, but more importantly, because the problem in question, the problem of the very possibility of philosophical questioning, will have never had to wait for its 'discovery' of course. To contextualize it in this manner under the pretence of historicist objectivity only serves to repress its irreducible primacy. Epicurus did not 'discover' the 'necessity of chance', any more than Aristotle was unaware of it. Epicurus was nonetheless, indeed, the first who unequivocally admitted its urgency and systematically pursued its implications; he was, in other words, the first who addressed the rational coherence of the universe *as a problem*, acknowledging that even if it is impossible to believe in chance, it is also impossible not to believe in it, that 'a principle of indeterminism is', indeed, it must be, 'what makes the conscious freedom of man fathomable', to recall Derrida's aphorism,<sup>128</sup> even if 'a principle of indeterminism' happens to challenge the basic principle of reason. A disciple of Democritus, the father of atomism, Epicurus introduced thus the idea of the *clinamen* as the 'supplementary deviation' of the world's atomic constitution, which 'alone can change the course of an imperturbable destination and an inflexible order', as Derrida's reading has it.<sup>129</sup> Propagating the Epicurean legacy, Lucretius will affirm:

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<sup>126</sup> Sorabji, *Necessity, Cause and Blame*, p. 243.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Derrida, *My Chances/Mes Chances*, p. 8.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

Moreover, if all movements are invariably interlinked, if new movement arises from the old in unalterable succession, if there is no *atomic swerve* to initiate movement that can annul the decrees of destiny and prevent the existence of an endless chain of causation, what is the source of this free will possessed by living creatures all over the earth?<sup>130</sup>

In the origin, there is chance; because so it must. ‘Such erring (elsewhere I call it “destinerring”)’ , Derrida will add, is alone what ‘can contravene in the laws of destiny, in conventions or contracts, in agreements of *fatum*.’<sup>131</sup> In the originary *clinamen* of the atomic elements that make up existence in its totality, in the ‘atomic swerve’ (*systrophé*) of the *littera* (letters), as Lucretius defines them, Derrida finds thus an antecedent of *destinerrance*, explicitly aligning deconstruction’s deviant course with the tradition of classical atomism. What is more, calling attention a little later to Plato’s sharp rejection of Democritus, he subtly suggests that one could actually read the history of philosophy, that is, everything that ‘philosophy’ appropriates in its Greek name, as an attempt to repress precisely that tradition, and with it the disconcerting consequences of its ‘discovery’. Our ‘common sense’, he proposes, is perhaps a symptom (from the Greek ‘*symptoma*’ meaning, as Derrida does not fail to note, coincidence – ‘that which is prone to fall (well or badly) with something else, that is, at the same time or in the same place as something else’<sup>132</sup>) of just this repression, a symptom of the repression of reason’s ‘supplementary deviation’; a ‘very large symptom’ indeed:

It is for us, in the Occident, the culture of common sense that is marked by a powerful scientifico-philosophic tradition, metaphysics, technics, the opposition of subject/object, and precisely a certain organization of

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<sup>130</sup> Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, ed. and trans. Martin Ferguson Smith (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1969), p. 41.

<sup>131</sup> Derrida, *My Chances/Mes Chances*, p. 7.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

the throw. Through several differentiated relays, this culture goes back at least to Plato, where the repression of Democritus perhaps leaves the trace of a very large symptom.<sup>133</sup>

One must believe in chance. But to believe in chance is to forgo reason's sovereignty and promise, its *arche* and *telos*; it is to surrender the remainder of one's declaration to the other. That is, one cannot, above all, believe in chance. To 'believe in chance' is *necessary* and *impossible* at once; what are we to do? As we said at the outset and demonstrated in the course of this chapter, philosophy has always had to assume as a consequence that it is possible both to believe in chance and to not believe in chance, to circumscribe 'belief in chance' appropriately so that its two possible meanings remain distinguishable, intact. Haunted by the irreducible tension between the origin vis-à-vis the autonomy of reason, the determinability of the universe vis-à-vis individual self-determination, philosophy has always been the attempt to surpass reason's principal impasse by arguing against it, if not outright ignoring it, avoiding rather than facing up to its dreadful aspect.

It is 'a quagmire of evasion' in William James's less subtle ruling, 'under which the real issue of fact has been entirely smothered'.<sup>134</sup> In one of his early lectures, delivered in 1884 and entitled 'The Dilemma of Determinism', the father of 'pragmatism' casts off thus all philosophical enquiry on the issue of determinism as a hollow wordplay which covers up or completely misses what is at stake. Philosophy, in James's eyes, wants to have it both ways. In accordance with a logic which he labels as 'soft-determinist', what is nowadays also called 'compatibilism', philosophy wants to maintain the indeterminability of human conduct, on the one hand, and the

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>134</sup> William James, 'The Dilemma of Determinism' in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York, London and Bombay: Longmans, 1897), p. 149.

determinability of the universe, on the other, the unpredictability of experience and the predictability of what is experienced. It wants to believe in chance in one sense, and not believe in it in another. In reality, however, James will argue, ‘the issue [...] is a perfectly sharp one, which no eulogistic terminology can smear over or wipe out. The truth *must* lie with one side or the other, and its lying with one side makes the other false.’<sup>135</sup> Driven by a characteristically American aspiration to talk straight and restore the purity of an overanalyzed subject and a misguided debate, James wipes the slate clean and starts over, offering us a summary outline of the problem’s essential parameters and constraints. One must either believe in chance or not. One must be either a determinist or an indeterminist. Either there is chance or there is no chance; simple as that.

What does determinism profess? It professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be. The future has no ambiguous possibilities bidden in its womb; the part we call the present is compatible with only one totality. Any other future complement than the one fixed from eternity is impossible. The whole is in each and every part, and welds it with the rest into an absolute unity, an iron block, in which there can be no equivocation or shadow of turning.<sup>136</sup>

‘There can be no equivocation or shadow of turning’: determinism excludes the possibility of a sovereign human consciousness, absolutely and unqualifiedly –it renders reason obsolete; there is no way one can amend its unambiguous ‘decree’. The claim to human self-determination within a predetermined universe is insubstantial; more than that, it is irrational. The privilege that reason accords to itself is arbitrary through and through; no matter how flimsy its foundational stone might be, it does not hold. An objective and impartial existence which sees without being seen, which explains the

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p. 151.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

other without being subject to explanation itself, which causes the other without having been caused by the other first, is simply impossible. To profess ‘freedom’ while holding on to determinism, James says, is mere ‘quibbling, and lets us, after the fashion of the soft determinists, make a pretense of restoring the caged bird to liberty with one hand, while with the other we anxiously tie a string to its leg to make sure it does not get beyond our sight.’<sup>137</sup> There is only *one* determinism, that is, one way of understanding determinism, good old-fashioned ‘hard determinism’, and to adhere to its law is to yield to its unnerving implications. As James will subsequently go to great lengths to demonstrate, to admit to the ‘iron block’ that is existence is to lay down one’s arms unconditionally and submit oneself to a world of ‘ethical indifference’.<sup>138</sup> For an essential and inescapable pessimism defines determinism. Regardless of the name it assumes, the claims it makes and the shape it eventually takes – ‘gnosticism’, ‘subjectivism’, ‘sensualism’, ‘sentimentalism’, ‘scientifism’, ‘idealism’ – ‘everywhere it fosters the fatalistic mood of mind.’<sup>139</sup> To believe in determinism is to give up on oneself.

But then again, is it not necessary to believe in determinism? What does the presumption of the universe’s orderliness, of its construction in accordance with a set of unbending principles, indicate, but the very point of departure of the pursuit of knowledge? What does the exclusion of chance safeguard but man’s capacity to unravel nature’s determinate structure and to uncover its laws? Is chance not precisely that, unbelievable? Indeed, as James admits,

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.



[t]he stronghold of the deterministic sentiment is the antipathy to the idea of chance. As soon as we begin to talk indeterminism to our friends, we find a number of them shaking their heads. This notion of alternative possibilities, they say, this admission that any one of several things may come to pass, is, after all, only a roundabout name for chance; and chance is something the notion of which no sane mind can for an instant tolerate in the world. What is it, they ask, but barefaced crazy unreason, the negation of intelligibility and law? And if the slightest particle of it exists anywhere, what is to prevent the whole fabric from falling together, the stars from going out, and chaos from recommencing her topsy-turvy reign?<sup>140</sup>

One must believe in chance; but to believe in chance is impossible. As the prevalent positivist spirit in James's day dictated, one has to accept determinism, even if 'determinism denies the ambiguity of future volitions, because it affirms that nothing future can be ambiguous.'<sup>141</sup> Under the pressure of this fatal necessity of necessity, James was suffocating: 'When I have felt like taking a free initiative', he avows in his diary, 'like daring to act originally, without carefully waiting for contemplation of the external world to determine all for me, suicide seemed the most manly form to put my daring into.'<sup>142</sup> Until one day, upon reading an essay by the French philosopher Charles Renouvier, it dawned on him: one *must* believe in chance – even if it is impossible. His long diary entry on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, 1870, which Robert D. Richardson so vividly reconstructs in a separate chapter of his *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*, reads indeed as the inauguration of that remarkable intellectual journey undertaken by one of the most innovative and influential thinkers in American history; as the invention of pragmatism – that is, the reinvention of Epicureanism, or else, the return of the repressed necessity of chance:

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p. 158.

<sup>142</sup> Qtd. in Robert D. Richardson, *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism* (New York, 2007), p. 120.

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's 2<sup>nd</sup> Essay and saw no reason why his definition of free will – the sustaining of a thought because I choose to when I might have other thoughts – need be the definition of an illusion. [...] My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will. [...] Not in maxims, not in *Anschauungen*, but in accumulated acts of thought lies salvation.<sup>143</sup>

James's commitment to the primacy of individual experience over objective knowledge, of faith over absolute truth, is evident throughout his oeuvre. However, it was in 'The Dilemma of Determinism' that his fundamental intellectual breakthrough eventually found its most faithful expression. So what if chance is impossible? So what if every discourse is inevitably prisoner to the implications of a fundamental deterministic assumption? And so what if its entrapment is the very premise of its existence? James sees no reason to hesitate. Once the threatening predicament of determinism is brought to light, what is one left with but the will to defy it? What hope is there, unless determinism is thrust aside, once and for all? 'Indeterminate future volitions *do* mean chance. Let us not fear to shout it from the house-tops if need be', he shouts out.<sup>144</sup> And what remains? There is chance.

That 'chance' whose very notion I am exhorted and conjured to banish from my view of the future as the *suicide of reason* [CD's emphasis] concerning it, that 'chance' is – what? Just this, – the chance that in moral respects the future may be other and better than the past has been. This is the only chance we have any motive for supposing to exist. Shame, rather, on its repudiation and its denial! For its presence is the vital air which lets the world live, the salt which keeps it sweet.<sup>145</sup>

To believe in reason is to believe in chance; this will be James's final verdict. To believe in the possibility of human consciousness, is to concede chance. One must

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<sup>143</sup> Richardson, *William James*, pp. 120-1.

<sup>144</sup> James, 'The Dilemma of Determinism', p. 158.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 178-9.

contain that which lies beyond reason, to embrace that which contradicts reason's very own foundation, reason's end. To believe in reason is to denounce reason. In order to survive, one must commit to the 'suicide of reason' in return. One cannot do otherwise: to believe in oneself, in the possibility of oneself as the one who says 'I believe' and thus appropriates the trace of one's faith, is to admit oneself as other. In the words of the poet: 'Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath'; which James in fact accidentally misquotes, substituting 'hazard' for 'forfeit', as if to illuminate thus the 'impotence' he speaks of, the impotence that a 'square' and 'resolute' surrender of reason to 'chance' brings about. To believe in reason is to allow even that, even 'chance' to 'hazard', even 'chance' as such to be taken over by chance, slip from one's firm grasp and be led astray. Even literature.

Whoever uses ['chance'] instead of 'freedom,' squarely and resolutely gives up all pretence to control the things he says are free. For *him*, he confesses that they are no better than mere chance would be. It is a word of *impotence*, and is therefore the only sincere word we can use, if, in granting freedom to certain things, we grant it honestly, and really risk the game. "*Who chooses me must give and forfeit all he hath.*"<sup>146</sup>

James's misquotation, it is important to note here, stems from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, where it figures as the inscription on the third of the three caskets out of which Portia's suitors are asked to choose one. The reward for whoever makes the right choice will be to become the husband of Portia:

This first of gold, who this inscription bears,  
 'Who chooseth me, shall gain what many men desire.'  
 The second silver, which this promise carries,  
 'Who chooseth me, shall get as much as he deserves.'  
 This third dull lead, with warning all as blunt,  
 'Who chooseth me, must give and hazard all he hath.'

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p. 180.

(Act 2, Scene 7, 4-9)<sup>147</sup>

In his paper 'The Theme of the Three Caskets' Freud explores the significance of this little scene and proposes that the three caskets here represent three women.<sup>148</sup> In this light, he then goes on to argue, the suitors' choice is actually analogous to King Lear's choice on how to divide his kingdom between his three daughters.<sup>149</sup> Now, Freud observes, similar scenes that involve '*a man's choice between three women*'<sup>150</sup> recur throughout a wide range of myths and fairy tales, and in all of them, as in both of Shakespeare's plays, the right choice is always the third one. And this third one, as Freud notes, happens to be consistently defined by her humility and her inconspicuousness; in *The Merchant of Venice* the right casket is, indeed, the casket of 'dull lead', while in *King Lear* it is the unassuming Cordelia who proves the most deserving daughter. From this characteristic, Freud will conclude that the third casket/woman represents 'Death itself, the Goddess of Death'. And he adds: 'But if the third of the sisters is the Goddess of Death, the sisters are known to us. They are the Fates, the Moerae, the Parcae or the Norns, the third of whom is called Atropos, the inexorable.'<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* [The New Cambridge Shakespeare], ed. M.M. Mahoud (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 110-11.

<sup>148</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The Theme of Three Caskets' [1913] in *Sigmund Freud: Art and Literature* [The Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14], trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickinson (London: Penguin, 1990), pp. 233-47.

<sup>149</sup> William Shakespeare, *King Lear* [The Annotated Shakespeare], ed. Burton Raffel (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid. p. 237.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p. 241.

In keeping with Freud's interpretation then – who curiously enough makes no mention of the writing inscribed on the casket of death – to choose 'chance' instead of 'freedom', as William James invites us, is precisely to choose absolute 'necessity', to submit to the scripture of the inexorable Atropos. Opting to 'hazard all he hath' James will indeed 'forfeit all he hath'; 'chance' is the choice of death, of no chance. 'No greater triumph of wish-fulfilment is conceivable', as Freud will observe. 'A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion.'<sup>152</sup> As *if* there was a choice, then, against philosophical portentousness, in defiance of humanistic presumptuousness, James 'freely' decides to surrender his 'freedom' instead. Everything happens on account of chance, he affirms, necessarily; 'we' are, by reason of the other, the other's envois, emissaries of our unsurpassable limits, consigned to our finitude – to come. The future is the promise of our inevitable end in the moment itself – already there.

The implications of this dramatic, exemplary gesture will have been cataclysmic, to say the least. And as it turns out, they will have also been graver than James would ever manage to bear. Gobsmacked by his own conclusions, it seems, horrified before the abyss, it will not be long, indeed, before he hastily retreats back into the safe, comfortable refuge of 'our ordinary unsophisticated view of things'. James is an indeterminist, indeed; but, for all his passion, only a 'soft' one after all.

Indeterminism, on the contrary, says that the parts have a *certain* amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. [...] Indeterminism thus denies the world to be one unbending unit of fact. It says there is a *certain* ultimate pluralism in it; and, so saying, it corroborates our ordinary unsophisticated view of things.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

<sup>153</sup> James, 'The Dilemma of Determinism', pp. 150-1.

James believes in chance, yes, but not in ‘actual chance’, as it turns out, not in chance as such, of course not, only in ‘a certain amount’ of it, just in one specific aspect of it. Which one? Human consciousness; because, as he adds, ‘*future human volitions* are as a matter of fact the only ambiguous things we are tempted to believe in’.<sup>154</sup> Truth is, he is not mistaken. Indeed, it would take a few more decades before philosophy tempted us to believe in the ambiguity of anything other than ‘future human volitions’, specifically in the ambiguity of everything that ‘exists’; at its most rigorous, it would take Derrida’s deconstruction of presence. But for the moment, one cannot help but wonder, how is James’s self-assured adherence to this partial indeterminism, his ‘belief in chance’ exclusively reserved for human reason, which can thereon freely appropriate it and turn it into its calculable fate, remaining thus master of itself in an otherwise predetermined universe, how is that then distinguishable from the compatibilist ‘soft determinism’ he has just denounced? Has ‘soft determinism’ not merely been transformed into ‘soft indeterminism’? What would be the difference between the two?<sup>155</sup>

Not only does ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’ fail to propose a solution to the dilemma of determinism then, it does not even get to pose that dilemma in the first place, to delineate alternatives between which one could decide. Not only does James fail to rewrite the beginning, he does not even manage to take a single step ahead. The issue is not as ‘sharp’ as it seemed to be at first. Albeit necessary, chance happens to be,

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 178.

<sup>155</sup> Richard Gale’s extensive research on William James illuminates the inherent and constitutive tensions in the Jamesian corpus. As Gale convincingly demonstrates, James’s work is an impossible attempt to devise a ‘have-it-all’ ethical scientism grounded on individual experience and belief, to reconcile an active and a passive orientation toward the world, to unify the ‘Promethean Pragmatist’ with the ‘Anti-Promethean Mystic’, as he puts it. See Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

fortunately enough, impossible. And ‘truth’, together with our absolute ‘impotence’, will therefore have to remain in suspense.

But although, in discussing the word ‘chance,’ I may at moments have seemed to be arguing for its real existence, I have not meant to do so *yet*. We have not *yet* ascertained whether this be a world of chance or no; at most, we have agreed that it seems so. [...] [F]rom any strict theoretical point of view, the question is insoluble.<sup>156</sup>

It is true; what all philosophical enquiries on determinism/indeterminism veil/unveil is precisely the impossibility to resolve the question of the beginning. It is impossible to believe in chance – it is impossible not to believe in chance. James is absolutely right, and the deconstructive nerve of his discourse, before an audience, let us not forget, imbued with reassuring appeals to ‘objectivity’ and the promise of limitless scientific progress, is deserving of infinite praise. Reason is groundless, James reminds us, its condition is aporetic. And what the impending failure to decide one way or another, once and for all to resolve ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’, calls for is not the means to escape its urgency but the acknowledgement of its constitutive inevitability and hence the assumption of one’s responsibility before this, reason’s essential limitation.

Now, the only question is, what would this responsibility consist in? What is the horizon of a discourse like James’s or like this one was supposed to have been? For some of us, as this chapter sought to argue, our responsibility would consist in making sure that the question remains precisely suspended at all cost, in unconditionally allowing for the abyssal effects of this interface of necessity and chance, while pursuing their implications with the utmost thoroughness. As difficult and disconcerting as it might be to accept a paradoxical law, it is imperative that we follow through its

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<sup>156</sup> James, ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’, p. 159.

consequences. This is the philosophical call, the call to philosophy. We cannot think otherwise ‘merely to be happy or reconciled’. We owe this to the other.

For William James, however, accepting that the problem at hand is insoluble and the question unanswerable means that we should rather learn to ignore it. Our responsibility, as he perceives it, not unlike the philosophic tradition he professes to oppose, is to *act* in spite of the problem, to pretend there has never been a problem to begin with; to be content that we can still speak, that we are still here, albeit blind and alone, futureless: ‘I consequently find myself, at the end of this long talk, obliged to state my conclusions in an altogether personal way’, James avows. ‘This personal method of appeal seems to be among the very conditions of the problem; and the most anyone can do is to confess as candidly as he can the grounds for the faith that is in him, and leave his example to work on others as it may.’<sup>157</sup> As we saw earlier, Richard Rorty and the pragmatic tradition will follow James on that to the letter. Since the ‘Dilemma of Determinism’ is irresolvable, namely since both determinism and indeterminism are equally unbelievable – one must believe in chance; one cannot believe in chance – then what one believes in remains ultimately insignificant. Since to believe in chance is no more unreasonable than to not believe in chance, since ‘to believe in chance’ is irreducibly double, unsustainable, unverifiable, that is, since ‘to believe in chance can just as well indicate that one believes in the existence of chance, as that one does *not*, above all, believe in chance’, then one might as well ‘believe in chance’ and leave it at that. Since one cannot get it right either way, then one might as well have it both ways; no one will ever know the difference anyway. These are the last words of James’s essay: ‘It is *fortunate* for the winding up of this controversy that in every discussion with

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., p. 176.



determinism this *argumentum ad hominem* can be its adversary's last word.<sup>158</sup> James 'believes in chance'.

But if one's belief is necessarily unverifiable, if it is actually legitimized by reason of its unverifiability, what distinguishes it from the belief in pure fiction, from any belief in anything whatsoever, from the mad belief in the absolutely unreasonable, for example? What separates in this case James's 'belief in chance' from the 'belief in chance' of some 'patent superstition'? Well, James will disagree, his is certainly more believable though, is it not? In conclusion to his famous essay 'The Will to Believe', James misquotes Mark Twain writes:

The freedom to "believe what we will" you apply to the case of some patent superstition; and the faith you think of is the faith defined by the schoolboy when he said: "Faith is when you believe something that you know ain't true". I can only repeat that this is misapprehension. *In concreto*, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.<sup>159</sup>

The aphorism James misquotes, in order to quickly dismiss as untruthful, stems from Pudd'nhead Wilson's New Calendar, one of Mark Twain's fictive creations. Entries from Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar are used as epigraphs in each chapter of Twain's novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, where Wilson figures as a minor character.<sup>160</sup> Surviving that novel, Wilson returns, however, and entries from his New Calendar introduce now the chapters of Twain's non-fictional *Following the Equator*. Chapter XII's epigraph reads: 'There are those who scoff at the schoolboy, calling him frivolous and shallow: Yet it

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid. p. 183.

<sup>159</sup> James, 'The Will to Believe', p. 29.

<sup>160</sup> Mark Twain, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, with *Those Extraordinary Twins* (Hartford: American Publishing, 1894).

was the schoolboy who said “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”<sup>161</sup> No, no, James protests in disbelief, that ‘ain’t true’; that is just fiction. And the schoolboy, of course, is glad they agree.

Indeed, every discourse entails an affirmation of faith in chance that disrupts its identity and undermines its authority: the irreducible, ineradicable chance that it is meant otherwise, that it is understood otherwise – as superstition, as we saw in this chapter, or as fiction, as we will validate in the next one. Every discourse entails within itself, as a necessary part of its structure, the chance that it is literary, or else, in what amounts to the same – as Mark Twain’s aphorism so brilliantly demonstrates – the chance that literature is not merely, entirely literary.

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<sup>161</sup> Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World* (Hartford and New York: American Publishing, 1897), p. 132.

## 4. LITERARY CHANCE

Perhaps all I wanted to do was to confide or confirm my taste (probably unconditional) for literature, more precisely for literary writing.<sup>1</sup>

### 4.1. Definition

In Book V of *Metaphysics* Aristotle defines an ‘accident’ as follows: ‘Accident [συμβεβηκός] means that which applies to something and can be truly asserted, but neither of necessity nor usually, as if, for example, while digging a hole for a plant one found treasure.’<sup>2</sup> That sure seems straightforward enough at first glance not to warrant any further enquiry. But what if, we might ask, not to complicate matters for complexity’s sake but to up the stakes, what if that someone who discovers treasure while digging a hole for a plant happens to be a fictional character? What if the event itself, the discovery of the treasure, happens to form part of a fictional narrative? Shall we still call it an ‘accident’ then? And what if, to add a further twist to this hypothetical question, what if that fictional narrative was actually written by a philosopher, for example Aristotle, as a supplement to his philosophical discourse, with the intention of demonstrating precisely what an accident really is, of defining ‘accident’ in its truth?

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Passions: “An Oblique Offering”’ in *On the Name*, trans. David Wood, ed. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 28.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book I-IX [The Loeb Classical Library], trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1933), p. 289. ‘Coincidence’ would have been a better translation perhaps for Aristotle’s ‘συμβεβηκός’, but I have retained ‘accident’ in keeping with the overwhelming consensus among translators.

Surely, the narrative that represents an ‘accident’ cannot be accidental. The man *had to* discover a treasure, at least something he was not expecting to find, or else the event would not count as an accident to begin with. In order to be faithful to what it stands for, in other words, the purpose and the significance of Aristotle’s narrative must be consistent, of necessity – unlike what it stands for (‘neither of necessity nor usually’). Like the designation of a lie or of a secret, the narrative that displays and so exemplifies an accident must betray itself, in order to be itself; its truthfulness (‘it can be truly asserted’) hangs on its untruthfulness. And what is consistently, of necessity, untruthful, Aristotle conjectures, save fiction? ‘As if, for example, while digging a hole for a plant one found treasure.’

As we had occasion to argue in more detail in the course of the previous chapter, for Aristotle – and ever since Aristotle – an event is considered an ‘accident’ insofar as its cause happens to be unknown at the moment of its occurrence; not that it *lacks* a cause, however, a determinable and retraceable source. ‘Accident’ is merely the name we give to what *we*, from *our* perspective, on account of *our* ignorance or ineptitude, will have failed to anticipate. ‘This – the finding of treasure –’, Aristotle goes on to clarify, ‘is an accident *to the man who dug the hole*’.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, the accident only happens to him, in his eyes; it is not devoid of reason in itself. *He* does not know that a treasure is really buried there, waiting for him, that he is in fact destined to discover that treasure, as soon as he gets to digging that hole. ‘Therefore, there is no definite cause for an accident, but a chance cause, that is, an indefinite one.’<sup>4</sup> And Aristotle adds now another example, another imaginary set-up:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. [translation modified]

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 291. [translation modified]

Going to Aegina was an accident for a man, if he went not in order to get there, but because he was carried out of his way by a storm or captured by pirates. The accident has happened or exists, not in virtue of the subject's nature, however, but of something else; for the storm was the cause of his coming to a place for which he was not sailing, in this case Aegina.<sup>5</sup>

Again, the accident only exists from the subject's perspective; it does not lack a perfectly reasonable, perfectly measurable cause; it just so happens that its cause is beyond the subject's control. Strictly speaking, then, there is no such thing as an accident *per se*. In truth, everything comes about of necessity. 'Accident' is a fiction, Aristotle proposes, an illusion, untruth; henceforth it is definable only in and as fiction, re-presentable exclusively by fictional narratives. For example, by the story of a man who thinks that discovering a treasure while digging a hole for a plant was a matter of chance, because he did not know in advance that a treasure was already buried where he dug, or that of another, who thinks that going to Aegina was a matter of chance, because he did not anticipate the impending storm.

In order to verify the 'accident' in its truth, to ascertain namely that it is untrue, that what appears to happen in and of itself, still has, as much as everything else, a determinable cause, Aristotle calls upon fiction. Not the most reliable witness, one would think, but Aristotle is not particularly bothered about that; because fiction does not have to answer to any questions or undergo any sort of scrutiny. Since its purpose is simply to exemplify the fictitious nature of the accident, then it only has to present itself, to exhibit its fictitiousness, and its job is done, the case is sealed. Provided of course that everyone understands what fiction is, that its significance is agreed upon in advance; provided, that is, that fiction *truly, of necessity, consistently*, represents the untruthful, the illusory *as such*.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. [translation modified]

As with every definition, the definability of the one, of the text defined, entails the transparency of the other, of the text that defines. And so, Aristotle's definition of the accident in and as fiction entails accordingly the transparency, the interpretative determinability, of the fictional narratives that represent it. In order to exemplify the other, an example must first of all be exemplary of itself. And indeed, so Aristotle presumes, his little stories speak for themselves; they attest to fiction as such. Presupposing, that is, that we all know what fiction stands for, that it stands for that which *appears* to happen in and of itself, for an event we could never have seen coming (Aristotle's narrative, discovering a treasure, going to Aegina), one that remains nonetheless attributable to a reasonable cause, to what has made it possible in the first place (Aristotle's intention to represent an accident, the presence of the treasure just where it is found, the storm or pirates). Aristotle's conception of an accident, in short, as something with an indefinite yet *post facto* determinable cause, relies on his preconception of fiction, as something with an indefinite yet *post facto* determinable cause. The distinction between chance and necessity is contingent upon the presumed lucidity of the distinction between truth and fiction, reality and illusion. As a consequence, the definition of the accident can be seen as the definition *par excellence*. It attests to the very condition of definability in general, to the very possibility of *logos*: accidents are fiction; in truth, there are no accidents; in truth, nothing happens by chance; and especially not fiction.

To put in question the commonsensical conception of chance, as this thesis has been trying to do, is therefore, in the first place and above all, to put in question our conception of fiction, the stability of the limit that separates truth from fiction. Perhaps, this chapter will suggest, fiction means something else. Perhaps it is not a necessary 'accident'. Perhaps it is irreducible to a preceding cause, to an identifiable meaning or

an intention beyond itself. Which is to say, what happens in fiction does not happen of necessity; despite appearances, the man of Aristotle's imagination was not supposed to find a treasure. Because an 'accident' is not definable; rather, it is bound to remain unrepresentable – accidental.

To facilitate this discussion we will turn to a fictional text, one that incidentally, and appropriately enough, happens to tell the story of a man who discovered treasure while digging a hole. His name is William Legrand, the title of the story is 'The Gold-Bug' and its author is Edgar Allan Poe. What is most intriguing about this story is that Legrand himself, as he confides to the story's narrator, is convinced that the series of events that led him to the discovery of the treasure were anything but accidental. Like Aristotle in fact, Legrand believes that the narrative itself in which he partakes is necessary, an 'accident' only to the untrained eye of the credulous reader. The fictitious counterpart of the Greek philosopher, as it turns out, is a superstitious zany old recluse. A thorough examination of his conviction, alongside an in-depth analysis of Derrida's many writings on the singularity of the literary text, will eventually bring into question its presumed truthfulness, and with it the presumably self-evident truthfulness of Aristotle's definition of the accident. In the end, and by way of confirmation of our conclusions, we will turn to another story by Edgar Allan Poe, entitled 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', which likewise affirms and thereby casts doubt on the necessity of the events it recites.

## **4.2. Presentiment**

'The Gold-Bug' recounts the events of two days, a month apart. They coincide with the two separate visits of the story's narrator to his friend, William Legrand, a

rather eccentric fellow residing in a secluded little hut on Sullivan's Island, in South Carolina, ever since, as the narrator deems necessary to inform us, 'I first, *by mere accident*, made his acquaintance.'<sup>6</sup> The events of the first day appear relatively insignificant on the surface. Legrand welcomes his friend to his abode and tells him of a particularly rare beetle, a *scarabaeus*, golden in colour, that he and his loyal servant, Jupiter, discovered just a few hours earlier. Dismayed that he cannot show it to him straight away, since he has already lent it to someone else, Legrand draws a sketch of it instead, which, as the narrator observes, bears a great resemblance to the outline of a human skull.

A month later the narrator receives a letter from his friend requesting that he hurries back to his hut as a matter of urgency. As soon as he gets there, Legrand invites him and Jupiter to follow him in the middle of the forest and then asks them to assist him in digging a hole underneath a large tree. The narrator and Jupiter begrudgingly comply, convinced at this point that Legrand has simply gone mad. To their astonishment, however, their labours will bring into surface a huge treasure trove, buried there by the notorious pirate Captain Kidd a few hundred years ago and lying undiscovered ever since. After helping him to transfer the treasure back to the hut, the utterly befuddled narrator now presses Legrand to explain how he knew of the

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<sup>6</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Gold-Bug' [1843] in *Tales and Sketches; vol. 2: 1843-1849*, ed. Thomas Ollive Mabbott (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 807. It is worth noting that the narrator of Poe's Dupin trilogy also met the stories' protagonist by accident, as he conveys in 'The Murder in the Rue Morgue': 'Our first meeting was at an obscure library in the Rue Montmartre, where the accident of our both being in search of the same very rare and very remarkable volume brought us into closer communion'. This forms only the first of a list of coincidences that connect 'The Gold-Bug' with Poe's Dupin trilogy, as we will verify in due course. See Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' [1841] in *Tales and Sketches; vol. 1: 1831-1842*, pp. 531-2.



treasure's presence just where it was found. And in response, Legrand proceeds to narrate to him the events of the first day once more, this time in more detail, thereby revealing to him, and to the reader, their real, previously unnoticed significance. 'The Gold-Bug' is thereby structured as a detective story. Considering, moreover, the indubitable similarities between the characters of William Legrand and Monsieur Dupin, it is therefore not unjustifiably classed as one of Poe's 'tales of ratiocination', although in this case, as we will see, it is chance that does most of the ratiocinating.

So it all began with the gold-bug. It was during one of his frequent excursions along the coast of Sullivan's Island that Legrand, with Jupiter as always at his side, came across this unique *scarabaeus*. 'Upon my taking hold of it', he says,

it gave me a sharp bite, which caused me to let it drop. Jupiter, with his accustomed caution, before seizing the insect which had flown towards him, looked about him for a leaf or something of that nature, by which to take hold of it. It was at this moment that his eyes, and mine also, fell upon [a] scrap of parchment, which I then supposed to be paper. It was lying half buried in the sand, a corner sticking up.<sup>7</sup>

On their way home, with the *scarabaeus* now securely wrapped in this parchment, Legrand and Jupiter happen to come across Lieutenant G—, who begs Legrand to lend him the beetle so he can examine it more closely. 'On my consenting he thrust it forthwith into his waistcoat pocket, without the parchment in which it had been wrapped, and which I had continued to hold in my hand during his inspection. [...] [W]ithout being conscious of it, I must have deposited the parchment in my own pocket.'<sup>8</sup> It is on the evening of that same day, 'a day of remarkable chilliness',<sup>9</sup> that the story's narrator happened to pay him a visit in his hut. Legrand excitedly tells his friend

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 830.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 808.

of his discovery, but since the *scarabaeus* is with Lieutenant G–, he decides to draw a sketch of its unusual shape. He looks for some piece of paper on his desk and in his drawers, but curiously enough, he finds none. Reaching now into his waistcoat pocket ‘hoping to find an old letter’<sup>10</sup> his hand falls upon the parchment. As soon as he is done with the drawing, he hands the parchment over to his friend; at that very moment, though, his dog happens to enter the room, quickly leaping upon the narrator’s shoulders. While caressing the dog with his left hand, his right, ‘holding the parchment, was permitted to fall listlessly between [his] knees and in close proximity to the fire’,<sup>11</sup> which Legrand had happened to light ‘on the *sole* day of all the year in which it has been, or may be, sufficiently cool for fire’.<sup>12</sup> Now, the heat from the fire happens to reveal the outline of a skull inscribed as it were on the back of the parchment by human hand and with a particular substance that renders it invisible while the material is cool, ‘but again become[s] apparent upon the reapplication of heat’.<sup>13</sup> The narrator sees the painted skull but does not realize its significance; holding the parchment upside down he presumes that it is his friend’s drawing of the *scarabaeus*. Legrand, who knows better of course, opts to let him think that and resolves to examine the parchment in more detail after his friend departs. As he explains:

The fact is, I felt irresistibly impressed with a presentiment of some vast good fortune impending. I can scarcely say why. Perhaps, after all, it was rather a desire than an actual belief; –but do you know that Jupiter’s silly words, about the bug being of solid gold, had a remarkable effect on my fancy? And then the series of accidents and coincidences –these were so *very* extraordinary.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 830.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 832.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 833.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 832.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 833. [original emphasis]

Recalling thus the long ‘series of accidents and coincidences’ that have brought this mysterious parchment into his possession and its secret to light, Legrand is overtaken by an irrational ‘presentiment’. What are the chances, he marvels? From the lucky discovery of this unique *scarabaeus*, to the chance encounter with Lieutenant G—, to the narrator’s visit to his hut, to the lack of paper from his desk space, to the unusually chilly weather, to the perfectly timed entry of the dog into the room, so many disparate factors had to conspire in order for him to find, hold on to and eventually ‘read’ this parchment, that it just seems impossible to attribute them all to mere chance. The actual likelihood of everything turning out the way it did is just so infinitesimal that Legrand cannot help but feel it has to be significant, necessary; as if he was meant to, in other words, as if there was a reason, a purpose behind it all, as if *this* were his destiny.

Which, of course, it is. As one will observe, Legrand happens to be absolutely right, his superstitious hunch spot-on. He may not be able to realize this, but as we know, the series of accidents and coincidences on which he muses were anything but accidental; indeed, they were ‘meant to’ happen, forming as it were the necessary correlative of none other than (let us refrain from saying the author’s intentions – the one who writes) the text entitled ‘The Gold-Bug’ – the writing as such, which causes them one by one by reciting them, which necessitates them by making them possible in the first place, for the first time; the text, that will have been their only chance; obviously so.

As it happens to happen, upon closer inspection and with the reapplication of heat, the parchment will reveal a few lines of peculiar symbols and characters inscribed on one of its corners, which Legrand presumes to form a cipher. And since he happens to be an expert in solving the most abstruse cryptographs, it is not long before he works

out this one. As it happens, it contains Captain Kidd's precise instructions regarding the burial place of his enormous treasure. Legrand's presentiment is thus vindicated; as it had to be, of course. Indeed, as one will confirm, he was supposed to find that treasure. Just as with every other incident that 'The Gold-Bug' recounts, so the fortunate outcome of its protagonist's adventure is but a necessary accident, meant to happen the way it is narrated, since it happened only insofar as it is narrated in this way. Legrand is right; nothing happened by chance; nothing just happened to happen; it was written this way.

Including, of course, Legrand's remarkable insight itself; including the truth. As one might further point out, insofar as all of the events in 'The Gold-Bug' are necessary, in that they are fabricated, insofar as they are indeed *predetermined*, then so is Legrand's '*pre-sentiment*' that they are; by the same token, this too must have come about of necessity. In a way then, in granting significance to his 'chances', Legrand is also acknowledging his own insignificance, relinquishing the right to his own belief. What he affirms, ultimately, what he believes in, is that what he believes in is inevitable, dictated by the other, fateful; a compulsory belief in its compulsoriness, so to speak, '*irresistibly*' impressed upon his fancy, as he himself admits. And naturally so, for it so happens that this presentiment *is* inexorably impressed upon his fancy, on himself from beyond himself, through the writing which institutes himself as much as, at the same time and with the same movement, it substitutes his sentiment, through the fancy out of which his fancy is constituted. I could not help myself, says Legrand; I could not think otherwise. That is, of course, the truth; for as we know, it had to happen this way; this is what he was meant to say. What? That it had to happen this way; that this is what he was meant to say. The effect of the truth is the effect of the truth: incontestable.

But to whom does the truth belong then? Where does it stem from and where does it come to rest? I could not be otherwise, says the text; it is necessary, it is said – necessarily. Indeed; but whose testimony is this? Who signs it? Obviously not Edgar Allan Poe, who speaks on behalf of the other and in the other's name, in this case Legrand; nor Legrand, of course, who readily perceives he owes himself to the other's voice, in this case that of Edgar Allan Poe. It would appear effectively that the truth belongs rather to the text *itself*, to a self-reflexive text then, which owns up evidently to its unconditional, absolute subjection to the other's determination, its only chance, to the necessity of what it unveils. The truth, it would appear, is founded upon and to be found in Poe's story. Legrand's statement itself *facilitates* it.

And yet, just as we are about to consign all this to a textual irony, at best to a metafictional effect (we will come back to this) and move on, a question impresses itself irresistibly upon our fancy: is it possible that a text which by its own admission and by all accounts is artificial, fictional, could ever constitute at the same time the locus and the purveyor of truth? What safeguards the truthfulness of the truth if it has to go by way of literature in order to present itself, if it has to remain in hiding in order to unveil itself, if it can only unveil itself, in fact, insofar as it remains in hiding?

#### **4.3. The truth of the lure**

'*That* would be the summit of the illusionist's art: through one of his fictive creations *to truly delude* us', Jacques Lacan will posit in response. Just like Freud, who frequently referred his findings to the authority of the poets, Lacan's influential 'Seminar on the "Purloined Letter"' also finds truth itself, the truth of psychoanalytic theory of course,

portrayed within the elaborate contours of another of Poe's famous short stories.<sup>15</sup> The 'secret to which truth has always initiated her lovers', Lacan maintains reassuringly, crediting Heidegger's meditations on '*aletheia*' for its disclosure, is that 'it is in hiding that she offers herself to them *most truly*'.<sup>16</sup> That is to say, the fact that a text alone, and a fictional one for that matter, safeguards the truthfulness of the truth should not be a cause for concern; on the contrary. Truth is made adequate to itself, identical to that of which it speaks, *causa sui* (cause and effect of itself), only through the symbolic exchange that secures its proper course, its singular destination back to itself. More simply, in order to reveal itself, to speak of itself, truth *must* veil itself in language. Come to think of it, it cannot *be* otherwise. Truth *must* assume the form of a narrative; it cannot but 'declare itself in a structure of fiction'.<sup>17</sup>

'I, the truth, speak: I am a text; I am the necessary effect of the other's intent', Legrand avers. To which the analyst responds: 'I, the truth, speak: this is the truth'.<sup>18</sup> Hence 'there is so little opposition between this *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* in its nudity', as Lacan states elsewhere – after Freud, after Heidegger.<sup>19</sup> This essential correspondence between truth and fiction does not, however, render the distinction between the two unverifiable. In fact, it does not even question the necessity and the stability of the limit

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, ed. John P. Muller and William J. Richardson, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1988), p. 37. [original emphasis]

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 37. [original emphasis]

<sup>17</sup> Qtd. in Jacques Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité' in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press), p. 467.

<sup>18</sup> Derrida employs this formulation ('I, the truth, speak') in the course of two long footnotes that seek to capture and reconstitute Lacan's notion of the truth as a symptom of speech. See Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', p. 471, p. 486.

<sup>19</sup> Qtd. in Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', p. 467.

that sustains the distinction's operability. What it does, undoubtedly, is destroy the dream of its objectifiability. Insofar as the truthfulness of the truth is not predicated upon its conformity with an external 'reality', with something beyond itself, beyond the signifier, it must be predicated upon its conformity with itself. Lacan writes: 'Thus it is from elsewhere than the Reality with which it is concerned that the Truth takes its guarantee: it is from Speech (*la parole*). Just as it is from Speech that it receives the mark which institutes it in a structure of fiction.'<sup>20</sup> And in Derrida's faithful rendering of Lacan's speech: 'The truth, which is what must be refound [*retrouvé*], therefore is not an object beyond the subject, is not the adequation of speech to an object but the adequation of full speech to itself, its proper authenticity, the conformity of its act to its original essence.'<sup>21</sup> This is then why the truth is bound to remain hidden from the subject's consciousness, even at the moment, especially then, that he pronounces it – just as Legrand is bound to remain blind to the truthfulness of his presentiment. The truth, in its truth, that is the difference between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*, can only be authenticated by the other, by the reader or the analyst, who is thus 'the master of truth',<sup>22</sup> as long as, of course, he 'knows how to read it'.<sup>23</sup> 'I, the truth, speak: I am a fiction', Legrand avers. To which the analyst responds: 'I, the truth, speak: this is the truth'.

Such would be the fundamental logic behind the Lacanian 'system of speech, or the system of truth',<sup>24</sup> as Derrida calls it, which justifies, as Lacan writes in all apparent seriousness, 'our referring, without malice, to a number of imaginary heroes as real

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 468.

<sup>21</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', pp. 470-1.

<sup>22</sup> Qtd. in Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', p. 458.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', p. 476.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 474. [original emphasis]

characters’.<sup>25</sup> Unsurprisingly enough, Derrida will remain unconvinced. His seminal essay ‘Le Facteur de la Vérité’ painstakingly analyses the ‘Seminar on the “Purloined Letter”’ with reference to the entire Lacanian oeuvre and casts doubt precisely on the presumed ‘transparency of intersubjective dialectics’, as he shrewdly sums up Lacan’s thesis.<sup>26</sup> ‘The double, repetition, recording, and the mimeme in general’, Derrida points out, ‘are excluded from this system, along with the entire graphematic structure they imply’.<sup>27</sup> Like every system, not to mention every truth, Lacan’s discourse is inevitably haunted by the possibility, the ‘uncontrollable threat and anxiety [of] all double simulacra’.<sup>28</sup> And this is so even when, especially when, it turns to fiction in order to verify its truthfulness, when it finds itself confirmed and exemplified by a fictional text.

The final word is that, when all is said and done, there is, at the origin or the end (proper course, circular destination), a word which is not feigned, a meaning which, through all imaginable fictional complications, does not trick, or which at that point tricks truly, again teaching us the truth of the lure. At this point, the truth permits the analyst to treat fictional characters as real, and to resolve, at the depth of the Heideggerian meditation on truth, the problem of the literary text which sometimes led Freud (more naively, but more surely than Heidegger and Lacan) to confess his confusion.<sup>29</sup>

‘When all is said and done’, Derrida argues, what safeguards the truthfulness of the truth and so the possibility of its systematization, is the idealization of the signifier, the identifiability and indivisibility of the letter (*phone*), that puts truth on stage and thus ‘ensures its proper course toward the proper place’.<sup>30</sup> In other words, what ensures the

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<sup>25</sup> Lacan, ‘Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”’, p. 37.

<sup>26</sup> Derrida, ‘Le Facteur de la Vérité’, p. 476.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 472.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 466.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., pp.466-7.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 462.



adequation of the truth to its narrative form, to the text that veils/unveils it, is the assumption that this form is necessary and authentic, and that its meaning is therefore dependable. ‘Formalism and hermeneutic semanticism always support one another’, Derrida notes insightfully.<sup>31</sup> It is not by chance, as he will show, that Lacan forcefully disregards the significance of ‘The Purloined Letter’s’ narrator, the ‘invisible, but structurally irreducible, frame around the narration’,<sup>32</sup> reducing thereby the narrating act which posits the truth to a mere “commentary” that “doubles” the drama, [...] with no specific intervention of its own, like a transparent element, a general diaphanousness.’<sup>33</sup> Similarly, to come back to ‘The Gold-Bug’, what ensures the truthfulness of Legrand’s ‘presentiment’ – that the events he experiences are not accidental – is no more than our motivated presupposition that the events he experiences, including that statement itself, are indeed not accidental; in other words, that what the story’s narrator relates is exactly what happened, hence what had to happen, or else, in what amounts to the same, that what is narrated could not have been narrated otherwise; that the narrative that goes by the title ‘The Gold-Bug’ and what this narrative narrates, the ‘how’ and the ‘what’, the signifier and the signified, are one and the same.

But is not literature precisely that which could have always been narrated otherwise? Isn’t the literary event precisely unverifiable? How can we ever be sure that the story’s narrator (and every story has at least one), whose writing filters not only Legrand’s words, but everything we come to know of, is relating to us exactly what happened and in the way that it happened? Especially so when that narrator happens to take part in the events he narrates. The unreliability of the narrator is not one possibility

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 432.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 431.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 428.

among others, a deception that one can identify or an accident whose effects one can calculate and evade. It is the structural condition of narrative.

Some thirty years after 'Le Facteur de la Vérité' and in response to Blanchot's little *recit* entitled 'The Instant of my Death', but quite possibly with Lacan's 'Seminar' still also in mind, Derrida reminds us that

literature can say anything, accept anything, receive anything, suffer anything, and simulate everything; it can even feign a trap, the way modern armies know how to set false traps; these traps pass themselves off as real traps and trick the machines designed to detect simulations under even the most sophisticated camouflage.<sup>34</sup>

Perhaps, that is, literature is playing a trick on the analyst. Perhaps Legrand's implicit, seemingly inadvertent, avowal of the truth – that it is a fiction – is a trap, designed to fool our critical machines, our systems of truth, into thinking that it is a 'real' trap. Is it not possible, indeed, that the text is actually feigning its self-consciousness, that it is simulating the truth? Just when we think we have made the text speak the truth, confess that it lies, we find ourselves wondering, and rightly so, inevitably, whether this might be yet another of its lies. Always one step ahead of us, like the schoolboy who always won in the game of even and odd,<sup>35</sup> is it not always possible that the text is deluding us into thinking that it is 'truly deluding' us?

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Demeure: Fiction and Testimony* with Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 29.

<sup>35</sup> Poe's Dupin of 'The Purloined Letter' refers to the story of a boy who could always guess correctly whether his schoolmates were holding an even or an odd number of marbles in their hand by a mirroring process that enabled him to successfully identify with their thought process and thus anticipate their actions. See Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Purloined Letter' [1844] in *Tales and Sketches; vol. 2: 1843-1849*, p. 984.

We will never know. ‘The problem of the literary text’, as Derrida suggests, is not resolvable. The text which proclaims to have resolved it, to have grasped ‘truth itself’ as the ‘truth of the lure’, is not to be trusted. Because the text in which it finds ‘truth itself’ in its truth, is by definition untrustworthy. ‘I, the truth, speak: it was supposed to happen this way; this is what I was meant to say’, Legrand avers. To which the analyst responds: ‘I, the truth, speak: this is the truth’; unless he is wrong; either one.

This is how Lacan concludes his ‘Seminar’: ‘Thus it is that what the “purloined letter”, nay, the “letter in sufferance”, means is that a letter always arrives at its destination.’<sup>36</sup> To which Derrida responds: ‘Not that the letter never arrives at its destination, but it belongs to the structure of the letter to be capable, always, of not arriving. And without this threat [...] the circuit of the letter would not even have begun. But with this threat, the circuit can always not finish.’<sup>37</sup>

In this manner, Derrida is not simply ‘opposing the unsystematizable to the systematized, “chance” to psychoanalytical “determinism”, or the “undecidable” to the “destination”’, as Barbara Johnson’s analysis of his and Lacan’s readings of ‘The Purloined Letter’ would have us believe.<sup>38</sup> And she would have us believe so, it should be noted, not as a result of her misunderstanding ‘Le Facteur de la Vérité’ – as is clearly the case, for example, with Irene Harvey and her contribution to the same debate;<sup>39</sup> on the contrary. At the end of her essay, ‘The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida’,

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<sup>36</sup> Lacan, ‘Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”’, p. 53.

<sup>37</sup> Derrida, ‘Le Facteur de la Vérité’, p. 444.

<sup>38</sup> Barbara Johnson, ‘The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida’ in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, p. 249.

<sup>39</sup> Irene Harvey, ‘Structures of Exemplarity in Poe, Freud, Lacan, and Derrida’ in *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida, and Psychoanalytic Reading*, pp. 252-67.

and after having succeeded in thoroughly misconstruing Derrida's argumentation as some sort of veneration of indeterminacy, Johnson artfully proceeds to appropriate as her own what will have always been Derrida's actual argumentation. All too eager to have the last word in the debate about the (im)possibility of last words, Johnson offers us now, albeit under the pretence of correcting Derrida, what is admittedly the most astute and the most insightful reading of 'Le Facteur de la Vérité' and of the import of chance in deconstruction.

If it at first seemed possible to say that [To whom did it seem possible? To Johnson. –CD.] Derrida was opposing the unsystematizable to the systematized, "chance" to psychoanalytical "determinism", or the "undecidable" to the "destination", the positions of these oppositions seem now to be reversed [...]. But these oppositions are themselves misreadings of the dynamic functioning of what is at stake here. For if the letter is what dictates the rhetorical indetermination of any theoretical discourse about it, then the oscillation between unequivocal statements of undecidability and ambiguous assertions of decidability is one of the letter's inevitable effects. [...] "[S]ymbolic determination" is not opposed to "chance": it is what emerges as the *syntax* of chance. But "chance", out of which springs that which repeats, cannot in any way be "known", since "knowing" is one of its effects. We can therefore never be sure whether or not "chance" itself exists at all. "Undecidability" can no more be used as a last word than "destination". "Car", said Mallarmé, 'il y a et n'y a pas de hasard'." The "undeterminable" is not opposed to the determinable; "dissemination" is not opposed to repetition. If we could be sure of the difference between the determinable and the undeterminable, the undeterminable would be comprehended within the determinable. What is undecidable is whether a thing is decidable or not.<sup>40</sup>

#### 4.4. Metalanguage

'A "literature", then, can produce, can place onstage, and put forth something like the truth', Derrida writes. 'Therefore it is more powerful than the truth of which it

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<sup>40</sup> Johnson, 'The Frame of Reference', pp. 249-50.

is capable.’<sup>41</sup> To be sure, Legrand puts forth ‘something like the truth’: this feels like an all too carefully, too neatly constructed plot, he avows, too well-designed to be real, too extraordinary to be the effect of mere, normal, chance. Such is his peculiar testimony: my life, the extraordinary coincidences that make up my destiny, seem to be invested with meaning, as if dictated by the other, intentionally, with good reason, as if I were no more than a literary character, a writing effect; which, as we think we know, happens to be true. A metafictional moment, they will say, those who claim to understand what fiction is, seeking to contain in this way the effects of this peculiar doubling.<sup>42</sup> As we will happen to verify, however, a certain constitutive traversal of fiction’s borders is actually what is at stake. For as soon as fiction is re-marked and put on stage, for everyone to see, its essential indeterminability is all that stands on display.

‘The idea of a text referring to itself, reflecting on its own language and so on, is always already at odds with itself’, Nicholas Royle points out in his *Jacques Derrida*.<sup>43</sup> ‘A logic of the supplement’<sup>44</sup> permeates each and every discourse that would appear to take itself as its object, to refer, more simply, to itself; ‘there is no metalanguage as a discrete language’, because ‘it is both part of and not part of its so-called object language. We might consider’, Royle continues, ‘an everyday example such as an argument in which one person says to the other, in exasperation: “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation!” This statement of disbelief is both part and not part of the

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<sup>41</sup> Derrida, ‘Le Facteur de la Vérité’, p. 419.

<sup>42</sup> For a survey of the common critical understanding and uses of metafiction, with reference primarily to American postmodernism, see Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1984).

<sup>43</sup> Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 89.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

conversation.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, on the one hand, in remarking ‘this conversation’ in the course of *this conversation*, one affirms what this very remark necessitates, the conversation within which this remark participates; one affirms, in short, the truth. On the other hand, however, in remarking ‘this conversation’ in the course of this conversation, one also interrupts and exceeds this conversation. In affirming the truth, that is, one inevitably also puts the truth in question. How can we be sure that ‘this conversation’ in the course of this conversation, refers indeed to the conversation of which it partakes? What guarantees that this re-mark is not a citation, for instance, or even a lie? For all we know, there might not even be a conversation to begin with; the re-mark of ‘this conversation’ might just as well be no more than a little fiction, one that Nicholas Royle has made up for the purposes of his demonstration, for example.

We will never know. But if the re-mark of the truth, of what is necessarily true, is potentially fictional, potentially untrue, by reason precisely of its metalinguistic aptitude, is that not to say that *every* text is likewise potentially fictional, potentially untrue? Indeed, as Royle writes, ‘metalanguage is in operation everywhere’.<sup>46</sup> The very condition of meaning, the principle upon which our dictionaries are written and our communications conducted, is that language refers to itself as something other than itself, that it exemplifies what it is not, that its truthfulness is thus never assured. Indeed, every text, every mark, is potentially a literary one, re-markable in the space of literature. This does not mean, however, that every text is ‘at bottom literary’; as a matter of fact, it almost means the opposite. And the reason is that this ‘peculiarly elliptical or non-totalizing logic by which a text refers to itself’ thus rendering

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

metalanguage ‘at once necessary and impossible’, as Royle astutely affirms,<sup>47</sup> would also have to pertain by the same token to a presumably fictional discourse, which, conversely, cannot but remark its fictitiousness at the very moment it claims its clear-cut independence from the truth, its sovereign self-sufficiency. Derrida stresses this confidently:

No doubt all language refers to something other than itself or to language as something other. [...] What is the specific difference of literary language in this respect? Does its originality consist in stopping, arresting attention on this excess of language over language? In exhibiting, remarking, giving to be remarked this excess of language as literature [...] No: for it shows nothing without dissimulating *what* it shows and *that* it shows it.<sup>48</sup>

Royle’s ‘metalinguistic’ example from above allows us to get a better grasp of this, as it ingeniously opens itself up to a ‘metafictional’ reading as well. The logic would be the same as above, except its structure would be reversed and what we perceive as the origin, what we take to be the truth, would now be upside down. In remarking precisely one’s *disbelief* in ‘this conversation’, as his example has it (‘I can’t believe we’re having this conversation’), in the course of what appears to be precisely a *fictitious* conversation, one necessarily interrupts and exceeds ‘this conversation’. Pronouncing ‘this conversation’ as unbelievable as a fiction, one thus dissociates one’s remark and one’s self from this conversation; one affirms thereby the truth: ‘this is not happening’. But then again, in affirming the truth, one also puts the truth in question. Because, on the other hand, this statement of disbelief in this conversation also happens to instigate, if not perpetuate, this conversation; in order to refute its reality from

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Jacques Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida’ in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 48.

without, it has to participate within its eventuality. In the same way, the presentiment of Legrand, who likewise cannot believe his luck, as they say, such a statement of disbelief pronouncing fiction (so improbable that it *feels*) fictional, non-truth (so incredible that it *feels*) untrue, neither belongs nor does not-belong to the text of which it forms part. Rather, it complicates it with an internal fold that renders it unidentifiable: neither true nor untrue, neither real nor fictional. For the same reason that the re-mark of the truth is incommensurable with truth itself, the re-mark of fiction, fiction announced, delimited and unveiled, remains accordingly incommensurable with untruth, the *topos* of an irreducible resistance. It remains undecidable.

In truth, then, the truthfulness of Legrand's affirmation of faith in the *significance* of his destiny – in the fictitiousness of the fiction he participates in – could not be more uncertain. 'I can scarcely say why', he himself confesses in the same breath. And how could he? The source of his 'presentiment' is unknowable, and so its veracity must remain unverifiable, its necessity an upshot of chance. It cannot be guaranteed; it is what cannot be guaranteed. Reflecting on the extraordinariness of the series of coincidences that make up 'The Gold-Bug', Legrand is simultaneously reflecting on the extraordinariness of the coincidences that have made himself possible, and hence his own reflections on the extraordinariness of the coincidences that have made possible his reflections on the extraordinariness of the coincidences – and so forth. Reflecting on his chances, in other words, Legrand is also reflecting on the chances of his reflection itself, on what is thus already there, by reason of itself. His reflection does not come back to a self that is not always already being reflected upon by the other, by himself as other, always already in simulation. It has no origin and no *telos*, because its origin is its *telos*; its necessity is its chance; and vice versa. 'It is immediately metalingual, but its metalanguage has nothing to set it off', to borrow this



excerpt from Derrida's reading of Francis Ponge's little poem 'Fable'; 'it is an inevitable and impossible metalanguage, since *there is no language before it*, since it has no prior object beneath or outside itself.'<sup>49</sup> And in the 'First Session' of his breathtaking reading of Mallarmé's 'Mimique', Derrida writes this:

We are faced then [...] with a double that doubles no simple, a double that nothing anticipates, nothing at least that is not itself already double. [...] This speculum reflects no reality; it produces mere "reality-effects". [...] In this speculum with no reality, in this mirror of a mirror, a difference or dyad does exist [...]. But it is a difference without reference, or rather a reference without a referent, without any first or last unit, a ghost that is the phantom of no flesh, wandering about without a past, without any death, birth, or presence.<sup>50</sup>

Fiction, textuality, the primacy of the signifier, 'this' is not the ultimate truth, the ultimate signified, of this originary simulacrum, as Lacan and a certain strain of so-called poststructuralist criticism would have us believe. It is not the final destination of its course. Rather, it is the structural condition of its possibility, which perpetually lures it away from its destination. It is what keeps it in suspense, always at a distance from itself, *between* truth and fiction. 'It is the impossible mourning of truth: in and through the word.'<sup>51</sup> Haunted by literature, truth persists.

As Derrida so insightfully puts it in 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', 'the trap of metalanguage – which in the last analysis is used by no one, is at the disposition of no one, involves no one in the consequences of an error or a weakness – is a trap belonging to writing before the letter'.<sup>52</sup> As for the 'I' that seeks to appropriate the text which

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<sup>49</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'From Psyche: Invention of the Other' in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Catherine Porter, p. 325. [original emphasis]

<sup>50</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The First Session' in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Barbara Johnson, p. 157.

<sup>51</sup> Derrida, 'From Psyche', p. 332.

<sup>52</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', p. 486.

declares itself untrue, fictional, this 'I' marks no more than the impossible desire to retrieve the authority over oneself, over one's belief, in oneself, in truth. 'Perhaps, after all, it was rather a desire than an actual belief', Legrand will concede. This 'I', in which 'metafiction' blindly affirms its faith, is but the remainder of the impossible desire to dispel the ghostly possibility of literariness and to arrest its contaminating force by relocating oneself within literature's abode. Impossible, because, as it happens, literature

does not remain at home, *abidingly* [*à demeure*], in the identity of a nature or even of a historical being identical with itself. It does not maintain itself abidingly [*à demeure*], at least if "abode [*demeure*]" designates the essential stability of a place; it only remains [*demeure*] *where* and *if* "to be abidingly [*être à demeure*]" in some abiding order [*mise en demeure*]" means something else.<sup>53</sup>

As it happens, literature is nowhere to be found. Literature could be anywhere. That is to say, literature is nowhere to be found *because* literature could be anywhere. Literature *is* potentially everywhere; right here and now, as we speak, its potentiality is the actuality of what remains. By reason of itself, literature will never present itself. It is bound to disappear, as soon as it offers itself to be read, as soon as it re-marks itself. 'What would be a literature that would be only what it is, literature? It would no longer be itself if it were itself.'<sup>54</sup> Literature only ever takes place insofar as it remains *incognito*, in secret. '*In place of the secret*: there where nevertheless everything is said and where what remains is nothing – but the remainder, not even of literature.'<sup>55</sup> No

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<sup>53</sup> Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 28.

<sup>54</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Before the Law' in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Avital Ronell and Christine Roulston, p. 215.

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, 'Passions', p. 28. [original emphasis]

literature, only literature. Absolute necessity, absolute chance. Always perhaps. 'Literature voids itself in its limitlessness.'<sup>56</sup>

#### 4.5. Testimony

In the course of his brilliant interview with Derek Attridge which forms part of the indispensable volume entitled *Acts of Literature*, Derrida avows that he has always been 'drawn toward texts which are very sensitive to this crisis of the literary institution (which is more than, and other than, a crisis)', texts, as he puts it, 'which belong to literature while deforming its limits', or else 'inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature', bearing 'within themselves, or we could also say in their literary act they put to work, a question, the same one, but each time singular and put to work otherwise: "What is literature?" or "Where does literature come from?"'<sup>57</sup> All of his essays included in *Acts of Literature*, meticulously trace the singular effects of precisely this 'law of overflowing, of *excess*, the law of participation without belonging',<sup>58</sup> as it is formalized by a number of texts, for the most part literary, from Kafka to Joyce, from Blanchot to Celan and Ponge, from Shakespeare to Mallarmé and Rousseau. What does the law dictate?

First of all, that no text is literary in itself; Derrida never gets tired repeating this: '[T]here is no such thing as literary essence or a specifically literary domain strictly identifiable as such.'<sup>59</sup> '[T]here is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no

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<sup>56</sup> Derrida, 'The First Session', p. 177.

<sup>57</sup> Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature'", p. 41-2.

<sup>58</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'The Law of Genre' in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Avital Ronell, p. 228.

<sup>59</sup> Derrida, 'Before the Law', p. 187.

literary-being or being-literary of literature.’<sup>60</sup> ‘Literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text.’<sup>61</sup> ‘There is no essence or substance of literature: literature is not. It does not exist.’<sup>62</sup> That the same text could be taken as literary in one context and non-literary in another only serves to confirm this. Literature does not even have to be fictional, strictly speaking, even if the possibility of fiction is intrinsic to so-called creative nonfiction and documentary narratives, such as biographies or memoirs. If it remains nonetheless possible to identify certain texts as literary and others as not, as we no doubt can do and should do, this is because there is something *about* the text, which meets a certain literary criterion, which fulfils, in other words, a certain, historically determined, concept of literariness. Unless a text bears within itself such a literary supplement, a ‘metafictional’ re-mark, it is not literary. That is to say, literature needs to be introduced; in order to be itself, to stand a chance, someone or something, itself or another, has to speak out its name. This is Derrida’s ‘humble axiom’, as he puts it in ‘The Law of Genre’:

[A] code should provide an identifiable trait and one which is identical to itself, authorizing us to adjudicate whether a given text belongs to this genre or perhaps to that genre. [...] Can one identify a work of art, of whatever sort, but especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in any way?<sup>63</sup>

Now, as Derrida goes on to add, ‘this re-mark can take on a great number of forms and can itself pertain to highly diverse types.’<sup>64</sup> Most simple of all, it can be a

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<sup>60</sup> Derrida, ‘The First Session’, p. 177.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’”, p. 44.

<sup>62</sup> Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 28.

<sup>63</sup> Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre’, p. 229.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

plain mention beneath the text's title or on a book's front cover, designating its genre: 'novel', 'poetry', 'drama', etc. Alternatively, it can be the fact that it is published by a specific publishing house or a specific author, presumed to only publish 'fiction'. It can even be another text altogether, such as an author's prologue or epilogue for instance, which refers to his or her work as 'literary', or another's critical review, which confirms that the work in question is indeed literary. None of these marks, however, suffices to guarantee the literariness of the text it designates as such. Why? Because such marks might be literary in themselves; always already, they are re-markable in and as literature. This is not an abstract, regulatable potentiality that one could evade or choose to ignore. It is not an accident that might or might not befall the mark. It is its very condition of possibility. Similar to a text's signature, the mark that circumscribes the space of literature, forms an integral, essential part of its structure, even if it is obviously incommensurable with it.<sup>65</sup>

This is what certain texts (especially, albeit not exclusively, as Derrida makes clear, texts associated with the advent of modernism)<sup>66</sup> give us to think by way of including the re-mark of their literariness within their corpus, as part of their content proper. A simple example would be the introduction of an internal narrator, whereby a fictitious character claims the authorship of the narrated story, as is the case in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902), for instance, or James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). In Francis Ponge's poem 'Fable', which Derrida analyses extensively in 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', the re-mark takes the form of an explicit statement verifying the text's own textuality. The first line of 'Fable' reads: 'With the word *with* commences

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<sup>65</sup> The structure of the signature is a recurrent point of reference in Derrida's writings. For the most extensive elaboration of its significance with respect to the literary see Jacques Derrida, 'From Signsponge' in *Acts of Literature*, trans. Richard Rand, pp. 344-69.

<sup>66</sup> Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', p. 230.

then this text'.<sup>67</sup> And in Poe's 'The Gold-Bug' it becomes the 'presentiment' of its protagonist, who intuits that the events he experiences are just too good to be true. One could multiply the examples indefinitely. What matters is that neither of these 'internal' marks suffices to guarantee the literariness of the text they designate as such; the reason being, again, that they *might* be literary in themselves. That is, conversely, they remain incommensurable with literature, even if they obviously form an essential, integral part of its structure.

Literature is un-introducible. Its name 'is destined to remain improper, with no criteria, or assured concept or reference', as Derrida writes in 'Before the Law'.<sup>68</sup> There is no such thing as a 'literary status', if by that one understands a homogeneous, identifiable field or type of discourse. 'Surely one could not speak of "literariness" as a *belonging to* literature, as of the inclusion of a phenomenon or object, even a work, within a field, a domain, a region whose frontiers would be pure and whose titles indivisible. The work, the opus, does not belong to the field, it is the transformer of the field.'<sup>69</sup> One can never say 'I am literature', any more than one can say 'this is literature', without irrevocably dislocating at the same time literature's identity, without putting in question the security of its borders, without re-marking, in other words, the possibility that one can always say this.

Again, this is not to advocate a sterile, nominalist equivocation of meaning. To repeat, Derrida does not seek to break down the limit between truth and fiction in the name of a constitutive, unsurpassable textuality, as it is often naively suggested; on the contrary. The unreliability of the literary re-mark, he shows, is the necessary condition

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<sup>67</sup> Qtd. in Derrida, 'From Psyche', p. 323.

<sup>68</sup> Derrida, 'Before the Law', p. 187.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 215.

of literature's possibility. In point of fact, the identifiability of 'a literary *functioning* and a literary *intentionality*'<sup>70</sup> is contingent upon the unidentifiability of a literary essence, upon the undecidability of 'literariness' as such. 'The historicity of its experience – *for there is one* [CD's emphasis] – rests on the very thing no ontology could essentialize.'<sup>71</sup> In affirming the truth, one also puts the truth in question; which is also to say, truth becomes possible only insofar as it remains in question.

Every text *participates* in one or several genres, there is no genreless text, [...] yet such participation does not amount to belonging. And not because of an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the *trait* of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and of the generic mark. In marking itself generically, a text unmarks itself.<sup>72</sup>

The mark by which one re-marks the difference between literature and the truth, by which one affirms the truthfulness of the truth, the literariness of literature, truth in its truth or truth as the truth of the lure, belongs to neither truth nor literature; it participates in both, it is re-markable within both – it is always potentially both. And so it must, or else the possibility to distinguish between the one and the other would collapse. A limit, in order to function as such, must partake in the structure of both the parties it separates; it must represent both. Difference must remain unidentifiable, unascrivable, unverifiable, in order to be attestable. Derrida sums everything up for us in this excerpt from *Demeure*:

[T]here is no testimony that does not structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury – that is to say, the possibility of literature, of the innocent or perverse literature that innocently plays at perverting all of these distinctions. If this

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<sup>70</sup> Derrida, "This Strange Institution Called Literature", p. 45.

<sup>71</sup> Derrida, *Demeure*, p. 28.

<sup>72</sup> Derrida, 'The Law of Genre', p. 230.

possibility that it seems to prohibit were effectively excluded, if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the *possibility*, at least, of literature. We will try to remain [*demeurer*] on this undecidable limit. It is a chance and a threat, a resource both of testimony and of literary fiction, law and non-law, truth and non-truth, veracity and lie, faithfulness and perjury.

Thus an impossible limit. Untenable. This limit permanently swears testimony to secrecy; it enjoins testimony to remain secret [...]; it is the condition of the testimony in a strict sense, and this is why one will never be able to demonstrate, in the sense of a theoretical proof or a determinate judgment, that a perjury or lie has in fact taken place. Even an admission will not be enough.<sup>73</sup>

Every text is potentially literary, potentially untrue. That does not, however, make literature true to itself. For this potentiality is not remarkable. It is part of every text, remarked with every text, but it belongs to no text; it never presents itself. It is what remains to be thought; the condition of the future: a secret.

#### 4.6. Singularity

Let us revisit our starting question then: will it have been possible that the man of Aristotle's imagination, who 'found treasure while digging a hole for a plant', did not find treasure while digging a hole for a plant? And the same goes for the man of Poe's imagination, William Legrand, who stumbled upon the instructions locating the burial place of treasure while looking for a leaf by which to hold a gold-bug; is the literary event a matter of necessity or chance?

- Of course chance, one will respond. Insofar as both Aristotle's example and Poe's story constitute literary narratives, products of their respective author's imagination, then what is narrated in them could always, in principle and by definition,

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<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *Demeure*, pp. 29-30.



have been narrated otherwise. Literature, as Derrida defines it, is ‘the institution where one can *say everything*, in *every way*.’<sup>74</sup> To refuse this potentiality, this absolute chance, is to deny the very distinctiveness of the literary. Literature, as Aristotle will establish, is the accident *par excellence*; and an accident must be accidental in order to be what it is.

- But of course not, the other will retort. To suggest that the fictitious quest of a fictitious character could actually have had a different outcome than the one its creator determined for it seems like a rather gratuitous task. After all, one can speculate about the chances of what came to pass only under the assumption of its necessity. ‘The space of literature’, as Derrida immediately goes on to clarify, ‘is not only that of an instituted *fiction* but also a *fictive institution* which *in principle* [CD’s emphasis] allows one to say everything.’<sup>75</sup> Indeed, in order to attest to its infinite potentiality, to its unconditional accidentalness, in order to exemplify precisely chance, literature must be of necessity. Surely, one cannot ‘really’, ‘seriously’, suggest that Legrand’s ‘presentiment’ might never have been validated, that what happened to happen might have happened otherwise, that perhaps no treasure was to be found where he dug. Because then the story entitled ‘The Gold-Bug’ would not have been itself; Legrand himself would not have been himself; this discussion would never have taken place; obviously.

And yet, ‘The Gold-Bug’ does seem to go at great lengths to force us to consider precisely that impossible possibility, in a way thus validating both viewpoints at once. Legrand’s initial attempt was in fact unsuccessful. First time around and after hours of arduous digging with the help of his servant, Jupiter, and his friend, the narrator, Legrand came up with nothing but mud. He was actually just about to admit defeat, give

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<sup>74</sup> Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’”, p. 36.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

up altogether on his ‘presentiment of some vast good fortune impending’, pack up and leave, when he suddenly realized that his servant had made a terrible blunder,<sup>76</sup> which resulted in them digging a hole a good few feet away from the spot where (according to the very fastidious instructions on the parchment) they were supposed to, the spot where Captain Kidd’s treasure was indeed lying and waiting to be discovered, as they were to soon find out. What if Legrand never realized Jupiter’s mistake? From the first ‘accidental’ meeting between the narrator and Legrand (‘since, by mere accident, I made his acquaintance’, he says), to the countless miraculous, practically ridiculous, coincidences that clue Legrand into the significance of the little, half-buried piece of parchment he picked up off the ground one chilly afternoon, to Legrand’s own explicit affirmation that these coincidences are, indeed, all ‘so *very* extraordinary’, and up to the very end, ‘The Gold-Bug’ remarks in every way imaginable that what eventually came to pass was, indeed, just a matter of the most improbable chance. So improbable, in fact, that it *feels* necessary; so improbable that it *feels* literary. Almost itself. A nearly perfect simulation of fiction – of the truth; by absolute chance – of absolute necessity. ‘Giving the greatest chance to chance, literature reappropriates chance itself into necessity’, as Derrida will say in conclusion to his essay ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*’:

[A]rt, in particular the “art of discourse” and literature, only represents a certain power of indeterminacy that sustains the capacity of *performatively* circumscribing its own context for its own event, that of the oeuvre. It is perhaps a kind of freedom, a large margin in the place of this circumscription (*découpe*). This stereotomic margin is very large and perhaps even the largest of all at a certain time in history, but it is not infinite. The appearance of arbitrariness or chance (literature as the place of proper names, if you wish) has to do with this margin. But this is also the place of the greatest symptomatology. Giving the greatest

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<sup>76</sup> Interestingly enough, Jupiter happened to confuse right with left in executing his masters orders; not because he did not know right from left, but because he did not understand that right *is* left from the perspective of our mirror’s reflection – specifically, in this case, from the perspective of a human skull.

chance to chance, it reappropriates chance itself into necessity or fatality. Literature plays nature for fortune –and art.<sup>77</sup>

In order to realize its infinite potential, literature has to forsake it. In order to be faithful to itself, literature must betray what it stands for. And vice versa. In order to remark chance, to exemplify accidentalness, literature has to sacrifice it. And vice versa. Necessary because of chance, out of chance. And vice versa. Literature is impossible, and by reason of its own condition of possibility, ‘tortured by a dependence on something that stands in a relation of contradiction to it’, as Rodolphe Gasché puts it.<sup>78</sup>

Undoubtedly, if it is to fulfil its destiny, literature constitutes the space where ‘one can say everything, in every way’, where one can make chance one’s own in absolute freedom. It is the means by which one can circumscribe, delimit and control chance effects, arrest the unpredictable, determine the future at one’s will. Indeed, one can be perfectly, unconditionally lucky in literature, addressor and addressee of one’s own dispatch. Just like the little boy in D.H. Lawrence’s short story ‘The Rocking Horse-Winner’, who secretly develops the ability to predict the winner of actual horse races by riding a wooden rocking-horse in his room:

He wanted luck, he wanted it, he wanted it. [...] [H]e would sit on his big rocking-horse, charging madly into space, with a frenzy that made the little girls peer at him uneasily. [...] “Now!” he would silently command the snorting steed. “Now take me to where there is luck! Now take me!” [...] One day his mother and his Uncle Oscar came in when he was on one of his furious rides. He did not speak to them. [...] His

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<sup>77</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘My Chances/*Mes Chances*: A Rendezvous with Some Epicurean Stereophonies’ in *Taking Chances: Derrida, Psychoanalysis and Literature*, trans. Irene Harvey and Avital Ronell, ed. Joseph H. Smith and William Kerrigan (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 28-9.

<sup>78</sup> Qtd. in Timothy Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity: The Counter-Culturalist Turn in Heidegger, Derrida, Blanchot and the later Gadamer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 6.

mother watched him with an anxious expression on her face. At last he suddenly stopped forcing his horse into the mechanical gallop and slid down. "Well, I got there!" he announced fiercely, his blue eyes still flaring, and his sturdy long legs straddling apart. "Where did you get to?" asked his mother. "Where I wanted to go," he flared back at her.<sup>79</sup>

This wooden horse, 'the secret within his secret', 'his secret of secrets', as the story's narrator describes it,<sup>80</sup> fulfils thus the boy's dream of finally possessing chance. But as it happens, to possess chance is to be possessed by it.<sup>81</sup> To know the future is to eliminate it; to be chance is to have no chance; it is to surrender oneself to the necessity of its prescription. The omnipotence that literature's infinite potentiality affords comes at the expense of one's self; to be absolutely lucky is therefore also the worse misfortune. And so, inevitably, as if by chance, the boy will pass away in the end, muttering from his deathbed 'I am lucky'. As his uncle observes, in the story's closing lines, 'he's best gone out of a life where he rides his rocking-horse to find a winner.'<sup>82</sup>

Therein, in this maddening, uncontrollable, irrepressible interface of necessity and chance, lies the often evoked and as often misunderstood 'singularity' of literature. No, literature does not simply represent or mirror the truth, neither in its truth nor as the truth of the lure. The literary event is not simply necessary, as Freud would often seem to imply rather confusedly, as Lacan would declare unambiguously, and as the 'literary instrumentalism' that still 'dominates literary criticism today',<sup>83</sup> in Derek Attridge's

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<sup>79</sup> D. H. Lawrence, 'The Rocking-Horse Winner' [1926] in *The Tales of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Heinemann, 1934), pp. 969-70.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., pp. 977-8.

<sup>81</sup> For a discussion of D.H. Lawrence's story in relation to automatism, the compulsion to repeat and the death drive see Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), pp. 101-2.

<sup>82</sup> Lawrence, 'The Rocking-Horse Winner', p. 982.

<sup>83</sup> Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 9.

words, more or less naively presupposes, when it treats the literary text ‘as a means to a predetermined end’.<sup>84</sup> No matter what Aristotle’s definition of definitions would have us believe, literature remains incommensurable with a context or a theory, a meaning or an intention beyond itself, with the ‘unforeseeable’ yet perfectly determinable cause that made it possible in the first place.

But that is not to say that the literary event is simply an embodiment of or a tribute to pure chance; literature is also ‘not [...] some forever yet-to-be-fully determined object’ that persistently eludes the truth, as Timothy Clark shrewdly affirms, in an effort to distinguish Derrida’s work from unwitting ‘arguments to which so-called “deconstructionism” was often reduced to in the 1970s and after’.<sup>85</sup> As Clark points out in his introduction to his excellent, necessary, monograph *The Poetics of Singularity*: ‘Too much of the standard defence of the literary as singular comes down to highlighting our not being able to finally identify or fix the meaning of something, and then vaunting this inability or resistance as a kind of vaguely democratic challenge to dogma.’<sup>86</sup> As it happens, the constitutive resistance of the literary text to critical appropriation, its incommensurability with a ‘self’ beyond itself, is nothing more and nothing less than an effect of its impossibility; in the strict sense. It is not the exclusive right or property of literature but what literature loses in order to become itself. ‘There is no literature without a *suspended* relation to meaning and reference’, as Derrida makes clear.<sup>87</sup> And so, if we cannot identify or fix its meaning, this is not because it has

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 7. Attridge’s monograph is a formidable attempt to formalize in an accessible manner Derrida’s thought by giving priority to the *experience* of the literary with respect both to reading and writing literature.

<sup>85</sup> Clark, *The Poetics of Singularity*, p. 8.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Derrida, “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’”, p. 48.

none, but because its meaning will have never been its own to begin with. In an illuminating essay on Derrida's conception of the literary in relation to the writings of Heidegger and Paul de Man, Joseph Riddel writes:

The limitlessness of "literature" is not the concealed fullness of language, but its disruptive and temporalizing function. "Literature" is neither a full text nor an empty text, neither a presence nor an absence. There is no "literary language," not even in de Man's sense, for there can be no privileged language.<sup>88</sup>

Literature is neither present nor absent to itself, neither true nor untrue to itself; it is in suspense – even when, especially when, it re-marks and presents itself, when it delimits and denudes itself in its truth; even when, as in the case of 'The Gold-Bug', it bears an uncanny resemblance to itself; especially then.

The singularity of literature is not the singularity of literature. 'Absolute singularity', as Derrida says, 'is announced in a paradoxical experience. An absolute, absolutely pure singularity, if there were one, would not even show up, or at least would not be available for reading. To become readable, it has to be *divided*, to *participate* and *belong*. [...] It loses itself to offer itself.'<sup>89</sup> The singularity of literature, or more precisely, the exemplarity of the experience of literature, lies rather in the fact that literature is not singular; which is yet another way of repeating that every text is potentially literary, that '[l]iterature is only exemplary of what happens everywhere', as Derrida affirms in 'Passions'.<sup>90</sup> In order to be itself, literature will never have fulfilled its destiny. It remains 'a would-be singular event', as Timothy Clark defines it in

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<sup>88</sup> Joseph N. Riddel, 'From Heidegger to Derrida to Chance: Doubling and (Poetic) Language', *boundary* 2, vol. 4, no. 2 (Winter, 1976), p. 589.

<sup>89</sup> Derrida, "'This Strange Institution Called Literature'", p. 68.

<sup>90</sup> Derrida, 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering"', n. 14, p. 143.

response to Derrida's mystifying little text 'Che cos'è la poesia',<sup>91</sup> or else the 'desire to relate *never* to itself or to itself *only* as to otherness: the dream of a total singularity and novelty, pure eventhood'.<sup>92</sup> Literature is the place where one will never have been able to say everything, in every way. 'There is in literature, in the *exemplary* secret of literature,' Derrida says, 'a chance of saying everything without touching upon the secret.'<sup>93</sup> And he continues, destined to never get there:

When all hypotheses are permitted, groundless and ad infinitum, about the meaning of a text, or the final intentions of an author, whose person is no more represented than nonrepresented by a character or by a narrator, by a poetic or fictional sentence, which detaches itself from its presumed source and thus remains *locked away* [*au secret*], when there is no longer even any sense in making decisions about some secret behind the surface of a textual manifestation (and it is this situation which I would call text or trace), when it is the call [*appel*] of this secret, however, which points back to the other or to something else, when it is this itself which keeps our passion aroused, and holds us to the other, then the secret impassions us. Even if there is none, even if it does not exist, hidden behind anything whatever. Even if the secret is no secret, even if there has never been a secret, a single secret. Not one.<sup>94</sup>

#### 4.7. Solution

In order to fulfil its own destiny, philosophy unquestionably treats the literary text, the 'as if' world of fiction, as a symptom of the truth. Indeed, the analyst or literary critic has to presume that his subject is of necessity, that is to say, that the events

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<sup>91</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Che cos'è la poesia' in *Derrida Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 221-37.

<sup>92</sup> Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a Crisis of Subjectivity in Romantic and post-Romantic Writing* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 262-3.

<sup>93</sup> Derrida, 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering"', p. 29.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

narrated cannot but have happened precisely in the way they are narrated. This is his starting point, the law he represents and enforces: nothing happens by chance in literature; or else, more precisely, everything happens by chance. Either way, everything happens for a reason. The literary text remains interpretable, an ‘accident’, as Aristotle will say, to be explained away, an illusion to be disclosed *as such*, in its truth. This is why it is always so hard to find typographical errors in literature; because literature, the critic presumes, is one massive slip of the pen. His responsibility, much like a detective’s responsibility, is defined as the disclosure of what the literary text relates, what the literary text *is*, as its absolute repetition in other words, only this time in the language of truth. The task of the purveyor of truth will have always been, in principle and by definition, to account for what happens, for what comes to pass, to demonstrate and so validate the necessity of the event by reducing it to its originating source, to what will have made it possible in the first place, what comprehends it always already – to the law.

It is not by chance that the interrogation of this fundamental presupposition that pervades literary criticism and safeguards its identity is instigated through the reading of detective fiction. In his introduction to ‘Le Facteur de la Vérité’, Derrida writes:

For example: what happens in the psychoanalytic deciphering of a text when the latter, the deciphered itself, already explicates itself? When it says more about itself than does the deciphering (a debt acknowledged by Freud more than once)? And especially when the deciphered text inscribes in itself *additionally* the scene of the deciphering? When the deciphered text deploys more force in placing onstage and setting adrift the analytic process itself, up to its very last word, for example, the truth?<sup>95</sup>

The detective story, as Derrida observes, anticipates and so destabilizes the authority of the critical operation. Rather than recounting a straightforward narrative with beginning,

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<sup>95</sup> Derrida, ‘Le Facteur de la Vérité’, p. 414.



middle and end, whose analyst would then be called upon to signify in the name of truth, the detective story splits itself up and performs the interpretative gesture of the other towards itself from within itself. Having first unfolded a sequence of events as a seemingly incomprehensible mystery, it then reveals, through the detective figure, its true meaning. This is what *really* happened, the fictional analyst proclaims; this is what it *really* means. However, this appeal to self-identity inevitably exposes at the same time the essential impossibility of every text to coincide with itself. As if in spite of itself, in repeating, naming, re-presenting itself, the detective story reaffirms its un-presentability, the irreducibility of its singular performance; it reaffirms, that is, chance as an indispensable property of its structure – the necessary, inherent possibility that it *is* otherwise; not as a hypothetical potentiality, a theoretical threat that one could perhaps foresee and evade, but as the very condition of its possibility. In explaining itself, the ‘so-called literary fiction’ makes clear, here and now, that the explanation of the other, for example the critic’s interpretation, for example the truth, will have always been potentially fictional. Derrida continues from above:

For example, the truth. But is truth an example? What happens – and what is dispensed with – when a text, for example a so-called literary fiction – but is this still an example? – puts truth onstage? And when in doing so it delimits the analytic reading, assigns the analyst his position, shows him seeking truth, and even finding it, shows him discoursing on the truth of the text, and then in general proffering the discourse on truth, the truth on truth? What happens in a text capable of such a scene? A text confident, in its program, of situating analytic activity grappling with the truth? This surplus does not convey the mastery of an author, and even less the meaning of fiction. Rather, it would be the regular effect of an energetic squaring-off. Within which truth would play a piece: lifted, by the philosopher or the analyst, from within a more powerful functioning.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

One necessary effect of Lacan's reading of 'The Purloined Letter' as an example of the truth, as Derrida argues in 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', is that it pays no heed to the fact that Poe's story forms part of a trilogy, alongside 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' and 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt'; an 'ablation', as Derrida calls Lacan's oversight,<sup>97</sup> all the more remarkable in that the story's narrator explicitly reminds us of those two other 'affairs' in the story's opening lines.<sup>98</sup> Derrida proceeds thus to discuss in detail a number of excerpts from 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', which serve to highlight the irrepressible significance of the narrator's *perception* of the events he narrates, that is to say, the significance of his presence *within* the narrative that supposedly reveals truth itself. By contrast, however, one notes that he limits himself to no more than a single passing reference to 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' and its 'newspaper clippings'.<sup>99</sup> Coming back to 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' once more in the course of his lecture 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', this time on account of Dupin's allusion to Epicurus, Derrida suppresses again the significance of 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', saying now that 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', which is the first installment of the trilogy, 'can also be read as a preface to "The Purloined Letter"', the third one.<sup>100</sup> Before we conclude then, it is worth taking a look at this rather neglected of Poe's famous tales of ratiocination. After all, if Poe invented the detective genre, as is

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 484.

<sup>98</sup> 'I was mentally discussing certain topics which had formed matter for conversation between us at an earlier period of the evening; I mean the affair of the Rue Morgue, and the mystery attending the murder of Marie Rogêt. I looked upon it, therefore, as something of a coincidence, when the door of our apartment was thrown open and admitted our old acquaintance, Monsieur G—, the Prefect of the Parisian Police.' Poe, 'The Purloined Letter', p. 974.

<sup>99</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', p. 493.

<sup>100</sup> Derrida, 'My Chances/*Mes Chances*', p. 11.

commonly admitted, then ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’, forming its primary repetition, constitutes no less than the genre’s founding moment.

And yet, ironically enough, Poe wrote that story not simply as a sequel to the ‘Murders in the Rue Morgue’, but also in contradistinction with it. In a letter to his friend Philip Pendleton Cooke, he admits:

You are right about the hair splitting of my French friend [Dupin]: – that is all done for effect. These tales of ratiocination owe most of their popularity to being something in a new key. I do not mean to say they are not ingenious – but people think they are more ingenious than they are – on account of their method and *air* of method... Where is the ingenuity of unravelling a web which you yourself (the author) have woven for the express purpose of unravelling? The reader is made to confound the ingenuity of the suppositious Dupin with that of the writer of the story.<sup>101</sup>

Before he invents the detective story, then, Poe has already abandoned it; founding it, he reinvents it. The time had come to put Monsieur Dupin to the test. Published in 1843, ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ constitutes thus Poe’s attempt to throw light in the guise of his ‘suppositious’ detective on a real murder case, which took place in New York two years earlier and was left unsolved. The victim was a young, beautiful woman by the name of Mary Cecilia Rogers, who was working in a well-known tobacco-shop, a meeting place for many writers and other intellectuals at the time, including Edgar Allan Poe himself. Mary left her home one Sunday morning with the intention, as she said to her fiancé, to visit her aunt, but she never returned. Three days later, her dead body was found floating in the Hudson River. Coinciding with the introduction of the penny press and owing to Mary’s reputation, the crime immediately attracted great public attention, thus putting a lot of pressure on the New York authorities to bring its perpetrators before justice. However, and despite the generous rewards offered to anyone willing to

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<sup>101</sup> Qtd. in Poe, *Tales and Sketches*; vol. 1: 1831-1842, p. 521.

come forward with some useful piece of information, the investigation failed to produce any conclusive results. A series of arrests were made, yet all suspects were sooner or later released due to insufficient evidence; a number of more or less plausible hypotheses were put forward but none came to pass. Until, after three to four months, the investigation was eventually abandoned and the mystery surrounding the death of Mary Rogers was gradually replaced in the papers' headlines by fresher news.

Poe's story consists in the uninterrupted unfolding of Dupin's detailed analysis of the mystery's various parameters. Albeit rather tedious and uneventful, 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' remains nevertheless fascinating precisely because it tackles a real case. Dupin invalidates very convincingly the most widespread theories circulated through the press: that Mary was still alive and well, that she was brutally murdered by one of the notorious gangs of New York and, finally, that she had been killed by her former employer. Simultaneously, he tentatively builds a case against one anonymous naval officer, with whom Mary had allegedly run away a few years prior to her tragic end. It would be impossible to sum up here all the mystery's particulars and so evaluate in more detail Dupin's conclusions. As it happens, Daniel Stashower has done just that and with great success in his recent monograph *Edgar Allan Poe and the Murder of Mary Rogers*, offering us thus one of the most comprehensive readings of both Poe's analysis of the case and of the case itself.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Daniel Stashower, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Murder of Mary Rogers* (Oxford: One World, 2006). A substantial number of articles and books have been written and are still being written either documenting or attempting to solve the murder of Mary Rogers. For instance, see Amy Gilman Srebnick, *The Mysterious Death of Mary Rogers: Sex and Culture in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) and Raymond Paul, *Who Murdered Mary Rogers?* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971).

Regardless of Dupin's investigative efficiency, however, what is more interesting about Poe's story is that it attempts to solve this case from the space of literature. While it clearly constitutes a practically precise transcription of the actual case, the story is actually presented as wholly independent from it. In point of fact, 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' does not deal with the murder of Mary Rogers *as such*, but with another case, set in Paris, which incidentally happens to form a perfect duplicate of the Mary Rogers case. The fictionalization of real events might seem like a rather trivial authorial ruse, especially nowadays; it is not, however, what Poe is doing here. As we will see, 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' attests to a far more radical, perhaps unique, distortion of the borders between fiction and non-fiction. In the story's opening lines, the narrator refers explicitly to the mystery surrounding Mary Rogers's death and thus positively dissociates his narrative from it. At the same time, he maintains that the events he is about to recount are nonetheless identical to the events that make up the real mystery. He proposes, however, that the identicalness between the two cases forms no more and no less than an incredible coincidence – extremely improbable, indeed, almost impossible, 'the most intangible in speculation', as unbelievable as fiction, yet true. These are the story's first two paragraphs:

There are few persons, even among the calmest thinkers, who have not occasionally been startled into a vague yet thrilling half-credence in the supernatural, by coincidences of so seemingly marvellous a character that, as mere coincidences, the intellect has been unable to receive them. Such sentiments – for the half-credences of which I speak have never the full force of *thought* – are seldom thoroughly stifled unless by reference to the doctrine of chance, or, as it is technically termed, the Calculus of Probabilities. Now, this Calculus is, in its essence, purely mathematical; and thus we have the anomaly of the most rigidly exact in science applied to the shadow and spirituality of the most intangible in speculation.

The extraordinary details which I am now called upon to make public, will be found to form, as regards sequence of time, the primary branch of a series of scarcely intelligible *coincidences*, whose secondary

or concluding branch will be recognized by all readers in the late murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers, at New York.<sup>103</sup>

What Poe so brilliantly demonstrates here for us is that, insofar as literature constitutes the space where everything is possible, where one can say everything and in every way, this must mean that it is always possible that literature replicates reality as such. It is always possible, indeed, that literature, as literature, without compromising in the least its literariness, remains absolutely indistinguishable from reality, that the difference between the two remains unverifiable – *that it does not exist*. Nothing will ever erase that possibility. No mark will ever completely and beyond doubt guarantee the difference between fiction and non-fiction; no mark will ever safeguard the security of their borders. Chance, ‘or as it is technically termed The Calculus of Probabilities’,<sup>104</sup> dictates that literature will never be literary enough, that reality will never be real enough. Insofar as every mark, every event, reality ‘itself’, is repeatable in itself, then ‘literature’, ‘reality’, identity, ‘this’ will have always been impossible.

On this premise, then, Poe effectively relieves himself of any kind of obligation to ‘fictionalize’ the Mary Rogers case. On the contrary, he makes sure to maintain the scene of the crime intact and provide all the available evidence with accuracy, he unreservedly transcribes a number of articles from the New York press as such, attributing them, of course, to the fictitious Paris press, and he even distorts on a few occasions the geography of Paris, so as to remain faithful to the original setting. When all is said and done, the only significant point of divergence between the mystery of

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<sup>103</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ in *Tales and Sketches*; vol. 2: 1843-1849, p. 723-4.

<sup>104</sup> Poe refers here to the work of the French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace, whom he admired greatly; Laplace was the prime source of inspiration for Poe’s ‘prose poem’ *Eureka*. See Edgar Allan Poe, *Eureka* [1848], ed. Stuart Levine and Susan F. Levine (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004).

Mary Rogers and ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ is that the latter gets solved in the end, that it is eventually interpreted thanks to the cunning of Monsieur Dupin. Which is also to say, in consequence, that by contrast to the basic premise that came to define the detective genre, which Poe’s trilogy is supposed to have initiated, that is, that the detective’s interpretation is necessarily correct, that the narrative’s denouement reveals the truth of the narrative, in ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ the mystery’s resolution stands from the outset most decidedly in doubt. The reader, especially the contemporary readership familiar with the case of Mary Rogers, cannot help but question Dupin’s conclusions, *as if* the mystery were real, because it is (as real as the) real.

Even more so, because the mystery’s resolution remains hidden. Dupin’s lengthy analysis is succeeded by a fictitious editorial note that reads:

[For reasons which we shall not specify, but which to many readers will appear obvious, we have taken the liberty of here omitting, from the MSS. placed in our hands, such portion as details the *following up* of the apparently slight clew obtained by Dupin. We feel it advisable only to state, in brief, that the result desired was brought to pass; and that the Prefect fulfilled punctually, although with reluctance, the terms of his compact with the Chevalier. Mr. Poe’s article concludes with the following words. –Eds.]<sup>105</sup>

Thus, Dupin’s success, the truthfulness of his interpretation, is not validated through the narrative, but through a short, reassuring remark that interrupts the narrative: ‘the result desired was brought to pass’. But did it? While eagerly awaiting for precisely the ‘following up’ of the investigation, for an arrest, a confession perhaps, the readers must now make do with this bizarre little note; which incidentally, it is worth noting, even designates Poe himself as the story’s author, in case anyone was still under the impression that this is anything more than, other than, ‘mere fiction’. It is impossible for the reader not to suspect at this point that what he is told that happened, in fact may

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<sup>105</sup> Poe, ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’, p. 772.

have happened otherwise, or not at all, that is to say, that Dupin's interpretation of 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt' just might be wrong.

Even more so, because Dupin's interpretation *is* wrong. Poe's story was originally published in three monthly instalments. A few days after the second instalment was released, however, in the front page of his morning newspaper, in big bold letters, Poe read: THE MARY ROGERS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

As it happened, in an incredible turn of events, 'as though the Calculus of Probabilities had risen up to deal a crushing blow', in Stashower's words,<sup>106</sup> the proprietor of the tavern where Mary was last seen alive allegedly confessed now from her deathbed that Mary had passed away under her roof undergoing an illegal abortion. Although not utterly explaining the mystery (it did not account, for example, for the multiple signs of physical violence on Mary's body), the 'abortion theory' was immediately accepted as the true one by the public. The timing of these revelations could not have been worse. Poe had not made any mention to a possible pregnancy in his story's first two instalments and it was now too late to go back. The story's readers would now have a very good reason, indeed, not to trust that Dupin's interpretation, which incriminated some obscure naval officer for Mary's murder, albeit apparently consistent and relatively convincing, was indeed brought to pass.

But is it possible that Dupin, the fictional analyst, is wrong? Is it possible that 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', a fictional narrative, did not happen precisely in the way it is related? It is not by chance that the vast majority of the critical approaches to Poe's story completely disregard the story's fictional status, thus missing the theoretical significance of Dupin's potential fallacy. Indeed, as we saw in the course of this chapter, this possibility, that what is narrated is not true of necessity, disrupts the very

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<sup>106</sup> Stashower, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Murder of Mary Rogers*, p. 208.



identity of the literary, irrevocably blurring the borders between fiction and non-fiction. Guarding themselves against the threat of this uncontrollable contamination, critics identify thus unquestionably Marie Rogêt with Mary Rogers and Dupin with Poe, thereby also reducing the narrator to a mere vehicle of the truth of the narrative. Poe *himself*, they presume, has simply attempted – and failed – to solve an actual murder case.

But ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’, as the narrator reminds us once more in the story’s conclusion, does not deal with the murder of Mary Rogers; it deals with another case, set in Paris, which by mere coincidence happens to form a perfect duplicate of the Mary Rogers case. And in that other case, Dupin’s interpretation was actually proven right. But how is this possible, one will reasonably protest? Insofar as the two mysteries are essentially identical, then their meaning must be one and the same. That is to say, if the solution to the mystery of Mary Rogers happens to differ from the solution to ‘The Mystery of Marie Rogêt’ after all, this must mean that one of them is wrong. And since it is impossible, in principle and by definition, that fiction is ‘wrong’, this must mean that Poe’s story is not fictional. Which is all very reasonable, of course. It presupposes, however, that one does not read the story’s conclusion:

It will be understood that I speak of coincidences *and no more*. [...] [I]n what I relate it will be seen that between the fate of the unhappy Mary Cecilia Rogers, so far as that fate is known, and the fate of one Marie Rogêt up to a certain epoch in her history, there has existed a parallel in the contemplation of whose wonderful exactitude the reason becomes embarrassed. I say all this will be seen. But let it not for a moment be supposed that in proceeding with the sad narrative of Marie from the epoch just mentioned, and in tracing to its denouement the mystery which enshrouded her, it is my covert design to hint at an extension of the parallel, or even to suggest that the measures adopted in Paris for the discovery of the assassin of a grisette, or measures founded in any similar ratiocination, would produce any similar result. [...] The very Calculus of Probabilities to which I have referred forbids all idea of the extension of the parallel: – forbids it with a positiveness strong and

decided just in proportion as this parallel has already been long-drawn and exact.<sup>107</sup>

Just because the two narratives are identical, the narrator affirms, it does not mean that they have the same meaning, and hence that they should be interpreted in the same way. No, in fact, their very identicalness makes it more likely, practically certain to be more precise, that their meaning is different, that they should be interpreted otherwise, that the one's solution does not apply to the other.

But is not Poe just trying to have it both ways? That is, claim to have solved the real mystery, if reality happens to confirm his interpretation, and maintain that he never intended to solve the real mystery, in case reality proves him wrong? Is he not just trying to salvage his story in light of the information that surfaced just before the third and final instalment of his story was due to be published, and thus save himself and his famous detective from public humiliation? Most certainly.<sup>108</sup> It is hard to imagine, indeed, that Poe's story would have had the same conclusion, if the revelations regarding Mary Rogers's death had not emerged just before its publication, even more so if those revelations happened to confirm rather than contest Dupin's suppositions in the course of the story's first two instalments. Far from undercutting its significance, however, this is what makes Poe's tale exceptional. The very possibility of 'having both

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<sup>107</sup> Poe, 'The Mystery of Marie Rogêt', pp. 772-3.

<sup>108</sup> As a matter of fact, two years after its original publication, and when the dust had settled, Poe supplemented his text with a little footnote at the very start of the story, which argues against what the narrator proposes in the story's conclusion: '[U]nder pretence of relating the fate of a Parisian *grisette*, the author has followed, in minute detail, the essential, while merely paralleling the inessential facts of the real murder of Mary Rogers. Thus all argument founded upon the fiction is applicable to the truth: and the investigation of the truth was the object'. Qtd. in Stashower, *Edgar Allan Poe and the Murder of Mary Rogers*, pp. 268-9.

ways' is just what this story demands that we try to fathom, against all our critical assurances. For 'having it both ways' means precisely offering an interpretation, attesting to the truth, and simultaneously installing within one's testimony its inevitable limitation – re-marking, almost imperceptibly, the necessary, irreducible possibility that truth itself is other than itself. Insofar as the same mystery, the same narrative, carries within itself *a priori* the possibility of its displacement within the space of literature, then it can always have two – at least two – different *correct* interpretations. That is, despite appearances, perhaps Monsieur Dupin did get it right in the end; perhaps some naval officer did murder Marie Rogêt. But even if he is right, he is most certainly not right of necessity. He could just as well have gotten it wrong. Which is also to say, Poe's text might just be 'mere fiction' after all; we will never know. As John T. Irwin so insightfully comments,

the unexpected divergence between the actual solution of Rogers's death and the one [Poe] had originally envisioned, although it disrupted his plans for "Marie Rogêt," could nevertheless be made to serve a larger theme of the Dupin stories as a whole. Which is to say that if Poe's detective stories are about the way that the analytic effort to include the process of thinking wholly within the content of thought ultimately reveals the essential noncoincidence of the self with itself, then Poe's unsuccessful attempt to double the real case of Mary Rogers with the imaginary one of Marie Roget becomes, through the reader's experience of this ultimate noncoincidence of parallel lives, a textual embodiment of this theme.<sup>109</sup>

And Derrida concurs in 'Le Facteur de la Vérité': 'If one wished to make it the example of a law at any price, the Dupin trilogy [...] exemplifies this uncontrollability, disrupting every verification of an identity.'<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> John T. Irwin, *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 327.

<sup>110</sup> Derrida, 'Le Facteur de la Vérité', p. 460.

Every event is irreducible to the text that makes it possible. Every mark is always already potentially other than itself and remains thus infinitely resistant to a final, transcendent interpretation, to a transparent definition, to the truth. And as this chapter has ascertained, this is true even for those events that would have never happened unless in the form that they did, in the text that they did, even for those events which would have never even been fathomable to begin with unless through the narrative that made them possible; even the literary event, whose improbable existence relies on one and only one text, is not identifiable with that text. This is the very condition of its readability; it is always already divided, always already in translation. It attests to a secret beyond itself,

even if one precisely cannot here trust any definite witness, nor even any guaranteed value to bearing witness, or, to put it another way, as the name suggests, to the history of any *martyrdom* (*martyria*). For one will never reconcile the value of a testimony with that of knowledge or of certainty – it is impossible and it ought not be done. One will never reduce the one to the other – it is impossible and it ought not be done.

That remains, according to me, the absolute solitude of a passion without martyrdom.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>111</sup> Derrida, 'Passions: "An Oblique Offering"', p. 31.

## Conclusion

It remains: every text acquires its significance from elsewhere than itself, and hence carries within itself the chance that it means something else. No meaning and no truth, no concept and no event, is identifiable with the text that provides it with its shape and form; no *mark* is identifiable with itself, no 'I' with a self. And this is not a potentiality one can calculate, evade or reduce. It is the necessary effect of the mark's own structure: in order to become possible as itself it must be *a priori* re-markable as other than itself. Therefore, what makes truth impossible, unknowable, unverifiable, is the very condition of its possibility, knowability, verifiability; and vice versa.

'The law of this spectral contamination, the impure law of this impurity, this is what must be constantly reelaborated',<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida suggests, as we saw in our introduction to this thesis. In response, as if it were possible, then, we have sought to verify that this law, which binds the possible to the impossible, chance to necessity, significance to insignificance, pervades indeed everything that happens, everything that *is*, every text: even the text that proclaims its adherence to the law, as we demonstrated in the first chapter; even the text that embodies and represents the law itself, as we ascertained in the second; even the text that refuses to abide by the law and claims to contain its force, as we argued in the third; and, finally, even the text that surrenders to the law and permits it to dictate its destiny, as we confirmed in the fourth. The law is

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'As If It Were Possible: "Within Such Limits"...' in *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001*, ed. and trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 362.

that the law is ‘deconstructible’. And this ‘is not bad news. We may even see in this a stroke of luck for politics, for all historical progress.’<sup>2</sup> There we are:

And this short philosophical dialogue for your distraction: “–What is it, a destination? –There where it arrives. –So then everywhere that it arrives there was a destination? –Yes. –But not before? –No. –That’s convenient, since if it arrives there, it is that it was destined to arrive there. But then one can only say so after the fact? –When it has arrived, it is indeed the proof that it had to arrive, and arrive there, at its destination. –But before arriving, it is not destined, for example it neither desires nor demands any address? There is everything that arrives where it had to arrive, but no destination before the arrival? –Yes, but I meant to say something else. –Of course, that’s what I was saying. –There you are.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’ in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Envois’ in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 244-5.

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