

“Jewgreek and Greekjew”

The Concept of the Trace in Derrida and Levinas

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A return to the Greeks, whenever it was attempted by Jews, always had about it something of a lack in power.

Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical-Political Profiles*¹

If the Jew is disempowered by the Greek, if the Greek always returns to the Jew, it is not simply because philosophy speaks Greek but because Greek philosophy is a philosophy of power that lays claim to an “encompassing amplitude or an ultimate comprehension [that] compels every other discourse to justify itself before philosophy.”² The Greek always comprehends the Jew: not to philosophize is still to philosophize, one must always philosophize. “Nothing,” writes Emmanuel Levinas, “can interrupt it. Every contestation and interruption of this power of discourse is at once related and invested by discourse. It thus recommences as soon as one interrupts it.”³ But this precomprehension that anticipates anything the Jew might say is not one motif among others in the discourse of Western philosophy. It gives rise to technology, politics, and history. As Levinas demonstrates in *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, texts commemorating the “millions on millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of the same hatred of the other man,”⁴ this amplitude engenders a philosophy of injustice that fulfills its historical destiny in the violence of the totality and the tyranny of the State. Governed by the imperial order of reason, the capacity to “maintain oneself identical above

the variations of becoming,”⁵ philosophy has always reduced difference, alterity, and heterology to the order of the same through a kind of conceptual violence, and its itinerary, according to Levinas, remains that of “Ulysses, whose adventure in the world was only a return to his native island—a complacency in the Same, an unrecognition of the other.”⁶ This reduction or dispossession, for Levinas, represents the fundamental gesture of philosophy: “And here every power begins.”⁷

These conflicts between Hellenism and Hebraism, identity and alterity, totality and infinity, along with the immense chain of philosophical concepts and historical events they organize, provide the essential context for the current debate about the role of Jewish mysticism in the thought of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. Not because these writers are either Jewish mystics or Greek philosophers, nor because it could ever be a question of choosing between mysticism or philosophy, as Jürgen Habermas would have us believe, but precisely because their work protests the reductivism that informs this discussion and lends it its peculiar tone of virulence. Levinas and Derrida indeed return us to the Greeks (even if these Greeks are Husserl and Heidegger) but in a powerful movement of thought, a kind of *filiation en abyme* that circulates indefinitely and faithfully between Hellenism and Hebraism, the “two points of influence” that move our world.⁸ Designed to “reawaken the Greek in the autistic syntax of his own dream” with the thought of the other and the heterological, with the thought of the incomprehensible,

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their work is at once Jewgreek and Greek-jew.⁹

And yet, despite the historical coupling of Judaism and Hellenism delineated in “Violence and Metaphysics,” and despite the precautions against reducing these traditions to determined categories that Levinas and Derrida observe in their own work, scholars as diverse as Susan Handelman, Stanley Rosen and Jürgen Habermas are prepared to decide whether Derrida is Jew or Greek. In *Hermeneutics as Politics*, for example, Rosen insists that Derrida is “not Jewish enough.” That Derrida is not a “genuine Talmudist,” he argues, follows “trivially from the fact that he is not a Jew, not in the sense of Levinas.”¹⁰ The Talmud, unlike deconstruction, “conceals a serious teaching beneath its playful clarifications.”¹¹ Rosen is thus led to describe Derrida as an “errant disciple” of Levinas, even an “ontological Freud.” Conversely, in *The Slayers of Moses*, Handelman sets out to show how deconstruction opposes Western metaphysics in “good Jewish prophetic fashion.” Retracing the historical interrelations between theological and Rabbinic modes of exegesis from the Presocratics to the present day, she contends that Derrida is an unrepentant “prodigal son” practicing a heretic hermeneutic that seeks to “cure the neurosis of the Jew in exile.”¹² Like Lacan and Freud, Derrida performs a “slaying of Moses, dis-possession of the father and reappropriation of the father and origin, a new writing, but this time one that seeks to secure itself from all future displacement by concocting a mystifying nonterminology, which at every instant eludes definition.”¹³ In her chapter on “Reb Derrida’s Scripture” she even claims that the grammatological system (which maintains above all that language never copulates with Being) ultimately seeks to unite what “Greek thought split asunder—word and thing.”¹⁴ It is therefore curious that Habermas finds in *The Slayers of Moses* his

authority for reading deconstruction as an irrationalism promoting an “unacknowledged renewal of a discourse with God that has been broken off under modern conditions.”¹⁵ In the end, Habermas’ polemical critique in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is most interesting for the way it exemplifies the synoptic, magisterial philosophy that Levinas and Derrida everywhere solicit. Perhaps Habermas is too Greek.

As part of his task of reconstructing the “conceptual aporias” in the discourse of post-enlightenment philosophy, Habermas assesses the work of Derrida in a lecture entitled “Beyond a Temporalized Philosophy of Origins: Jacques Derrida’s Critique of Phonocentrism.” Here he argues that the deconstructive interpretation of logocentrism, like Nietzsche’s genealogy, Heidegger’s *destruktion*, and Adorno’s negative dialectics, remains enclosed in the “metaphysical edifice which it professes to overthrow.”¹⁶ Derrida’s “textualizing” of the history of Being fails to escape the foundationalist impulse of phenomenology and the naive ambitions of *Ursprungsphilosophie*:

As a participant in the philosophical discourse of modernity, Derrida inherits the weakness of a critique of metaphysics that does not shake loose of the intentions of first philosophy. Despite his transformed gestures, in the end he, too, promotes only a mystification of palpable social pathologies; he, too, disconnects essential (namely, deconstructive) thinking from scientific analysis; and he, too, lands at an empty, formulalike avowal of some indeterminate authority.¹⁷

While Habermas’ lecture remains faithful to Derrida’s thought in some respects, it can be shown that the amplitude of his critique leads

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him into fundamental misconceptions about the theoretical and political initiatives of deconstruction. As Rodolphe Gasche argues in "Infrastructures and Systematicity," as long as it is "believed to promote . . . licentious free play, nihilistic canceling out of opposites, abolition of hierarchies, and demystification . . . of Western philosophemes, deconstruction's definite and logical procedure cannot be grasped in all its specificity."¹⁸ But for Habermas deconstruction is precisely the expression of an "anarchist wish to explode the continuum of history," the force of which is to be found in Derrida's "Jewish mysticism."¹⁹ This argument warrants closer attention not for the way it might seem to resonate with a certain style of discourse that has always questioned the Jew, posed a Jewish question, but rather for the way it exemplifies the philosophical synopsia that Levinas and Derrida call into question.

Habermas conducts his argument by positing a series of hierarchies that presuppose a comprehension of the fields covered by these terms (science/literature, logic/rhetoric, pragmatics/poetics). In fact, his critique seems to rest on an equally imperious distinction between philosophy and mysticism: "This contrasting stance [anarchism and nonphilosophy] may have something to do with the fact that Derrida, all denials notwithstanding, remains close to Jewish mysticism."²⁰ Through cryptic references to Levinas and the tradition of Kabbalistic interpretation Habermas contends that Derrida's work is haunted by a "remembrance of the messianism of Judaic mysticism and the abandoned but well-circumscribed place once assumed by the God of the Old Testament."²¹ As a Jewish mystic Derrida "degrades politics and contemporary history . . . so as to romp all the more freely, and with a greater wealth of associations, in the sphere of the ontological."²² Unlike the philosophi-

cal logic that guides Habermas implacably through the texts of Nietzsche, Benjamin, Adorno, Heidegger, and Foucault, the mystical inspiration animating deconstruction merely "incites the frenzy of deciphering interpreters,"²³ and, by exempting itself from the normative constraints of Habermas' model of "scientific analysis," deconstruction consequently lets the "refuse heap of interpretations, which it wants to clear away in order to get at the buried foundations, mount ever higher."²⁴ Like the Judaism that apparently inspires and sustains it, deconstruction is thus compelled to justify itself before philosophy, only to be judged a "fanaticism" that purifies Heidegger's mysticism of Being by returning it to the context of the "monotheistic tradition."²⁵

"All denials notwithstanding, Derrida remains close to Jewish mysticism": an interesting and symptomatic statement. For Derrida nowhere denies his affinities with Hebraic thought. Besides his writings on Jabes and Levinas or his parodic use of multiple columns (like the Talmud) in *Margins of Philosophy* and *Dissemination*, consider the autobiographical passages in interviews ("a feeling of non-belonging I have doubtless transposed")²⁶ and in texts like *The Post Card* and *Glas*:

In Algeria, in the middle of a mosque the colonists would have transformed into a synagogue, the Torah, once brought forth from behind the curtains, is promenaded in the arms of a man or a child. . . . Maybe the children who watched the pomp of this celebration dream about it for a long time after, in order to organize all the pieces and scenes of their lives. . . . What am I doing here? Let's put it that I am working at the origin of literature by miming it. Between the two.²⁷

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Consider, too, his discussion of Sollers in *Dissemination*, where he links Kabbalistic eisegesis, like Umberto Eco,²⁸ to the (non)principle of dissemination or unlimited semiosis: “Even while it keeps the text it culls alive, this play of insemination—or grafting—destroys their hegemonic center, subverts their authority and their uniqueness. . . . it is always possible for a text to become new, since the blanks open up its structure to an indefinitely disseminated transformation.”²⁹ Habermas fails to comment upon these texts and the filiations between Hebraism and Hellenism that they articulate. Is Derrida Greek or Jew? This must remain undecided. What should now be evident, however, is that Habermas characterizes Derrida as a Jewish mystic in order to disqualify deconstruction as a legitimate philosophical enterprise.

With Habermas’ critique in mind, then, we shall review the meaning of the “trace” in several texts of Levinas and Derrida, for it is above all the problematic of the trace that draws their texts into communication. First, through a discussion of its semiological properties we shall suggest that the trace is not, as Habermas claims, a mystical “deeper foundation” or “Dionysian motif of the god making his promised presence all the more palpable . . . by means of his poignant absence,”³⁰ but an originary absence that opens the possibility of signification. Second, by reading “Freud and the Scene of Writing” beside relevant passages from Levinas we shall argue that the trace calls into question both the foundationalist tenacity of the philosophy of the subject and the aspirations of *Ursprungsphilosophie*. This can be done without bringing into play questions of messianism, monotheism, or mysticism, for even the themes of eschatology and transcendence that preoccupy Levinas are not mystical or even religious, but ethical, in nature. It should become apparent that Habermas’ ar-

gument is carried out with too much facility (in all the senses of this word) and that this facility exemplifies the totalizing discourse that Levinas and Derrida contest: “The void that breaks the totality can be maintained against an inevitably totalizing and synoptic thought only if thought finds itself faced with an other refractory to all categories.”³¹ The refractory other that breaches the totality is the trace. But before we see how the thought of the trace operates in their work we ought to remark, however briefly and unjustly, some of the affinities between Derrida and Levinas with respect to the thought of Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl.³²

II

For the philosophical tradition the conflicts between the same and the other are resolved by theory whereby the other is reduced to the same — or, concretely, by the community of the State, where beneath anonymous power, though it be intelligible, the I rediscovers war in the tyrannic oppression it undergoes from the totality.

Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*.³³

Derrida’s deconstruction of metaphysics, like Levinas’ phenomenology of the other, is inspired by an ethico-political impulse to resist the “fundamental conceptual system produced by the Greco-European adventure [which] is in the process of taking over all of humanity.”³⁴ Like Derrida, Levinas regards the Western philosophical tradition, particularly ontology and phenomenology, as a discourse that reduces difference, alterity, and heterology to the order of the same. Since Socrates, philosophy has been an imperialism and “egology”:

This primacy of the same was Socrates’ teaching: to receive nothing of the Other but what is in me, as though from

all eternity I was in possession of what comes to me from the outside—to receive nothing, or to be free. Freedom does not resemble the capricious spontaneity of free will; its ultimate meaning lies in this permanence in the same, which is reason.³⁵

If philosophy has always been struck with the “horror of the other that remains other—with an insurmountable allergy,”³⁶ Hegelianism represents the purest symptom of this allergy. The order of the *logos* culminates in Hegel’s speculative dialectic. “But faced with this alterity,” writes Levinas, “Hegelian phenomenology, where self-consciousness is the distinguishing of what is not distinct, expresses the universality of the same identifying itself in the alterity of objects.”³⁷ This act of identification reduces the other to a moment of self-consciousness characterized (as it is for Derrida) by the illusion of presence: “However different the terms of a relation might appear . . . or however separated over time . . . they can ultimately be rendered commensurate and simultaneous, the same, englobed in a history which totalizes time into a beginning or an end, or both, which is presence.”³⁸ For Levinas, then, Hegel determines the heterological as contradiction in order to reappropriate it, through the logic of the *Aufhebung*, into a synthesis which reduces it to the same, and to this extent Hegelianism consists in abolishing the “very core of beings.”

In *Glas*, Derrida reads the figure of the Jew within this dialectic, which is above all a dialectic of master and slave that secures the sovereignty of Christianity by exiling Judaism from the realm of Spirit. For Hegel, the Jew represents a moment of negativity or diseconomy in the dialectic that ensures the transcendence of Christianity over Judaism: “The Jew falls again. He signifies what does not let itself be raised up—relieved perhaps

but denied from then on as a Jew—to the height of the *begriff*. He holds back, pulls the *Aufhebung* toward the earth.”³⁹ This remains true for Habermas, who determines Judaic philosophy as an irrationalism in order to exclude it from the order of the *begriff*. In forsaking the Spirit and Logos in favour of the dead letter of writing and inscription, the Jew, for Hegel as for Habermas, falls back into the irrationalism of mystical inspiration and frenzied cryptology.

The reduction of difference and heterology characteristic of Hegel’s speculative logic persists in Heidegger’s ontology. According to Levinas, Heidegger subordinates the relation to the other (which for Levinas almost always denotes an ethical relation between existents, not between existents and God) to the relation with Being. This pre-comprehension of the meaning of Being repeats the Greek gesture of mastery, but with disastrous historical consequences:

To affirm the priority of *Being* over the *existent* is to already decide the essence of philosophy; it is to subordinate the relation with *someone*, who is a being, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the *Being* of *existents*, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of the existent (a relationship of knowing).⁴⁰

In a movement of knowing “within the same before obligation to the other,” Heidegger’s obedience to the anonymity of Being leads inevitably to “another power, to imperialist domination, to tyranny.”⁴¹ Thus while Heidegger holds that Being dominates beings, Levinas insists on a reversal of these terms: an ethical obligation that takes the form of an infinite desire that “hollows out subjectivity,” a resignation to the “hyperbolic demand” of the other, must precede and open the knowing relationship to Being.

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Only in the context of this ethical relation with the other can the directive concepts of Levinas' thinking—the face, proximity, the other, infinity, transcendence and desire—assume their full force and significance. Levinas' critique of ontology is thus inspired neither by a Jewish mysticism, at least explicitly, nor by an occulted foundationalism, but by the desire for a preontological ethics grounded in concrete historical experience, in the experience of the face of the other, in the passivity of suffering, in holocaust. And this notion of ethical "extra-version" emerges from his conception of the trace, which marks a disinterested relation with the other and the otherwise than essence.

Heidegger's privileging of the question of Being over the question of ethics is also crucial to Levinas' reading of Husserl, in whose works this philosophical synopsis or "ontological imperialism" is thematized even more explicitly. In *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl's Phenomenology*, Levinas challenges the primacy Husserl assigns to theoretical consciousness (which reduces both existence and existents to the "evidence of an objectifying act")⁴² and the ocular metaphor of understanding he uses to elucidate it. In this text, the first substantial appreciation of Husserl's thought, the imperialism of *theoria* already bothered Levinas. More than any other philosophy, phenomenology, in the wake of Plato, was to be struck with light . . . it predetermined Being as its object."⁴³ By elevating the heterological into the luminous sphere of intelligibility phenomenology strips existents of their "independence." In Husserlian phenomenology, as in Heidegger's ontology, it is the "Being of the existent that is the medium of truth."⁴⁴ Like the dialectical economy which turns every expenditure to profit through a movement of usury (*usure*), and like the reductivism of fundamental ontology, which subordinates the ethical relation between beings to the anony-

mous power of Being, phenomenological reflection simply recalls itself to itself:

if ontology is tautology and egology, then it has always *neutralized* the other, in every sense of the word. Phenomenological neutralization, one might be tempted to say, gives the most subtle and modern form to this historical, political and authoritarian neutralization.⁴⁵

It thus gives rise to what Derrida calls "heliopolitics"—the violence of light. Founded on the certainty of self-presence, phenomenological reflection "seizes upon an existent through the void and nothingness of existing—wholly light and phosphorescence."⁴⁶ According to Levinas' reading of Husserl and Heidegger, then, Being coincides with the apprehension of Being: before any possible ethical relation, Being is already an appeal to subjectivity, and for this reason phenomenology develops itself as an egology.

It should be apparent that Levinas' diagnosis of the Western philosophical tradition as a violent allergic reaction to difference has little to do with Judaic mysticism or Rabbinic hermeneutics, at least as Habermas understands them. "If the messianic eschatology from which Levinas draws inspiration seeks neither to assimilate itself into what is called a philosophical truism," writes Derrida, "nevertheless it is developed in its discourse neither as a theology, nor as a Jewish mysticism (it can even be understood as a trial of theology and mysticism)."⁴⁷ Levinas' critique of ontology in fact "never bases its authority on Hebraic theses or texts."⁴⁸ Neither philosophy nor mysticism, neither a philosophy of the subject nor a *prima philosophie*, Levinas' thinking aspires to a reciprocal surpassing of these categories through an adventure of the question that has

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not predetermined its answer. Like deconstruction, Levinas' phenomenology of the other (which Derrida calls a pure heterology or empiricism) seeks the "opening of opening, that which can be enclosed within no category or totality, that is, everything within experience which can no longer be described by traditional concepts, and which resists every philosopheme."⁴⁹ From totality to infinity, from the same to the other, from ontology to ethics, from Ulysses to Abraham, Levinas and Derrida institute a community of the question dedicated to the "dislocation of the Greek logos, to a dislocation of our identity, and perhaps of identity in general . . . toward an exhalation inside the Greek origin, close to the other of the Greek."⁵⁰ This adventure, which is nevertheless still philosophy, is above all an adventure of the trace.

III

But empiricism always has been determined by philosophy, from Plato to Husserl, as *nonphilosophy*: as the philosophical pretension to nonphilosophy, the inability to justify oneself, to come to one's own aid as speech. But this incapacitation, when resolutely assumed, contests the resolution and coherence of the logos (philosophy) at its root, instead of letting itself be questioned by the logos. Therefore, nothing can so profoundly *solicit* the Greek logos—philosophy—than this irruption of the totally-other; and nothing can to such an extent reawaken the logos to its origin as to its mortality, its other.

Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics."⁵¹

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida acknowledges the importance of Levinas' critique of the concepts "presence," "immediacy," and "consciousness" for his own work, emphasizing in particular the significance of the idea of the trace:

Thus, I relate this concept of trace to what is at the center of the latest work of Emmanuel Levinas and his critique of ontology: relationship to the illeity as to the alterity of a past that never was and can never be lived in the originary or modified form of presence. . . . this notion signifies . . . the undermining of an ontology which, in its innermost course, has determined the meaning of being as presence and the meaning of language as the full continuity of speech.⁵²

Similarly, in "*Differance*," Derrida cites Levinas (along with Nietzsche and Freud) as a source for his reading of the trace: "A past that has never been present: this formula is the one that Emmanuel Levinas uses . . . to qualify the trace and enigma of absolute alterity: the Other. . . . the thought of *differance* implies the entire critique of classical ontology undertaken by Levinas."⁵³ Is this enigmatic past a mystical concept? A deeper foundation? The grounding principle for a first philosophy? The God of Judaism? Perhaps it might signify the latter in certain works of Levinas, for whom it sometimes designates a (non)relation with God. But it is not a mystical or theological concept for Derrida any more than it is for Nietzsche or Freud; in fact, far from serving as the renovated foundation for a theology, the trace is irreducible to even the most "negative of negative theologies." For the purposes of our exposition the question of the trace will have two intercomplicated moments: first, a semiological one, concerning the possibility of signification, and second, a phenomenological one, concerning the disruption of consciousness.

Against conventional sign theories that maintain a distinction between signifier and signified, *signans* and *signatum*, and which therefore reproduce the metaphysical dis-

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inction between the sensible (an expressive substance) and the intelligible (a preexisting semantic ideality), Derrida advances a nonontological theory of signification—a grammatology. Every signified, he claims, is already a signifier, and any entity or point of fixity outside the differential economy of language that would somehow exceed the chain of signs and arrest the movement of freeplay is prohibited by the trace. As a mark that makes itself present through its erasure the trace is the origin of sense, the “*differ-ance* that opens appearance and signification.”⁵⁴ The trace is therefore one of the principal concepts of semiology, designating the “pure movement which produces difference”: every element in a signifying chain is an effect of the purely formal play of differences, of “syntheses and referrals that forbid the presence of an element referring only to itself.”⁵⁵ This originary movement of synthesis and referral opens “in one and the same possibility, temporalization as well as a relationship with the other and language.”⁵⁶ Consequently, despite Habermas’ claims to the contrary, the trace is antithetical to the theological ideal of presence, for it is “neither a ground, nor a foundation, nor an origin [and] in no way can it provide for a manifest or disguised ontotheology.”⁵⁷ In fact, strictly speaking, the trace is “nothing, it is not an entity, it exceeds the question ‘What is?’ and contingently makes it possible.”⁵⁸

For Levinas the trace also designates the alterity that opens signification, the difference that signifies without making appear. Linguistic signs do not re-present Being, he claims, but only traces of the beyond Being: “If the signifyingness of a trace is not immediately transformed into the straightforwardness which still marks signs, which reveal the signified absent and bring it into immanence, it is because a trace signifies beyond being.”⁵⁹ This absence that opens the present is “refractory to the simultaneity of the present,

something unrepresentable, immemorial, pre-historical.”⁶⁰ Accordingly, since every signified is already a signifier following in the wake of the trace, language is irreducible to a “system of signs doubling up beings and relations.”⁶¹ Like the movement of *differ-ance*, which differs in space and defers in time, the trace is the “insertion of space in time, the point at which the world inclines toward a past.”⁶² It is therefore neither ontological nor ontic; prior to Being, signification interrupts the “assembling, the recollection or the present of essence. On the hither side of or beyond being, signification is the breathlessness of the spirit expiring without inspiring.”⁶³ Prior to essence and ontology, the trace marks the exhalation of the *logos*, the end of the theology of the sign. For Derrida and Levinas it also signals the dissolution of the transcendental subject.

In *Of Grammatology* Derrida rejects the possibility that the trace might renew a philosophy of the subject. In fact, in acknowledging his debt to Levinas he notes that the critique of subjectivity is undertaken precisely through the notion of the trace: Levinas’ deconstruction of presence “accomplishes itself through the deconstruction of consciousness, and therefore through the irreducible notion of the trace (*Spur*), as it appears in both Nietzschean and Freudian discourse.”⁶⁴ Texts like *Totality and Infinity* and “The Trace of the Other” confirm this claim. We have remarked that for Levinas the trace is the absence (an-archie) and temporal lapse that opens signification. This claim exceeds its semiological context and becomes the principal moment in a critique of Husserl’s conception of the *Cogito*. For Levinas, the “ultimate secret of the incarnation of the subject . . . prior to all reflection, all apperception,” is that consciousness is the effect of an anterior absence and temporization (*diachronie*).⁶⁵ The self is constituted in and through the trace. Prior to all cognition

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and memory the subject is traversed by the “pure trace of a ‘wandering cause’ inscribed in me,”⁶⁶ by an alterity that denucleates or empties one even of the “quasi-formal identity of being someone.”⁶⁷ The trace thus signals the defection of the subject: “in self consciousness, there is no longer a presence of self to self, but senescence . . . beyond the recuperation of time.”⁶⁸ With these considerations in view we are in a better position to appreciate how the trace signifies the erasure of self-presence in Derrida’s “Freud and the Scene of Writing.”

Although Freud’s model of the Mystic Writing Pad unavoidably “participates in the Cartesian space and mechanics” it seeks to surpass, it nevertheless permits us to think the exhaustion or death of a conception of the Cogito that extends from classical philosophy into Husserlian phenomenology.⁶⁹ For Derrida, the metaphor of the mystic pad and its chain of related concepts (trace, transcription, graphemics, breaching) facilitate a systematic deconstruction of the Cartesian space of subjectivity and the metaphysics of presence that animates and authorizes it:

The subject of writing does not exist if we mean by that some sovereign solitude of the author. The subject of writing is a system of relations between strata: the Mystic Pad, the psyche, society, the world. Within that scene, on that stage, the punctual simplicity of the classical subject is not to be found.⁷⁰

Derrida’s notion of the general text and his definition of the subject as a stratified system of relations reaffirm Freud’s representation of the Cogito as a text-system or space of writing. Both writers substitute an energetics or economics of force for the Cartesian conception of the Cogito as an “immobile, preexisting text,” and both understand the fabric (*textum*) and activity of the psyche in

terms of graphic textuality or “psychographics.” And since *differance* represents for Derrida “the economical concept . . . the most general structure of an economy,” recollecting the relations between the trace and subjectivity might reveal the cooperation of Freudianism and deconstruction in the critique of phenomenology.⁷¹

The problematic of writing implicit in Freud’s graphemic representation of mind introduces a catastrophe into the determination of the subject as present to itself in the act of reflection. The Freudian catastrophe signals the translation of the Cogito into an “infinite allusion” or play of forces inscribed in an economy of semiological *differance*, a different topology altogether: “the subject, and first of all the conscious and speaking subject, depends upon the system of differences and the movement of *differance* . . . [and] is not present, nor above all present to itself before *differance*.”⁷² The Cogito thus becomes an effect or production of the trace, a kind of nonlocus. By reinscribing the psyche in a trace system governed by the play of *differance* (which cannot be conceptualized on the “basis of the present, or the presence of the present”⁶³), and by identifying *differance* as the primary mode of psychical work, Freud announces the “erasure of the present and thus of the subject, of that which is proper to the subject and of his proper name.”⁷⁴ And with this erasure the Cogito and its predicates—consciousness, subjectivity, self-identity, self-proximity, self-possession—lose both their simplicity and their authority as the essential and originary grounds of philosophical reflection. Since *differance* constitutes the general structure of the psychic economy, regulating both the perception-consciousness (celluloid/wax paper) and the unconscious (wax tablet) systems, the interrelations between *differance* and the concept of self-presence may be deciphered through the strata of the Mystic pad.

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The analogy between perception and inscription represented by the first stratum of the Mystic Pad implies that perception, like the signifier, is always inscribed in a chain of differences, traces without positive terms, which defer the presentation of the signified concept. Perception is never originary: "pure perception does not exist: we are written only as we write, by the agency within us which always already keeps watch over perception, be it internal or external."⁷⁵ Perception, like the signifier, supplements the system of differentiation and deferral that produces it: "Writing supplements perception before perception appears to itself . . . 'Memory' or writing is the opening of that process of appearance itself. The 'perceived' may be read only in the past, beneath perception and after it."⁷⁶ Thus, just as inscription can only be the reiteration or repetition of signifying traces, perception can only be the reproduction of mnemonic traces circulating in the archive of the unconscious.

The primacy of perception is also threatened by the fact that the source of mnemonic traces can never be made present. Traces are inscribed in the unconscious and appear only as re-presentations or deferrals: "To defer (*differer*) thus cannot mean to retard a present possibility . . . to say that *differance* is originary is simultaneously to erase the myth of a present origin."⁷⁷ Radical alterity, not self-presence, constitutes the possibility of perception and consciousness, just as the difference between signifiers constitutes the possibility of signification. For Derrida, consciousness as text is thus not a "transcription, because there is no text present as an unconscious one to be transposed . . . the text is not conceivable in an originary or modified form of presence."⁷⁸ There is no form of presence, no presence in the form of a transcendental signified, that could somehow exceed the chain of signs; similarly, the Cogito can never exceed its textuality and recuperate

itself in the form of presence. The dream of a present, reassuring certitude outside the differential economy of language, the presence (for instance) of the transcendental ego, is precisely what the arche-trace prohibits: consciousness is "a weave of traces . . . a text nowhere present, consisting of archives which are always already transcriptions . . . repositories of a meaning that was never present, whose signified presence is always constituted by deferral."⁷⁹ In this deferral the Cogito loses its identity.

According to Derrida's reading, then, the movement of *differance* constitutes the primary activity of consciousness; the psyche protects itself (as the celluloid protects the tablet) by deferring the hazardous effects of experience. He makes this alliance between deferral and repression explicit:

All the differences in the production of unconscious traces and in the process of inscription (*Niederschrift*) can also be interpreted as moments of *differance*, in the sense of putting into reserve. According to a scheme that never ceased to guide Freud's thought, the movement of the trace is described as an effort of life to protect itself by deferring the dangerous investment, by constituting a reserve.⁸⁰

This economy of inscription, erasure, and conservation suggests that the Cogito is not only never present to itself in the act of perception but that consciousness is itself this activity of erasure, a vigilant forgetting which defers and represses the presentation of presence: the subject protects itself "by repetition, trace, *differance*."⁸¹ The arche-writing inscribed on the wax tablet of the unconscious is thus a maze of stratified inscriptions without perceptible origin and absolutely without foundation, a weave of traces in which the subject will never en-

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counter itself in the purity of the living present: one can only ever be conscious of differences and traces of traces.

We have tried to suggest that Derrida and Levinas share an understanding of the trace not as a Dionysian motif or theological foundation but as a semiological concept that marks the “breakup of identity, [and the] changing of being into signification.”⁸² The trace encapsulates the movement from ontology to grammatology in Derrida’s thought, and from Being to the beyond Being in Levinas’. Both focus on its potential as a resource for deconstructing the founding principles of phenomenology. More specifically, Levinas and Derrida employ the trace to conceptualize the disappearance of the Cogito into the field of *differance*. Thus, for Levinas, the trace marks the denucleation of the transcendental subject which knows itself in reflection or apperception: the *Cogito*

can no longer be conceptualized on the basis of “intentionality, representational activity, objectification, freedom and will.”⁸³ For Derrida, similarly, the trace constitutes the “arche-phenomenon” of memory, the lapse signifying the “erasure of the present and thus of the subject.”⁸⁴ What comes after the subject? How can the otherwise than Being yield an ethics? Assuredly, what follows in the wake of the trace must not return us to a rationality which, faced with the different and the otherwise, maintains its sovereignty and consequently fails to observe certain essential protocols of reading, listening and communicating. Perhaps in its illegibility the trace will have come to us only as a hyperbolic demand for infinitely responsive readings, readings that exercise this responsibility not in the name of a universal pragmatics but in the name of a community of Others.

ENDNOTES

1. Jürgen Habermas, “The German Idealism of the Jewish Philosophers,” in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1983), p. 33.
2. Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1987), p. 153.
3. Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Boston: Nijhoff, 1981), p. 169.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
5. Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 51.
6. Levinas, “Meaning and Sense,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 91.
7. Levinas, “Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity,” in *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 50.
8. Derrida begins his essay on Levinas, “Violence and Metaphysics,” with a citation from Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*. Since this epigraph frames and contains his entire argument it is worth citing in full: “Hebraism and Hellenism,—between these two points of influence moves our world. At one time it feels more powerfully the attraction of one of them, at another time of the other; and it ought to be, though it never is, evenly and happily balanced between them.” See *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 79.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 152.
10. Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 55.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
12. Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), p. 175.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 175.
15. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: The

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- MIT Press, 1987), p. 407.
16. Ibid., p. 166.
 17. Ibid., p. 181.
 18. Rodolphe Gasche, "Infrastructures and Systematicity," in *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, ed. John Sallis (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 3.
 19. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 182.
 20. Ibid., p. 182.
 21. Ibid., p. 167. The surplus of citations in the present essay is intended to compensate for the lack of textual evidence (and therefore thinking dialogue) Habermas offers in support of his argument.
 22. Ibid., p. 181.
 23. Ibid., p. 183.
 24. Ibid.
 25. Ibid., p. 184.
 26. "An Interview with Derrida," trans. David Allison et al., in *Derrida and Difference*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 175.
 27. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 240.
 28. See Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 153–56.
 29. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 344–45.
 30. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 181.
 31. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 40.
 32. It must be stressed that what follows is an explication of Levinas' interpretation of Hegel, Heidegger, and Husserl. We are simply attempting to describe, for the purposes of a less ambitious argument, his readings of these philosophers, which are by no means unproblematical, even for Derrida ("Violence and Metaphysics" is in fact an energetic critique of Levinas' interpretation of Heidegger and Husserl).
 33. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 47.
 34. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 82.
 35. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 43.
 36. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 346.
 37. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 36.
 38. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 9.
 39. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, p. 55.
 40. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 45.
 41. Ibid., p. 46.
 42. Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition In Husserl's Phenomenology*, trans. Andre Orianne (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 134.
 43. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 85.
 44. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 45.
 45. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 96.
 46. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 45.
 47. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 83.
 48. Ibid.
 49. Ibid.
 50. Ibid., p. 82.
 51. Ibid., p. 152.
 52. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 70.
 53. Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 21.
 54. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 65.
 55. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), p. 26.
 56. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 60.
 57. Derrida, *Positions*, p. 52.
 58. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 75.
 59. Emmanuel Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," in *Deconstruction in Context*, p. 356.
 60. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 38.
 61. Ibid., p. 46.
 62. Levinas, "The Trace of the Other," p. 358.
 63. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 14.
 64. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 70.
 65. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 111.
 66. Ibid., p. 192.
 67. Ibid., p. 117.
 68. Ibid., p. 19.
 69. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 226.
 70. Ibid., p. 227.
 71. Derrida, *Positions*, p. 8.
 72. Ibid., p. 9.
 73. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 21.
 74. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 229.
 75. Ibid., p. 226.
 76. Ibid., p. 217.
 77. Ibid., p. 203.
 78. Ibid., p. 211.
 79. Ibid.

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80. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, p. 18.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

81. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 203.

84. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, pp. 229–30.

82. Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, p. 16.

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