

Beyond Deconstruction

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I

Deconstruction is usually and rightly linked to the philosophical and literary writings of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man. These writings have come under sharp attack in recent years. I would refer you, for example, to David Lehman's discussion of Paul de Man. Deconstruction, it is argued, stands outside of reason and affirms only an endless, undisciplined, even wild freedom of commentary.¹ Now there is much to be said for this assessment of deconstruction. Geoffrey Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness* is a good indication (I think) of just how arbitrary deconstruction can be. Here, at the extreme point of interpretation, the critic is certain of himself alone and so determined to undermine every specific claim to truth which a text may make.²

But there is another and more interesting side to deconstruction, and this has to do with its continuing relation to traditional philosophical ideas of truth. I want in what follows to bring out this other side - the beyond of deconstruction - particularly as it can be found in the thought of Derrida. I see in Derrida's free play of interpretation not only criticism of older forms and a longing for the new, but insight into the substantial truth of philosophy and a talent for speculative thought. To be sure, Derrida believes that the traditional metaphysical hierarchies between idealism and realism, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, substance and subject, and so on, are one-sided and must be overturned. But he also argues that the undervalued terms of these hierarchies can only be affirmed in relation to, or as another form of, the 'higher' ones. Thus, for example, the notion of reality as something given and independent of the ideal world is dogmatic and, like all reversals, a prisoner of the metaphysical hierarchy it seeks to overthrow. In this perspective, metaphysical forms can be seen in even the most naturalistic attempts to escape the constraints of Western thought.³

¹ David Lehman, *Signs of the Times: Deconstruction and the Fall of Paul de Man* (Poseidon, 1991), pp. 41, 69, 99, and throughout

² Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness* (Yale U.P., 1980), pp. 265-83; and idem, *Minor Prophecies* (Harvard U.P., 1991), ch. 7.

³ Cf. Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (MIT Press, 1992), pp. 115 ff. Habermas sees a connection between "metaphysics" and Derrida's "critique of reason", but wants to develop a concept of reason that is neither metaphysical nor deconstructionist. In pursuing this "third" position Habermas has important things to say, but underestimates the real philosophical significance of deconstruction.

I want to argue that deconstruction in this sense amounts to a rediscovery of traditional philosophical ideas, and a reaffirmation of their truth, even if in one respect in a distorted way. In fact, Derrida from an early date was inspired to consider Western thought in Hegelian fashion; he learned from Hegel to see in the tradition an overarching demand for reconciliation, and thereby to distinguish himself from that kind of superficial criticism which sees the idea of metaphysics as something one-sided and abstract, cut off from reality and hostile to all sense and existence. For Hegel always and everywhere attacked the view that the 'Idea' is a mere logical form: "It is ... false to imagine the Idea to be mere abstraction. It is abstract certainly, insofar as everything untrue is consumed in it: but in its own self it is essentially concrete, because it is the free concept [*Begriff*] giving character to itself, and that character, reality." The Idea is not the idea of some external thing, or the concept held by this or that individual person. The Idea is the concept which gives itself the form of external existence, comprehends this form ideally, and establishes itself in it. "Every individual being is some one aspect of the Idea."⁴

Hegel's concept of philosophy is determined according to an idea of which all reality is the expression. In grasping this idea, Hegel's consciousness of himself and others necessarily becomes "absolute knowledge", that is, the knowledge of "all essentiality and all existence", the knowledge of the unity of "subject" and its "substance".⁵ Now Derrida wants very much to speak from outside Hegel's concept of philosophy, and everyone else's for that matter. Yet despite his critical intent, he has, with great energy and insight, put himself near the standpoint of Hegel's absolute knowledge. For it is relative to Hegel that he has been able to run through the history of philosophy, set forth the various dimensions of the whole - essence and existence, substance and subject - and relate them to one another. And it is relative to Hegel that he has tried to bring this history to a close, and introduce a new standard of judgement and new points of view. Derrida states: "we believe, quite simply and literally, in absolute knowledge as the *closure* if not the end of history...As for what 'begins' then - 'beyond' absolute knowledge - *unheard-of* thoughts are required, sought for across the memory of old signs."⁶ Derrida then seeks a new beginning beyond the absolute knowledge of Hegel, beyond the metaphysical determinations of substance and subject, of thought and being, and yet looks for this new beginning in these determinations, "across the memory of old signs". He leads us from Hegel to something new and then back again.

Derrida's relation to Hegel - and through him to the whole of the Western metaphysical tradition - is ambiguous. He maintains that his position is beyond Hegel's, but still insists that he is working within the Hegelian philosophy. This would not be the result if anything in Hegel allowed us to separate what we know about the world from

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Logic* (first published in 1817), trans. William Wallace (Oxford, 1975), sec. 213, p. 275 (translations modified). German: *Werke*, 20 vols., eds. Moldenhauer and Michel (Suhrkamp, 1970), vol. 8, pp. 368-9.

⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (first published in 1807), trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford, 1977), p. 485. German: *Werke*, vol. 3, p. 582. (Henceforth called PhG. I shall give page numbers from both the translation and the original, with that of the translation first.)

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Northwestern U.P., 1973), p. 102. The original is at *La voix et le phénomène* (P.U.F., 1967), p. 115. (Henceforth called SP. I shall give page numbers from the both the translation and the original, with that of the translation first.)

what we know about ourselves. But Derrida argues that Hegel makes any such separation impossible. He is no less insistent than Hegel himself that the order of reason is absolute. It is absolute not only because it can affirm everything existing in the world, but because it can endure every possible protest and criticism. Derrida says: "The unsurpassable, unique, and imperial grandeur of the order of reason...is that one cannot speak out against it except by being for it, that one can protest it only from within it; and within its domain, Reason leaves us only the recourse to stratagems and strategies."⁷ All appeals and protests against reason can only use the language of reason. From this point of view there is no chance of defeating Hegel on his own ground. Derrida confirms this in what he has to say about Emmanuel Levinas, a French theologian and important commentator on Hegel: "as soon as *he speaks* against Hegel, Levinas can only confirm Hegel, has confirmed him already."⁸ Hence Derrida's strategy: he adopts the language of metaphysics, of reason and critique, and works within it, but does so in order to renounce that language over and over again.

Derrida's connection with Hegel and the language of metaphysics is conditioned by the completeness of his critical attitude. On the one hand, he denies that philosophy can gather everything up into one point of view. This is a theme which surfaces again and again in his writings. As a critic of metaphysics, Derrida sees only deception in talk about a pure idea, a thought wholly clear to itself, a being fully present. On the other hand, he does not resist the language of metaphysics by somehow standing outside of it; he is certain that there can be no such standpoint. This explains why he is so critical of empiricism. Empiricism, he says, "destroys itself"; it lives in and from "the opposition of philosophy and nonphilosophy", but cannot sustain the opposition or make its own discourse intelligible. "The thought of this historical opposition between philosophy and empiricism is not simply empirical and it cannot be thus qualified without abuse and misunderstanding."⁹

Derrida would have the empirical world disappear into the language of metaphysics, even though this language in his view is utterly lacking in content. Here he draws on the Hegelian philosophy, or at least that part of it which reveals the naivety of any attempt to distinguish between existence (whether external or internal) and consciousness. Hegelian philosophy arises from the conviction that it is only in consciousness that 'the object' can appear to us, no matter how intuitive a sense we give to this expression. Any thought we may have of transcending consciousness is therefore futile. Even the object in its most limited and finite shape is existent for us only as something of which we are conscious. "Consciousness ... is something that goes beyond limits, and since these limits are its own, it is something that goes beyond itself. With the positing of a single particular the beyond is also established for consciousness, even if it is only *alongside* the limited

⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago U.P., 1978), p. 36. The original is in *L'écriture et la différence* (Seuil, 1967). (Henceforth called WD. I shall only give page numbers from the translation, since I do not have access to the original.)

⁸ WD, p. 120

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri C. Spivak (Johns Hopkins U.P., 1976), p. 162. The original is at *De la grammatologie* (Minuit, 1967), p. 232. (Henceforth called G. I shall give page numbers first from the translation and then from the original.)

object as in the case of spatial intuition."¹⁰ Derrida agrees completely with Hegel on this point. Nevertheless, he says that Hegelian philosophy must be purged of that tendency which still holds it within the confines of metaphysics, the metaphysics of presence.

The connection between Derrida and Hegel emerges out of this reduction of all given phenomena to identity with consciousness. Of course, Derrida takes the appearance of pure consciousness in its abstraction to be a merely negative result. He moves from one thing to another, one way of thinking to the next, with a view to finding something new, and only ever sees nothingness or emptiness in what he encounters. Hegel thought that there was truth in the realm of appearances, of phenomena, and so did not collapse it all into a sceptical consciousness. And yet it is just this scepticism which binds deconstruction and Hegelian philosophy so closely together. "The scepticism that is directed against the whole range of phenomenal consciousness," Hegel writes, "renders the Spirit for the first time competent to examine what truth is."¹¹ When Derrida finds nothing true or stable in the way things appear to us he comes to the genuinely speculative moment in deconstruction. He comes to the point which Hegel called "absolute negativity", to the dissolution of all content in the abstract 'I' and the reconstitution of the content in a form made stable by knowledge of the substantial 'self' at work within it.¹² Derrida no doubt wants both truth and content to vanish, but the negation of everything existing is itself an element, an altogether necessary element, of the 'spirit' which Hegel wanted to capture whole and entire. This connection between Derrida and Hegel helps us to see the implications of Derrida's position more clearly. Deconstruction assumes that every claim to truth is null and void, but it also presupposes the nullity of its own standpoint and thus remains bound to the substantial content it is so determined to compromise.¹³

II

To begin with the immediate intellectual background to the theory of deconstruction, the early Derrida, as is well known, worked out a detailed critique of the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Derrida, like others of his generation, started from Husserl's standpoint and developed it, but then went beyond it altogether. From the perspective of a radical critique of reason, he showed that Husserl's philosophy contradicted its own

¹⁰ PhG, p. 51/74.

¹¹ PhG, p. 50/73.

¹² PhG, p. 489/587.

¹³ See the exchange between Richard Rorty and Christopher Norris on the question of whether there are philosophical foundations for Derrida's deconstruction in *Redrawing the Lines: Analytical Philosophy, Deconstruction and Literary Theory*, ed. Reed W. Dasenbrock (Minnesota U.P., 1989). Norris argues that Derrida gives philosophical foundations for deconstructive literary criticism (pp. 189-203), while Rorty insists that Derrida does no such thing (pp. 204-16). I am on both sides on this debate. While Derrida's 'playful' critique is completely non-philosophical in intent, it keeps him under the influence of philosophy and its 'serious' claim to reason.

presuppositions and could not be sustained. The way in which he did this will help us to clarify the connection between his position and Hegel's.¹⁴

Now so far as Derrida's critique of Husserl's philosophy is concerned, we need stress only the following points. First, Husserl aimed to found a science - a "rigorous science" - called "phenomenology", and with that to satisfy the highest theoretical and practical needs of philosophy. To this end, and in conformity with the whole movement of modern philosophy, he made the ego the fundament of all knowledge and consciousness. This ego, as he understands it, is utterly abstract and formal, and every object, every content, is freely constituted by it and rendered transparent.¹⁵ Second, the ego is not only this conscious freedom and activity, but an existing, living individual, and its life presupposes a world that is prior to consciousness and its reflective operations. Phenomenology, in this sense, seeks the origin of truth and consciousness, and finds it in the immediacy of feeling or intuition. According to Husserl, "whatever presents itself in 'intuition' in primordial form (as it were in its bodily reality) is simply to be accepted as it gives itself out to be, though only within the limits in which it then presents itself". The origin of the judgement of a thing is to be found in the intuition of the thing as it is present in bodily experience. This "principle of principles" is for Husserl in every instance "a source of authority (*Rechtsquelle*) for knowledge."¹⁶

One element in Husserl's philosophy is his vision of an absolute science, of a transcendental knowledge or consciousness. A second element is his insistence that the origin of truth is to be found in intuition, in the simple certainty that there is being and life - that is, a world by virtue of which every particular experience is experienced. But then there is no logical priority of consciousness, or of the categories by which the thinking subject posits its objects; on the contrary, since the origin of truth lies in intuition, we exist before we think.¹⁷ Thus, as Husserl argues in *Experience and Judgement*, it is necessary to return to this origin of truth, to make contact with the world that lies behind our judgements and the categories they embody, to seek the primal experience where reflective distinctions have yet to be made. Husserl speaks here of a "simple believing consciousness", and notes that this involves the perception of a "preliminary presence", a "passive pre-giveness", which is "always already there" before

¹⁴ See Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding (CUP, 1979), ch. 5. I am indebted to Descombes' lucid summary of Derrida's relation to both Husserl and Hegel.

¹⁵ Edmund Husserl, *Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft* (first published in 1910-11) (Vittorio Klostermann, 1965), p. 7 ff.

¹⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology* (first published in 1913), trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (George Allen and Unwin, 1931), p. 92. German: Husserliana: Edmund Husserl *Gesammelte Werke* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), vol. 3, part I, p. 51.

¹⁷ See Jean-Luc Marion, "A Relief for Theology", *Critical Inquiry* (Summer, 1994), 580-3. I agree with Marion that Husserl's phenomenology prepared the way for Heidegger insofar as it "no longer limits itself to sensible intuition but admits all originally donating intuition". I do not agree that Husserl ever "finally" gave up "metaphysics" and "the transcendental project" (582). Husserl remained tied to the idea of a transcendental (a priori) consciousness even as he developed the notion of an (a posteriori) intuition. See too the discussion of Husserl and Heidegger in Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago U.P., 1991), *passim*. (I am grateful to my colleague, Dr. W.J. Hankey, for giving me these references.)

any discovery of meaning or "awakening of interest".¹⁸ He explores this perception in a discussion of the preliminary and pregiven experience which grounds all our articulate and explicit knowledge of things. Such experience includes the apprehension of an "original present", a present which contains both past and future, an eternal now, a fully explicit and present object.¹⁹

This inquiry into the origin of truth which points us to the fulness of experience inspired Derrida to write his first major published essay, his *Introduction to Husserl's Origin of Geometry*.²⁰ But already in this early essay one can see a difference between Husserl and Derrida which is of considerable importance for Derrida's later work. For, as Husserl himself had pointed out, the present is never merely present, but always already past and still to come. This is the chief lesson of the famous lectures on the internal time-consciousness which Husserl gave between 1904 and 1910. The present in its immediacy, the 'now', appears as unstable, ever changing, continually 'running-off' into the past. "Since a new now is always presenting itself, each now is changed into a past, and thus the entire continuity of the running-off of the pasts of the preceding points moves uniformly 'downward' into the depths of the past."²¹ The present is the immanently negative and destructive moment which vanishes as quickly as it arises. Every purely intellectual or speculative science, according to Husserl, has as its origin this difference or non-coincidence of the present with itself. But then there arises a question the full force of which Derrida thinks Husserl failed to appreciate: is anything ever altogether present, or does the present itself actually take place?²²

Husserl's history of European science and philosophy, his vision of the past and the future, hangs on this question. His answer, as Derrida shows, falls in the opposition between fact and reason.²³ In fact, we can be confronted by something from the past, a past way of life, a past way of thinking, the significance of which escapes us. It can mean nothing to us. This is clearly a consideration of some importance for historians or for anybody presented with an artifact or a cultural object of some sort which no longer makes any sense. But by right, according to Husserl, the recovery of an object, the recollection of it, is always possible. We know *a priori* that a past object is not merely past, but also ideally present. It exists as much in our present consciousness of it, in the 'Living Present', as in material that is constantly changing or passing away: "the absolute primordially of the Living Present permits the reduction, without negation, of all alterity. The Living Present constitutes the other as other in itself and the same as the same in the

¹⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Experience and Judgment*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks (Northwestern U.P., 1973), pp. 29-30. German: *Erfahrung und Urteil* (published posthumously) ed. Ludwig Landgrebe (Claassen, 1964), pp. 23-6.

¹⁹ *Experience and Judgement*, p. 383; *Erfahrung und Urteil*, p. 463

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's "Origin of Geometry": An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Nebraska U.P., 1978). The original: *Introduction a "L'Origine de la géométrie" de Husserl* (P.U.F., 1962). (Henceforth called OG. Since I do not have access to the original, I shall only give page numbers from the translation.)

²¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* (first published in 1928), trans. James S. Churchill (Indiana U.P., 1964), p. 50. German: *Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins* (Max Niemeyer, 1980), p. 23.

²² OG, p. 82.

²³ OG, p. 47.

other."²⁴In this way, in raising ourselves to the level of consciousness, we can attain the highest degree of certainty. By an act of consciousness we can make meaningless objects meaningful, and continue to think what we think despite the radical alterity of other moments and acts.²⁵

Derrida observes that for Husserl history is always a "pure history" of "meaning".²⁶ History is never just haphazard, or violent, or treacherous. It is a series of conscious acts, a succession of meaningful forms, an intelligible pattern of beliefs established across time, from generation to generation. History - the only history that counts - is orderly, peaceful and rational. Behind all of this, of course, there lies Husserl's primary assumption, his most deeply-felt conviction, that being is identifiable with meaning, that the way of the world is no different from an act of consciousness. Still, as Derrida notes, the identity of being and meaning is never given here and now but must be thought within a present that includes past and future, i.e., "the world's infinite horizon".²⁷ Indeed, it is only because Husserl denies the actuality of reason that he can celebrate the "infinite tasks" of science.²⁸

Husserl embraces an ideal, a truth, which is both identical with the world and disproportionate to it. Naturally, he is aware of the contradiction implied within this conception of truth and tries to remove it. He holds that the origin of truth is to be found in the intuition of something absolute which is given and present and that this is to be grasped and made meaningful by the ego in a free act of consciousness. The ego determines what is true and meaningful, but for this very reason is directed to an end which is infinitely remote. There can be no apprehension of this end in what is "factual and worldly", in the here and now, but by right only.²⁹ The idea of truth or meaning is therefore for Husserl bound up with the idea in a Kantian sense of infinite historical progress.³⁰

The passages in Husserl which mention God are equally concerned with this contradiction in human existence, the contradiction between the *idea* or the *ideal* of truth and meaning and the *reality* of meaninglessness. If being is identical with my meaning then I must be one with God and share in eternal truth. Derrida makes this point in a discussion of the traditional metaphysical path which starts from the world and the human consciousness of it and leads to knowledge of God.³¹ If the world and my consciousness of truth are to be the same, then I must be one with God. I must acquire, or

²⁴ OG, p. 86.

²⁵ See Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Phenomenology*, trans. Brian Beakley (SUNY, 1991), pp. 60-1.

²⁶ OG, p. 102.

²⁷ OG, p. 106.

²⁸ OG, p. 128.

²⁹ OG, p. 72 n.

³⁰ On the difference between Kant's idealistic view of progress and Husserl's investigations into a "more profound" history, see OG, p. 42. See too the famous article approved by Husserl and cited by Derrida (OG, p. 42 n.): Eugen Fink, "The Phenomenological Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Contemporary Criticism", in *The Phenomenology of Husserl*, ed. R.O. Elvelton (Quadrangle, 1970), pp. 73-147. Fink draws a distinction between the psychological nature of the Kantian critique and Husserl's inquiry into the "origin of the world" (p. 95).

³¹ OG, p. 45 n.

rather already possess, the divine standpoint of a speculative metaphysics or an absolute idealism. Otherwise, my concept of truth would be no more than "the indefinite *openness* to truth and to phenomenality".³²

But for both Husserl and Derrida our divinity is an illusion. We know in advance that right and fact will never coincide. This is what Derrida calls, even at this early stage in his career, the "primordial Difference" between fact and right, between being and meaning, between humanity and divinity.³³ We cannot pass from human consciousness ('I am conscious of being') to divine consciousness ('being is conscious of itself'). There can be no deification of humanity, no humanization of God.³⁴ But then we cannot say how being and meaning are related to one another. Being is given as it is, and consciousness is something separate and apart.

Phenomenology as we see it through Husserl has a positive though subordinate role to play within Derrida's thinking. This is clear from what Derrida himself has to say about "the hidden historical field" of phenomenology.³⁵ Husserl makes meaning into an infinite principle which for Derrida means that it is undermined by its opposition to the finite.³⁶ The problem in Husserl is that of a pure consciousness, an empty ego, which presupposes being but can neither overcome it nor make it intelligible. Husserl sets himself the task of rendering being intelligible, but this task can never be realized, is there simply in the form of "an infinite Idea", the content of which "can never immediately and as such present itself in an intuition".³⁷

Derrida goes beyond this opposition in his meditation on language (*langage*). Language is the place in which Husserl's demand for absolute truth can appear. It is "the indispensable medium and condition of possibility for absolute ideal Objectivity, for *truth* itself". Language in the form of speech dissolves the immediate givenness of things and continually shapes and reshapes our vision of the world. "Speech (*parole*) is no longer simply the expression (*Aüßerung*) of what, without it, would already be an object: caught again in its primordial purity: speech constitutes the object, and is a concrete juridical condition of truth."³⁸ Speech is the pure nullification of the antithesis between object and subject, of finite being in its opposition to truth.

But speech is connected to writing which opens up the field of transcendental experience. In writing Derrida encounters the meaninglessness of the past, the stubborn lack of intelligibility in history. He refers to the "silence of prehistoric arcana and buried civilizations" as well as to "the entombment of lost intentions" and "the illegibility of the lapidary inscription". These things, he says, reveal not only that the "transcendental

³² OG, p. 148.

³³ OG, p. 153.

³⁴ The conclusion of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* highlights, and radicalizes, the problem: "It is as if the world, man, and man-in-the-world were only able to produce an abortive God." Cited by Vincent Descombes in *Modern French Philosophy*, p. 53.

³⁵ OG, p. 51.

³⁶ OG, p. 138.

³⁷ OG, p. 106.

³⁸ OG, pp. 76-7.

subject" is a failure but that at work within it is a "transcendental sense of death".³⁹ In other words, the quest for absolute truth is subverted by the very act of writing it depends upon. Writing both institutes and undermines truth and meaning.

All language tends towards meaninglessness, but writing sums up and completes the process. "The field of writing has its originality in its ability to dispense with, *due to its sense*, every present reading in general."⁴⁰ Here Derrida is being deliberately paradoxical. He is not just saying that both meaning and the lack of meaning are intrinsic to writing. He is saying that writing, as the place of truth and meaning, makes meaninglessness possible. Indeed, one could say that, for Derrida, writing is never more meaningful than when one fails to make any sense of it at all!

The activity of uncovering such systematic incoherence within a text or an object, a work of art, for example, is what the later Derrida calls 'deconstruction.' The term has a passive as well as an active sense. Derrida wants to undermine all fixed conceptions of truth, but operates entirely from within the language of truth that is given to him. The simple 'destruction' of truth and meaning is out of the question. "The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures."⁴¹ The same spirit of resignation, of passive acceptance, can be found in another one of Derrida's terms of art, 'différance', which is not quite 'difference' (with an 'e'). It is purposely misspelt (with an 'a') in Derrida's text and refers to the 'deferral' of meaning in language. Any given structure of truth can be undermined not only because the critic can refer to different interpretive contexts, but because language 'defers itself'. Language refers us to "the entire configuration of its meanings", but the coherent and definitive truth of these meanings is always out of reach, i.e. deferred.⁴²

Différance or deferral is at the same time a purely intellectual movement, the movement of that finite which turns out to be infinite, because it is forever negating itself. This is the most important result of Derrida's critique of Husserl's phenomenology. We find ourselves in a situation in which truth can arise only out of the negation of all things finite, as out of pure nothingness. "Certainly nothing has preceded this situation. Assuredly nothing will suspend it...And contrary to what phenomenology - which is always phenomenology of perception - has tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing, the thing itself always escapes."⁴³

³⁹ OG, p. 88.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ OG, p. 24/39.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago U.P., 1982) pp 8-9. The original is at *Marges de la philosophie* (Minuit, 1972) pp. 8-9. (Henceforth called Margins. I shall give page numbers from both the translation and the originals, with that of the translation first.)

⁴³ SP, p. 104/117. On this point, Derrida is especially critical of Merleau-Ponty's attempt to read into Husserl a form of "historical relativism", that is, an enthusiasm for "factual experimental inquiry" and for "lived experiences" of diverse sorts. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man", in *Primacy of Perception*(Northwestern U.P., 1964), pp. 83-4. Quoted by Derrida in OG, pp. 111-12.

We can perhaps now see more clearly why Derrida was drawn to Husserl's phenomenology. Derrida finds that Husserl not only opposes finite being to consciousness, but points the way to a sceptical dissolution of the opposition. Husserl's great achievement on this view was to show that there is in fact endless discrepancy between our original intuition of reality and the intentions of consciousness, that there can be no reconciliation between our intuition and the free act of consciousness. There is an unbridgeable gulf between them, a gulf which takes the form of an infinite distance, a remote end, an abysmal task.

Derrida maintains that the division of an abstract ego from its content cannot be sustained, that from Husserl's own standpoint the finite is not grounded in reason and consequently cannot be justified. "Husserl describes, and in one and the same movement effaces, the emancipation of speech as nonknowing."⁴⁴ It is a small step from Husserl's position to Derrida's view that all the finite is simple nullity. All Derrida has to do is to eliminate the actual content of phenomenology. And he does so as soon as he makes language logically anterior to the conscious ego and to its intuition of existence.

In this way Derrida annuls the distinction between what is original and what is derived, between what is simply present to one and what is there by virtue of an act of consciousness. There is no doubt a certain arbitrariness in this view. Yet it gives us an insight into a whole theory of language. Derrida says, "the system of signs is constituted solely by the difference in terms, and not by their plenitude. The elements of signification function due not to the compact force of their nuclei but rather to the network of oppositions that distinguish them, and then relates them one to another."⁴⁵ Language has as its central feature the relation of words to one another, never the relationship of words to things, but always the relationship of words to one another, of discourse to other discourse, signs to other signs. No doubt the influence of Saussure's theory of linguistics can be discerned here. There is, as Derrida indicates, no connection in consciousness or in sensation between a sign and what it signifies. A 'signifier' relates only to other signifiers never to a 'signified.'⁴⁶ This is what Derrida emphasizes in his study of Husserl's phenomenology, and he intends thereby to go beyond all limits, to dissolve the apparent givenness of the finite world, and to move directly from this encounter with nothingness into a world of infinite interrelationships and substitutions among words.

III

Husserl had elevated all questions of truth and meaning to the *consciousness* of the free ego, referring us at the same time to the *intuition* of a world, to a power independent of rational cognition which makes itself felt in sensible reality. In a manner reminiscent

⁴⁴ SP, p. 97/109.

⁴⁵ Margins, p. 10/11

⁴⁶ See the account of 'sign, signified, signifier' in Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (first published in 1916), trans. Wade Baskin (Philosophical Library, 1959), pp. 66-7. Cited by Derrida in SP, pp. 46-7 n/50-2 n.

of Hegel's critique of Kant and Fichte, the early Derrida discovered a discrepancy between this intuited world and the endless investigations which Husserl conducted into the ego and the inward reflection that characterizes it.⁴⁷ The conjunction of intuition and consciousness in Husserl's philosophy implies, as Derrida says, "an immediate eidetic", a purely formal activity of thought which inevitably tends to annihilate the content of intuition.⁴⁸ This dialectic, which challenges all given beliefs and convictions, unsettling everything that is external to it, works so that nothing remains at the end but the action of the ego itself, the bare abstraction of thought - consciousness without an object.

In Hegel's philosophy the endlessly critical and destructive aspect of the dialectic is conditioned by "absolute" truth, the "positive Idea that being is strictly nothing outside of the infinite, or apart from ego and thought. Both being and thought are one".⁴⁹ The actual content of the world, the substantial totality of things, is not separate and distinct from thought, but absolutely present to it. This is not Derrida's view. He denies that the unity of thought with its object can be clearly or even *implicitly* present, that the ego can penetrate into and beyond diverse forms of being and calmly contemplate them, that the 'Idea' can be the basis at once of the ego and the external and natural. For this reason Derrida remains tied to the transcendental standpoint he finds so empty of content. He cannot escape the discrepancy he discovers at every stage of Husserl's philosophical development: that which is distinct from the ego still presents itself as an other, an alien and unintelligible affair. Still, there is the other perspective in which Derrida's infinitely critical thinking is closer to Hegel's absolute philosophy than Husserl's finite philosophy is.⁵⁰

Derrida recognizes that Hegel's philosophy brings together opposite tendencies in philosophy. Both objectivity and consciousness, being and thought, tradition and critique, have a place in his system. Hegel's philosophy is profoundly traditional, for it is only the "presence or presentation" of what is already known - i.e., the "truth of man" as it appears to him in his consciousness of the "past". At the same time Hegel's philosophy is essentially critical, for it announces the "death" of the "finite man", the disappearance of "man past".⁵¹ Hegel wants to affirm all past philosophy and religion, but makes no effort to limit modern freedom and self-consciousness. His aim is not only to relate these forces to each other, but to demonstrate their fundamental unity and coherence.

Derrida seems to grasp the unity of Hegel's work and to avoid any one-sided interpretation of his thought. He acknowledges that tradition and critique, positivity and negativity, come together as one in Hegel's philosophy to form a "profound, systematic truth". Yet he does not at all believe that the opposed directions or tendencies of Hegel's thought can be fused in one system. On the contrary, he holds that Hegel's critical self-consciousness, his "very necessary" preoccupation with "negativity", can be separated

⁴⁷ OG, p. 45 n.

⁴⁸ OG, p. 67.

⁴⁹ . G.W.F. Hegel, *Faith and Knowledge* (first published in 1802), trans. Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (SUNY, 1977), p. 190. German: *Werke*, vol. 2, p. 431.

⁵⁰ See Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Harvard U.P., 1986), ch. 9.

⁵¹ Margins, pp. 120-1/142-4

from the metaphysical notion of "presence".⁵² He looks back on Hegel's philosophy as the final truth of its tradition, and thus as the first indication of a new kind of thinking. This thinking overcomes the traditional categories of Western thought precisely because it is free of the "dialectics of truth and negativity".⁵³

Derrida portrays Hegel's philosophy as a monumental - and successful - effort to bring together metaphysical thought and modern freedom, traditional belief and critical reflection. Hegel's driving ambition was to enter into the thought of the past and appropriate it, to understand the tradition and make it his own. In realizing this ambition, however, his philosophy inevitably points beyond itself. Derrida agrees with Georges Bataille: "He [Hegel] did not know to what extent he was right".⁵⁴ To the extent that Hegel knows the totality of tradition he knows the openness and indeterminacy of the future. This relation of past and future to each other allows Hegel both to recognize and to transcend the "passage" of time, the "vanishing" of the present.⁵⁵ It also allows Derrida to explore the possibility of something new and different, that is, a "rigorous critical" questioning which cannot be subordinated to any traditional "law" or philosophical "tribunal".⁵⁶

Derrida develops his position out of a close reading of Hegel's philosophy. In a very fine example of textual analysis, he shows how Hegel distinguishes 'eternity' from the succession of moments presenting itself to consciousness as the process of 'time'. Insofar as the single moment, the "now" (*Jetzt*), comes and goes, arises and vanishes, it is limited and thus a "finite" expression of the "present" (*Gegenwart*).⁵⁷ Hegel, as a traditional philosopher, makes this point in order to criticize the limited and finite aspect of the "temporal form" of consciousness. He moves from one moment of consciousness to another with a view to arriving at an "eternal" present, but there is a difficulty: every expression of "infinite" presence is as much in time as outside of it. The concept of eternity necessarily manifests itself in time, and in so doing "loses in difference the unity of its beginning and its end".⁵⁸ This is really Derrida's last word on Hegel. What he finds acceptable is not the result but the process of Hegel's philosophy. He is certain that Hegel's method yields no real result, that his argument reveals no final truth, because the law under which it operates requires that every concept be turned by an immanent critique into its own opposite. The critique is utterly destructive: everything both true and untrue is consumed in it.⁵⁹

⁵² Margins, pp. 38-9/41-2.

⁵³ Margins, p. 121/144.

⁵⁴ Georges Bataille, "Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice", *Deucalion*, 5 (1955), 35-6. Quoted by Derrida in WD, pp. 251, 260.

⁵⁵ Margins, p. 46 n/51-2 n.

⁵⁶ Margins, p. 39/42.

⁵⁷ Margins, p. 46 n/51 n.

⁵⁸ Margins, p. 52 n/60 n.

⁵⁹ On this point, I found it useful to consult Jacob Loewenberg, *Hegel's Phenomenology* (Open Court, 1965), pp. 20-2, 93-6, 371. See too James Doull, review of *Hegel's Phenomenology*, by Jacob Loewenberg, in *Dialogue*, 5 (1966-7), 96-8. I have drawn much from Doull's penetrating review.

Derrida therefore pits the negative side of Hegel's thought against the positive side. Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung*, the surpassing and conserving of one form of consciousness after another, is seen not as the point at which negativity is overcome, but the point from which negativity proceeds to undermine every possible system of truth. The *Aufhebung* is known, not as the appearance of the spirit, of the substantial self, but rather as the "empty form" of its own restless movement. "This displacement is paradigmatic: within a form of writing, an intraphilosophical concept, the speculative concept par excellence, is forced to designate a movement which properly constitutes the excess of every possible philosopheme."⁶⁰ This movement of thought subordinates Hegel to a position for which he had harsh words in his *Encyclopaedia*: "If the result - the realized Spirit in which all mediation has superseded itself - is taken in a merely formal, contentless sense, so that the spirit is not also at the same time known as *implicitly* existent and objectively self-unfolding; - then that infinite subjectivity is the merely formal self-consciousness, knowing itself in itself as absolute - Irony." The ironic self-consciousness declares that it has superseded all previous religion and philosophy, but in Hegel's view "falls back rather into the vanity of wilfulness". It can make everything "objective" empty and vain but is itself "emptiness and vanity", for it is only by "chance" and "its own good pleasure" that it gives itself content and direction.⁶¹ This is how Hegel understands the "irony" of Fichte and Schlegel. Derrida would collapse Hegel into the ironical self-consciousness of Fichte and Schlegel.⁶²

Derrida interprets Hegel against Hegel, but does not propose to offer a more coherent or more meaningful philosophy. Rather he affirms the negativity of time, the ambiguity of everything present, in a way which challenges all past religion and philosophy. We can see this in his account of the history of writing. Derrida finds that there is an entire tradition which subordinates the written to the spoken word. This tradition takes the oral sign to be the sign of something immediately and directly present: an individual's original gesture or action. Writing arises when one takes the oral sign to be insufficient, when one needs to reach others who are absent or incapable of seeing or hearing what has originally happened. The written sign is the sign of the oral sign, the sign of a sign. Writing in this sense fulfils a supplementary function. Indeed, for Derrida, "writing is the supplement par excellence since it marks the point where the supplement proposes itself as supplement of supplement, sign of sign, *taking the place of* a speech already significant".⁶³ But this formulation implies that the function of the written sign is really the function of every sign. Every sign is a 'signifier' whose 'signified' is always another signifier, never the object, the thing itself, present before us, in our field of vision.

At the origin of speech and writing there is no origin, no real presence at all, but only a supplement in the place of an origin that is always absent. This explains why, for

⁶⁰ WD, p. 275.

⁶¹ G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind* (first published in 1817), trans. William Wallace (Oxford, 1971), sec. 571, p. 301. German: *Werke*, vol 10, p. 377.

⁶² For comments on the 'irony' of Fichte and Schlegel, see among many places G.W.F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art* (posthumously edited), trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1975), pp. 61-73. German: *Werke*, vol 13, pp. 93- 9. See too the discussion of Hegel as 'ironist' in Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (CUP, 1989), ch. 5.

⁶³ G, p. 281/398.

Derrida, the metaphysical and theological idea of an "originary presence" is so deeply flawed. No system of thought can eliminate the ambiguity of the present, that is, its complicated relation to past and future (both of which are absent). What Derrida calls the "trace" is the present sign of something absent, an absent past or an absent future. Every sign is surrounded by this strange trace of something we can neither fully remember nor make absolutely manifest. It is therefore necessary to conceive of a past which never was present, and never will appear, a past which is no longer bound up with our sense of ourselves - an "absolute past". It is also necessary to speak of a "future", of a "cosmic time", which cannot be anticipated or envisaged within any "metaphysical" or "dialectical" system of thought.⁶⁴

But there is an affinity between Derrida's 'trace' - the proposition that there is no origin which founds knowledge - and Hegel's 'absolute'. Derrida knows well enough that Hegel's philosophy incorporates into itself the 'infinite' movement, the 'negative' attitude which excludes everything that is, but which for that very reason stands in relation to 'totality' and is determined by it.⁶⁵ Hegel's philosophy is a vision of the whole that is active and eternally present to itself in everything that can be differentiated from it. There is for Hegel no consciousness without an object, but equally no object without a consciousness. Nothing is absolutely and immediately present from the beginning, everything is derived, to the point where the whole system of 'metaphysical' or 'dialectical' mediations is known as the only reality.⁶⁶ Derrida insists that his reflection on time and the present "differs" profoundly from Hegel's vision of these things. Yet he does not want us to see his position as a "break" with Hegel's standpoint.⁶⁷

Derrida's position is a "displacement" of Hegelian discourse as "infinitesimal" as it is "radical".⁶⁸ This displacement demands a certain playfulness which is foreign to Hegelian philosophy, but does no more than betray the discourse within discourse, the truth within truth. The displacement is not the experience of a full and present meaning establishing itself at the limit of difference, of negativity, of death. The experience of displacement is rather the experience of "absolute difference".⁶⁹ And yet there is a link between Hegel's thinking of difference - which is always in aid of truth and meaning - and Derrida's thinking of difference, which is beyond all identifying thought. Derrida's thinking is not opposed to Hegel's; nor is it a meditation on the negative absence of truth and meaning, a 'negative theology'.⁷⁰ Derrida presupposes truth in the Hegelian sense, truth which is active and fully present in the world, for without such truth he would never actually arrive at the point of non-presence, never really experience the displacement of truth and meaning. This is why he is always looking to subvert philosophical discourse, but admits

⁶⁴ G, pp. 66-7/97-8.

⁶⁵ Margins, pp. 13-4/14.

⁶⁶ Margins, p. 20/21.

⁶⁷ Margins, p. 14/15.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ WD, p. 263.

⁷⁰ Jacques Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials", in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, eds. Harold Coward and Tobie Foshay (SUNY, 1992), pp. 77 ff.

that "philosophy, Hegelian speculation, absolute knowledge and everything that they govern...will govern endlessly in their closure".⁷¹

From Derrida's point of view both Hegel and the history of philosophy offer no more than a history of ordinary discourse about the external world, reason, and goodness. Philosophy is a speculative discourse, which sets out from a certain experience of thinking, and becomes at length a thinking of experience. Experience and thinking are continuously related to one another in this way through the more or less 'vulgar' concept of 'presence'. This presence is the basis on which 'absence' has traditionally been understood and interpreted. But Derrida does not propose that we now think this absence, make it our foundation, or bring it to light, as if it were some forgotten reality. Rather, we must accept that the history of philosophy cannot be replaced, that metaphysics is destined to govern our thinking. Only then, he says, will we be free of the ordinary or vulgar tendency to see things speculatively, to look around for a still 'hidden' truth: "it is the tie between truth and presence that must be thought, in a thought that henceforth may no longer need to be either *true* or *present*".⁷²

Derrida's meditation on truth and presence is and is not compatible with the history of philosophy. His meditation is another thinking of truth, another experience of presence. It is a thinking that goes beyond the metaphysical moment toward a less restricted, more general experience of truth and presence. But this more general experience offers itself both in the texts of metaphysics and in Derrida's reading of these texts. Hence the ambiguity of his whole approach. Derrida will limit himself to an interpretation of a given metaphysical text, even as he seeks to uncover traces of "an entirely other text". He says that every text can be divided into two, but denies that there is any real opposition between them: "Two texts, two hands, two visions, two ways of listening. Together simultaneously and separately".⁷³ It is the metaphysical text which allows the other text to be deciphered, albeit in ways which the metaphysical mind can never grasp.

Derrida's thinking is always both philosophical and anti-philosophical, both inside and outside the truth of a text. Every metaphysical text from the beginning is compromised, fractured, divided into two. Between the text by Hegel and itself there passes in Derrida's words "a barely perceptible veil" separating Hegel's thought from itself.⁷⁴ A reading of Hegel's text, as of any metaphysical text, requires a double perspective in order to do justice to this inherent duplicity. This double perspective splits the metaphysical text into two. A slight displacement, a slight play on the meaning of the text, is enough to move from the first to the second. But it is always the duplicity of the first text which enables one to exceed or transgress in the direction of the second text. It is Hegel's text itself which makes Derrida's double reading of Hegel possible.⁷⁵

⁷¹ WD, p. 276.

⁷² Margins, p. 38/42.

⁷³ Margins, p. 65/75-6.

⁷⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago U.P., 1981), p. 207. French: *La Dissemination* (Seuil, 1972), p. 235.

⁷⁵ The most compelling of Derrida's 'double' readings involve Hegel and Bataille - in *Writing and Difference* (1967) - and Hegel and Genet, in *Glas* (Gailée, 1974). See too the doubling of Hegel and

This brings us back to Derrida's belief that Hegel's absolute knowledge marks the "closure", if not the "end", of history. Derrida distinguishes in Hegel a timeless system of thought, as "servile" as it is "full of meaning", and a critique of tradition, which points the way to something new. This critique of tradition, the "passage" from one form of "past" consciousness to the next, is what he thinks is promising in Hegel - the critique itself and the "play" of meaning and non-meaning it brings into view. Between this arbitrary play and Hegelian speculation there is obvious tension and difference. Derrida's absolute knowledge is not what Hegel thought it was, that is, the consciousness that continuously and forever completes the "circle" of meaning, "which is always where it comes from, and where it is going to". Derrida speaks rather of discontinuity, of the desire to emerge from the "tissue" of absolute knowledge, to break out in an "absolute rending". Such violent Nietzschean desire could not be farther from Hegelian speculation. At the same time, however, Derrida refers to an absolute knowledge "once more become 'solid' and servile in once more having been read".⁷⁶ Thus there is continuity between the desire to go beyond absolute knowledge and the need to affirm it. Absolute knowledge, in Derrida's view, is a two-way process of interaction between absolute meaning and absolute non-meaning, between absolute necessity and absolute contingency. Absolute knowledge is the constant oscillation between the timeless and the historical, reason and its other, which is nothing but the work of deconstruction itself.

Derrida could not be more ironical: what he finds admirable in Hegel is the idea of history as a succession of diverse and disconnected forms of life. By contrast Hegel emphasized the idea that history is a connected series of forms, a progressive realization of a universal human freedom. Much could be said about this difference.⁷⁷ At the very least it is clear that Derrida has absorbed the Nietzschean and Heideggerian critique of humanism. His animus against Hegel (and Marx) is such that he will not allow the successive forms of spirit from ancient Greece to the present day to embody an uninterrupted history of humanity. What he takes from Hegel is the notion of "ruptures" and "discontinuities" in the continuum of history, "displacements" in the movement of concepts from period to period. "In order to mark *effectively* the displacements of the sites of conceptual inscription, one must articulate the systematic chains of the movement according to their proper generality and their proper period, according to their unevennesses, their inequalities of development, the complex figures of their inclusions, implications, exclusions, etc."⁷⁸ But Hegel says: "These forms of spirit are distinguished from the previous forms in that they are real spirits, proper actualities, and instead of being forms of consciousness only, are forms of a world".⁷⁹ Derrida so empties historical

Nietzsche in Derrida's "L'âge de Hegel", in *Qui a peur de la philosophie*, ed. GREPH (Oublier-Flammarion, 1977), pp. 73-107. Derrida's work in the 1980s and beyond has frequently involved a meditation on Hegel and the history of philosophy. See the proceedings from a colloquium at Cerisy-la-Salle in 1980 - *Les fins de l'homme*, eds. Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy (Galilée, 1981) - and a collection of essays on the institutional aspects of philosophy, *Du Droit à la philosophie* (Galilée, 1990). I do not have the space in this essay to comment on these writings.

⁷⁶ WD, pp. 275-7.

⁷⁷ See, for example, Manfred Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?*, trans. Sabine Wilke and Richard Gray (Minnesota U.P., 1989), lecture 17.

⁷⁸ Margins, p. 72/83.

⁷⁹ PhG, p. 265/326 (translation modified).

forms of worldly content that Hegel's concept of spirit appears to fade away into nothing, to lose all actuality. The identification with 'spirit' or with the history of 'humanity' seems impossible - a more or less naive attempt to secularize the idea of becoming one with God.

And yet what Derrida says about history is linked to a discussion of Plato and Christianity in which he appears to side with Hegel against Heidegger. I am thinking of his attempt to connect philosophy and religion with the development of freedom and self-consciousness in his little book on spirit. Like Heidegger, he finds in the "Platonic-Christian" tradition the origin of that "rational" and "intellectual" freedom which was fully realized only in "modern Idealism".⁸⁰ Unlike Heidegger, he does not imagine that the unity of the divine subject and the human subject which underlies this history can be forgotten or overcome. In fact, he argues that Heidegger was insufficiently aware of the continuing "power" of the Christian interpretation of history. "We have here a program and combinatory whose power remains abyssal."⁸¹ But then Derrida at least implicitly acknowledges the integration of the divine and human in his view of history in that human subjectivity, aware in its purity of its own emptiness, is identical with the self-unfolding of the divine throughout the ages.⁸² Hegel takes a similar view when he insists that the identity of the divine with the human - abstractly realized in the "Fate" of ancient Greece - is the basis and goal of the entire history of humanity.⁸³

Derrida brings out the negative or restless aspect of Hegel's philosophical thought. In this light, the history of philosophy can be nothing but a contest between divergent philosophical positions, a struggle between irreconcilable aspects of the same intellectual tradition. Derrida's "double writing" is intended to reflect this endless shifting of emphasis between the "higher" and "lower" terms of the classical philosophical hierarchies that are forever re-establishing themselves. Certainly, Derrida also wants to be beyond the oppositions: "By means of this double, and precisely stratified, dislodged and dislodging, writing, we must also mark the interval between inversion, which brings low what was high, and the irruptive emergence of a new 'concept', a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime."⁸⁴ But the desire for a "new" concept in this sense is driven by the kind of scepticism with which Hegel was familiar: "The scepticism that ends up with the bare abstraction of nothingness or

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Chicago U.P., 1987), pp. 96, 127 n. French: *De l'esprit* (Galilée, 1987), pp. 155-6, 121 n.

⁸¹ *Of Spirit*, p. 109; *De l'esprit*, p. 179. The link between present-day views of history and Christian eschatology is also the theme of one of Derrida's recent lectures on Marx. See Jacques Derrida, "Spectres of Marx", *New Left Review*, 205 (1994), 31-58. Derrida lays special emphasis on the continuing influence of Hegel's "messianism" on both Marxist and anti-Marxist discourse (pp. 44,54).

⁸² For Derrida's specifically Jewish background, and for details on the heretical tradition of rabbinic interpretation from which he springs, see Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses* (New York U.P., 1982), pp. 163-78.

⁸³ PhG, pp. 410 ff./495 ff.

⁸⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago U.P., 1981), p. 42. French: *Positions* (Minuit, 1972), p. 57. (Henceforth called Positions. I will give page references from both the translation and the original, with that of the translation first.)

emptiness cannot get any further from there, but must wait to see whether something new comes along and what it is, in order to throw it too into the same empty abyss."⁸⁵

Derrida resists any suggestion that his position can be reduced to 'scepticism'.⁸⁶ He says of his critical standpoint that it is with "all the risks, but without the metaphysical or romantic pathos of negativity".⁸⁷ I take it that this is because he regards the critical consciousness as the point at which traditional forms of thought and life continuously come into view. But for this reason he tends to underestimate the risks in his debate with Hegel. Derrida warns us again and again that the opposition in Hegel between timeless thought and historical change, between traditional wisdom and radical critique, cannot be "immediately" overcome. He himself concedes that the opposition of philosophical and historical forms has a certain "necessity", and therefore that the debate with the traditional metaphysical account of history is "interminable".⁸⁸ The unbroken connection of the critical deconstructive consciousness with Hegel's account of philosophy and history is in fact everywhere assumed in Derrida's writings.

It would take a longer and more detailed argument to make such a connection clear. Here it is enough to say that it is the nature of Derrida's position to have its opposite within it, i.e. the metaphysical thought which grasps the fundamental unity and coherence of the tradition. Since deconstruction requires that its thinking shall be open and indeterminate it does not understand itself in conformity with its implicit nature. It tries to deny what is in it implicitly and to posit itself as a new and independent standpoint. But the truth is that deconstruction has never really stood on its own ground. Indeed, it has always acknowledged in itself the presence of the metaphysical idea it would refuse. I would argue that this has been the greatness of deconstruction from the beginning. What deconstruction helps us to do - its own intention notwithstanding - is to rediscover the continuity of history, to reaffirm the truth of our almost forgotten philosophical tradition. It does not do this by following feeling or intuition, or by looking to some truth beyond consciousness. It does this - in however tortured a way - by allowing itself to think in conformity with the structures of traditional metaphysical thought. The movement 'beyond deconstruction' can mean nothing other than this reduction of deconstruction to a moment in the history of philosophy. It is necessary only that we recognize deconstruction as the implicit essence of the very tradition it loves to despise.

⁸⁵ PhG, p. 51/74.

⁸⁶ Margins, p. 38/42.

⁸⁷ Positions, p. 121/86.

⁸⁸⁸⁸ Positions, p. 57/42. On Derrida's refusal to commit himself to any definite position, see Sarah Kofman, "Un philosophe 'unheimlich'", in *Ecarts: Quatre Essais à propos de Jacques Derrida* (Fayard, 1973).