

Alex Thomson

# Deconstruction and Democracy

Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy



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*Derrida and Disinterest*, Sean Gaston

*Heidegger and the Place of Ethics*, Michael Lewis

Deconstruction and Democracy  
Derrida's *Politics of Friendship*

A.J.P. Thomson



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# Abbreviations

## WORKS BY JACQUES DERRIDA

- ADI *Adieu: to Emmanuel Levinas*, trans. Pascale Anne-Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. / *Adieu: à Emmanuel Levinas*, Paris: Galilée, 1997.
- ALT *Altérités*, (with Pierre-Jean Labarrière) Paris: Osiris, 1986.
- DAP 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', trans. Simon Critchley, in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 77–88.
- DIS *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, London: Athlone, 1982. / *La Dissémination*, Collection Points, Série Essais, Paris: Seuil, 1993.
- DP *Du Droit à la philosophie*, Paris: Galilée, 1990.
- FOL 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority"', trans. Mary Quaintance, in Drucilla Cornell *et al.* (eds), *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 3–67. / *Force de loi: 'le Fondement mystique de l'autorité'*, Paris: Galilée, 1994.
- GES I 'Geschlecht I: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference', trans. Ruben Berezdivin, in Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1991, pp. 380–402. / 'Geschlecht I: Différence sexuelle, différence ontologique', *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1987, pp. 395–414.
- GES II 'Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand', trans. John P. Leavey Jr, in John Sallis (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 161–96. / 'La Main de Heidegger (Geschlecht II)', *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1987, pp. 415–51.
- GES IV 'Philopolemology: Heidegger's Ear (Geschlecht IV)', trans. John P. Leavey Jr, in John Sallis (ed.), *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 163–218. / *Politiques de l'amitié*, Paris: Galilée, 1994, pp. 341–419.
- GoD *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. / *Donner La Mort*, Paris: Galilée, 1999.
- GRA *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. / *De la grammatologie*, Paris: Minuit, 1967.



- HOS *Of Hospitality*, (with Anne Dufourmantelle) trans. Rachel Bowlby, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. / *De l'hospitalité*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997.
- KJG 'Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German', trans. Moshe Ron, *New Literary History*, 22 (1991–2), pp. 39–95.
- LJF 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', trans. David Wood and Andrew Benjamin, in Peggy Kamuf (ed.), *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1991, pp. 270–6. / 'Lettre à un ami Japonais', *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1987, pp. 387–93.
- MAR *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Brighton: Harvester, 1982. / *Marges de la Philosophie*, Paris: Minuit, 1972.
- MON *Monolingualism of the Other*, trans. Patrick Mensah, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. / *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1996.
- OH *The Other Heading*, trans. Pascale Anne-Brault and Michael Naas, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989. / *L'autre cap*, Paris: Minuit, 1991.
- ONH 'Onto-Theology of National Humanism: Prolegomena to a Hypothesis', trans. Geoffrey Bennington, *Oxford Literary Review*, 14 (1992), pp. 3–23.
- OS *Of Spirit*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. / *De l'esprit*, Paris: Galilée, 1987.
- PAS 'Passions', trans. David Wood, in Thomas Dutoit (ed.), *On the Name*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 3–31. / *Passions*, Paris: Galilée, 1993.
- PC *The Post Card*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. / *La Carte Postale*, Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1980.
- PM *Papier Machine*, Paris: Galilée, 2001.
- PoF *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins, London: Verso, 1997. / *Politiques de l'amitié*, Paris: Galilée, 1994.
- PoF(a) 'Politics of Friendship', trans. Gabriel Motzkin, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 85: 11 (1988), pp. 632–44.
- PoF(b) 'Politics of Friendship', trans. Gabriel Motzkin *et al.*, *American Imago*, 50: 3 (1993), pp. 353–91.
- POI *Points...*, *Interviews 1974–1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf *et al.*, in Elizabeth Weber (ed.), Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. / *Points de suspension: Entretiens*, ed. Elizabeth Weber, Paris: Galilée, 1992.
- PSY 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other', in Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (eds), *Reading de Man Reading*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 25–65. / 'Psyché: Invention de l'autre', in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1987, pp. 11–61.

- RM 'The *Retrait* of Metaphor', trans. F. Gadsner *et al.*, in Julian Wolfreys (ed.), *The Derrida Reader*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998, pp. 102–29. / 'Le retrait de la métaphore', *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1987, pp. 63–93.
- SoM *Specters of Marx*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge, 1994. / *Spectres de Marx*, Paris: Galilée, 1993.
- SPI *Of Spirit*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. / *De l'esprit*, Paris: Galilée, 1987.
- SST 'Some statements and truisms about neologisms, newisms, positisms, parasitisms, and other small seisms', trans. Anne Tomiche, in David Carroll (ed.), *The States of Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990, pp. 63–94.
- VM 'Violence et Métaphysique: Essai sur la pensée d'Emmanuel Levinas', *La Revue de Métaphysique et Morale*, 3 & 4 (1964), pp. 322–54 & 425–73.
- WD *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Routledge, 1981. / *L'écriture et la différence*, Collection Points, Série Essais, Paris: Seuil, 1979.

## OTHER WORKS

- CP Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976.
- ED Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- HSS Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso, 1986.
- LR Emmanuel Levinas, *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Séan Hand, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.
- ND Carl Schmitt, 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations', trans. Matthias Konzell and John. E. McCormick, *Telos*, 96 (1993), pp. 130–142.
- NE Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, revised J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- OB Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being: Or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998. / *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, le Livre de Poche, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001.
- QT Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', trans. William Lovitt, in David Farrell Krell (ed.), *Basic Writings*, London: Routledge, 1987, pp. 287–317.
- TI Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University

Press, 1999. / *Totalité et Infini: Essai sur l'extériorité*, le Livre de Poche, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1996.

#### NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS

I have made no changes to the published translations of the texts cited. Unless otherwise stated, all emphases are those of the original texts.

## Introduction

Derrida claimed in 1994 that deconstruction is ‘literally the most ethical and political way of taking seriously what is implied by the very concepts of decision and responsibility’.<sup>1</sup> In another interview, given three years earlier, he states that deconstruction follows an exigency ‘without [which], in my view no ethico-political question has any chance of being opened up or awakened today’ [PoI 364 / 375]. More forceful still are the remarks in *Politics of Friendship*, the most extensive political work of Derrida’s career, which identify deconstruction with democracy itself. For Derrida comments that there is a ‘self-deconstructive [*auto-déconstructrice*] force in the very motif of democracy, the possibility and the duty for democracy itself to de-limit itself. Democracy is the *autos* of deconstructive self-delimitation [*auto-délimitation*’] [PoF 105 / 129]. On the one hand, deconstruction is to be found at work within democracy; on the other, democracy itself is already inscribed within deconstruction. Or as Derrida puts it in more telegraphic fashion: ‘no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction’ [PoF 105 / 128].

There are at least two reasons why such an apparently hyperbolic claim for deconstruction might come as a surprise, even to a reader well-acquainted with Derrida’s work. Firstly, because despite the consistently political and polemical reception of his work Derrida refused for a long time to bow to the insistent demand that his work should take political positions. In an interview with Richard Kearney conducted in 1981 Derrida comments that ‘I have never succeeded in directly relating deconstruction to existing political codes and programmes.’<sup>2</sup> Secondly, not only did Derrida refuse to elaborate his own understanding of the political implications of his writing for many years, but the word ‘deconstruction’ itself has a complex history, and he has regularly refused to grant any particular privilege to the term as a description of his work. In a famous attempt to come to terms with the word ‘deconstruction’, his ‘Letter to a Japanese Friend’ dated 10 July 1983, Derrida expresses a certain amount of dissatisfaction with the word ‘deconstruction’. It ‘imposed itself upon me’ [LJF 270 / 388], Derrida complains, and ‘has never appeared satisfactory to me’ [LJF 272 / 390]: ‘I do not think, [...] that it is a good word’ [LJF 275 / 392]. If Derrida feels able to risk a comment such as ‘no democracy without deconstruction’, one implication must be that over a decade his attitude to both politics and to the use of the term deconstruction must have altered.

My aim in this book is to explain and evaluate Derrida’s linking of deconstruction to democracy. Coming to terms with Derrida’s understanding of this relationship will mean not only having to account for his use of ‘democracy’, but also his use of ‘deconstruction’. That his identification of the two

occurs in the course of a 'genealogical deconstruction of the political (and through it to the democratic), [through which] one would seek to think, interpret and implement another politics, another democracy' [PoF 104 / 128] has the consequence that: 'at stake would thus be a deconstruction of the genealogical schema, a paradoxical deconstruction – a deconstruction at once genealogical and a-genealogical, of the genealogical' [PoF 105 / 128]. In other words, neither democracy nor deconstruction can escape their encounter unscathed.

What I hope to achieve is the demonstration that contrary to the common misconception, Derrida's work has a major contribution to make to our understanding of politics. This is not as controversial an argument as it might once have been. But if the caricature of deconstruction as an apolitical textualism is receding, it is being replaced with new myths. Thomas McCarthy is typical when he argues that Derrida's writings can only give rise to a 'politics of the ineffable'. A more sympathetic reader such as Simon Critchley makes what is broadly the same complaint when he asks 'might one not ultimately speak of a refusal of politics in Derrida's work?' Yet it is at the very least plausible that the hyperbole and hysteria attendant on the dissemination of Derrida's work in the English-speaking world has stemmed not from the lack of a political dimension, but from the fact that the political implications of deconstruction are so excessive and disconcerting as to be almost unrecognizable.

What critics of deconstruction have failed to account for are the ways in which Derrida's work upsets the distinctions with which we customarily approach the analysis of politics: for example, between theory and practice. McCarthy, following closely the attack on Derrida made by Jürgen Habermas in his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, argues that Derrida's work – while broadly political in scope – leads to a 'politics of the ineffable'.<sup>3</sup> He takes what he calls 'Derrida's withdrawal from the specificity of politics or of empirical social research' to be evidence of a retreat to theology or mysticism.<sup>4</sup> Derrida's key terms are 'elastic,' 'vague' and 'ambiguous' and his 'notion of a "grammar" of responsibility is at best an airy abstraction'.<sup>5</sup> Having reduced Derrida's work to a 'philosophicopolitical' programme or system, McCarthy wonders: 'is it the case, as Nancy Fraser has put it, that the politics of deconstruction amounts to little more than the deconstruction of politics?'<sup>6</sup> The interest of McCarthy's thesis here is that Simon Critchley, a less impatient reader, reaches essentially the same conclusion in his *Ethics of Deconstruction*, asking:

is there not an implicit refusal of the ontic, the factual, and the empirical – that is to say, of the space of *doxa*, where politics takes place in a field of antagonism, decision, dissension and struggle? In this sense, might one not ultimately speak of a refusal of politics in Derrida's work? [ED 200]

This argument is circular. Critchley and McCarthy are only able to condemn deconstruction for failing to generate a political practice by presuming a distinction between theory and practice which is unsustainable from Derrida's perspective.

The form of this misunderstanding is set out clearly by Geoffrey Bennington, whose *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction* contains detailed refutations of many of the attacks made on Derrida's work, a defence updated more recently by Morag Patrick in *Derrida, Responsibility and Politics*.<sup>7</sup> As Bennington suggests in his more recent book *Interrupting Derrida*, 'the political demand made of Derrida by a variety of commentators is the demand for the concept "politics" to be placed in the very transcendental position it is self-righteously supposed to reduce and explain, but to which it remains blind'.<sup>8</sup> By presuming to know in advance what politics is, or ought to be, these critics are not only unable to read Derrida's work without interposing their own preconceptions, but end up blind to the movement of politics itself. From Derrida's point of view, not only is the deconstructive questioning of politics neither a simple rejection of politics nor of traditional thought, but it is the necessary precondition for thinking about politics at all.

Such a claim seems over the top because it is tempting to assume that when Derrida insists on the value of deconstruction he must be recommending his own work, and in effect making a monstrous claim for the unique importance of his thought. However, as he makes clear in 'Letter to a Japanese Friend', Derrida considers the term deconstruction to be first of all a translation of two prominent words in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, *Abbau* and *Destruktion* [LJF 270 / 388].<sup>9</sup> In *Of Grammatology* for example, Derrida speaks of 'deconstruction' when he describes his own work, with that of Nietzsche and Heidegger, as 'inhabiting [...] in a certain way' the concepts of Western thought [GRA 24 / 39]. While Derrida rarely appears as closely allied to Heidegger as he does in the first part of *Of Grammatology* we cannot ignore the fact that the word 'deconstruction' must remain marked with at least a minimal reference to its translation from the work of Heidegger.<sup>10</sup> In which case, Derrida's emphasis on the importance of deconstruction to politics must be something other than mere self-aggrandizement, if only because he presents himself not as an originator, but as a follower and interpreter. Indeed translations of Heidegger into both French and English now use the term without any reference to Derrida.<sup>11</sup>

Although Derrida does use deconstruction in places as a name for his own theoretical practice, he insists that it be considered as simply one in a series of terms which he has made use of in his work. It is only one word among others:

For me, for what I have tried and still try to write, the word has interest only within a certain context, where it replaces and lets itself be determined

by such other words as ‘écriture’, ‘trace’, ‘différance’, ‘supplement’, ‘hymen’, ‘pharmakon’, ‘marge’, ‘entame’, ‘parergon’, etc. By definition the list can never be closed. [LJF 275 / 392]

All these words – which Rodolphe Gasché labels ‘infrastructures’ in his *The Tain of the Mirror* and which it has become commonplace to call ‘quasi-transcendentals’ – operate within particular texts of Derrida’s in broadly comparable ways. ‘Deconstruction’ is one word among the others on the list – some of which are borrowed from other texts, some of which are neologisms suggested by the structure which Derrida has found at work in the text under consideration – rather than the transcendental guarantor of the list’s identity. ‘Deconstruction’ is an example of ‘the trace’ as much as ‘the trace’ is an example of ‘deconstruction’.

Moreover, although deconstruction may be used as a convenient name of this series of terms, it can be misleading as a label for Derrida’s work as a whole, which is not to be considered ‘an *analysis* or a *critique*’, nor a ‘*method*’, ‘an *act* or an *operation*’ [LJF 273 / 390–1]. Instead, and this third meaning is the one to which Derrida will attach most importance, deconstruction is what happens: ‘deconstruction takes place everywhere it [*ça*] takes place, where there is something (and is not therefore limited to meaning or the text in the current and bookish sense of the word)’ [LJF 274 / 391]. If deconstruction is oriented towards what happens – towards the world and not away from it – it is clear that any abstraction or withdrawal from concrete political reality must take place according to a complex logic.

Given this complex linguistic background, the use of deconstruction in the statement ‘no democracy without deconstruction’, as in the related claim that ‘*deconstruction is justice*’ [FoL 15 / 35. Emphasis only in French] appears somewhat ambiguous, to say the least. It might certainly be said to add a new dimension to our understanding of the word ‘deconstruction’. My hypothesis is that Derrida’s apparently greater ease with his own use of the word might be profitably linked to two other significant mutations in the trajectory of his work. Firstly it can be compared with an increasingly explicit thematic attention to overtly political questions. There is a qualitative shift between Derrida’s political work prior to the period I am interested in – focused largely around the question of the proper name<sup>12</sup> and the institution of the university<sup>13</sup> – and essays such as those on Nelson Mandela and racism collected in *Psyché* (1987) or the project of his seminar on philosophy and nationalism (1983–7). This shift towards political themes culminates in the publication of *Politics of Friendship* in 1994, which recapitulates and develops many of the concerns of this period in Derrida’s work.

Secondly, Derrida’s attitude towards his own role as a public intellectual appears to have changed. Despite a reluctance earlier in his career even to allow photographs of himself to be published, since the middle of the 1980s Derrida has appeared regularly to give interviews on radio and television, as

well as in newspapers and scholarly journals, at least five volumes of which have been published since *Positions* (1972): *Points de Suspensions* (1992), *Echographies: de la télévision* (1996), *Sur Parole* (1999), *Negotiations* (2002), *De Quoi Demain* (2001). Derrida's political interventions, which had previously been largely focused on the educational establishment, have expanded to include public debate on a wide variety of issues. These political activities cannot be considered as simply extrinsic, or contingent to the political development of Derrida's work. To reduce Derrida's work to a set of theses and then claim to deduce its politics on that basis, as Thomas McCarthy does, must miss the extent to which the politics of deconstruction are bound up with its form and practice.<sup>14</sup> As Geoffrey Bennington has suggested, we should read Derrida's 'more or less visible interventions in concrete political situations' as 'not merely the circumstantial acts of a philosopher elsewhere, and more importantly, developing theories or knowledge, but continuous with each act of deconstruction from the start.'<sup>15</sup> Derrida has been insisting on this since beginning his 1968 paper 'The Ends of Man' with the axiom that 'every philosophical colloquium necessarily has a political significance' [MAR 111 / 131]. In an interview given in 1977 Derrida affirmed this claim: 'philosophical activity does not *require* a political practice; it is, in any case, a political practice' [POI 69–70 / 74]. Deconstruction must be understood as both a philosophico-political practice that implies a correlative theory and as a philosophico-political theory whose elaboration is coterminous with its consequent political practice.

It is only once we appreciate deconstruction as a political practice in and of itself, I suggest, that we can evaluate the contribution to be made by deconstruction to political theory or to the analysis of politics. Such a shift in focus also has consequences for how we read and respond to Derrida's work, and highlights a methodological concern of this book.

If we take seriously Derrida's problematization of the relationship between singularity and the general, we can neither reduce his work to the expression of some fundamental thesis of deconstruction nor consider it to be a set of absolutely heterogeneous and singular operations. It has become common, following Rodolphe Gasché's influential *The Tain of the Mirror*, to consider Derrida's work in terms of a quasi-systematicity which recognizes this problem. On this account Derrida's texts form a series of interventions in particular contexts in which much the same thing happens each time; the texts throw up a series of apparently transcendental terms on the basis of which it is possible to rethink traditional philosophical problems, but which also put their own transcendental status into question. Gasché calls these terms 'infrastructures' but it has become more usual to refer to them as 'quasi-transcendentals'.<sup>16</sup> The difficulty of this approach is that it can only accommodate a rather reductive sense of the internal historicity of Derrida's work.

As Derrida insists in his 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', his earlier work is a necessary precondition for later developments; this



should serve to remind us that deconstruction is also an attempt to take seriously the empirical historical inscription of any theoretical discourse. For Gasché, the development of Derrida's work is to be considered at best contingent to its philosophical rigour, and at worst in teleological terms; we can only understand the later work on the basis of the earlier texts in which Derrida's own philosophical inheritance is more explicit. However, Derrida himself – and this remains entirely consistent with his rejection of teleology – has insisted that his earlier 'more academic or philosophically more reassuring' texts were an 'irreversibly necessary condition' for what followed; their necessity however is not logical, that of 'a fundamental or foundational' condition [DAP 79].

Rather, I suggest, we should read Derrida's work in the manner in which he reads. By suspending the traditional or metaphysical conception of the history of an author's work – in which the work unfolds a central thesis or applies a method; in which the earlier work prepares for the later or in which the later work occludes the profound insights of the earlier; in terms of decisive breaks or revisions – we must develop other ways of assessing the development, the mutations and the continuities, of the discursive strategies within his work.<sup>17</sup> This requires careful attention not only to the systematicity of the texts, but also a persistent attention to the features of each work which resist incorporation into such a history.

Moreover, by reducing the occasion of Derrida's work to the philosophical issue to which he refers, Gasché obliterates any sense of a connection between Derrida's work and its other contexts. While there can be no question of reducing Derrida's work to a symptomatic expression or product of a particular political context, recognizing the internal heterogeneity and planes of consistency of that work must include some sense both of the relationship each text negotiates with the other works signed by Derrida, and of those so-called external (political, social, historical) contexts which are inscribed into Derrida's work as the occasion for each text. Richard Beardsworth's *Derrida and the Political* is a good example of the pitfalls of a relatively systematic and philosophical approach.<sup>18</sup> As Bennington has argued, the clarity and authority of Beardsworth's argument is bought at the price of a number of key reductive decisions, and deconstruction is reduced to a set of theses about 'the aporia of time'.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, for Beardsworth, deconstruction appears to be largely a philosophical response to philosophical problems, and as an almost dialectical resolution of a set of political antinomies between Kant and Hegel, and between Heidegger and Levinas.

Yet a brief consideration of the performative context of even a short text such as 'History of the Lie: Prolegomena' suggests that its political dimension extends beyond the philosophical.<sup>20</sup> Aside from its more typical Derridean concerns – with the relationship between the concepts of history and truth, with Nietzsche, with the fable, with performative or illocutionary force, with secrecy and testimony – the essay is directly linked to some central

concerns of *Politics of Friendship* and can be read as a lengthy gloss on some elliptical comments made in the final chapter on ‘history *qua* fraternization, which begins in a non-truth and *should end up making non-truth true* [...] a history of truth. A matter, more precisely, of a trial of *verification, qua* the history of a becoming-true of illusion’ [PoF 274 / 305]. Nor can the public performance and subsequent publication of the paper, or the broadcast of a radio interview extending the discussion, be strictly demarcated from the political context written into the paper.<sup>21</sup> Presented in New York, and first published in the *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* of the New School for Social Research, the paper locates itself as one of a series of texts concerned with the truth written or published in New York: an essay on truth and politics by Alexandre Koyré written in exile during the Second World War; Hannah Arendt’s ‘Truth and Politics,’ published in the *New Yorker*; an inaccurate article published in the *New York Times* accusing Derrida and other French intellectuals of a failure to acknowledge the ‘truth’ of the persecution of Jews in Vichy France; a letter in response to this article which draws attention to Derrida’s signature on a petition to President Mitterrand calling for precisely such a public recognition of French responsibility for these crimes. As Derrida himself argued on another occasion against similar accusations, ‘the text is always a field of forces, heterogeneous, differential, open [...]. That’s why deconstructive readings and writings are [...] also effective or active (as one says) interventions, in particular, political and institutional interventions’.<sup>22</sup> Given both the internal historicity and the performative force of Derrida’s texts as political interventions, we should not be too quick to conclude where their philosophical or political significance lies.

There are generally three strategies available when considering a concept such as ‘responsibility’ in Derrida’s work. The first is to locate Derrida’s treatment of the concept alongside a set of previous philosophical responses to the same problem within the philosophical tradition that Derrida appears to be working in; the second is to compare or relate his work to philosophical contexts to which he does not explicitly refer; the third assumes that his work advances more-or-less philosophical arguments which can be abstracted from a particular context and repeated independently of the project of reading within which they may have arisen. Keith Peterson’s reading of Derrida’s work on responsibility and decision in relation to Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger fits the first model; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s attempt to relate Derrida on responsibility to Wittgenstein on decisions and rule-following fits the second; Geoffrey Bennington’s work on unpacking Derrida’s ‘deceptively simple’ arguments tends towards the third.<sup>23</sup> None of these strategies is in itself inappropriate; in combination with each other they can yield powerful and perceptive responses. In this book I have tended to follow the third strategy, with some consideration of the other two; but by balancing these with a sense of the internal historicity and performative context and address of Derrida’s work I have attempted to

generate a distinctive response to the question of the politics of deconstruction. The key text throughout is *Politics of Friendship*, a largely neglected text among the commentary available on Derrida's recent writings: perhaps because of its complexity, the awkwardness of the seminar format in which it is presented, or simply because of its length. I do not attempt to argue for the centrality of this text in Derrida's recent work – although I think such an argument might be convincingly made – but take the work as a provisional starting point.

In choosing to focus on a particular period within the development of Derrida's work, and to focus on those texts which contribute most to the analysis of the theme with which I am concerned, my argument risks circularity; but I take this to be a necessary risk, and a risk that may be the chance of a productive reading – a reading that manages to follow without repeating.<sup>24</sup> Even if we must not try to predict the coming of the other, we must prepare for it as best we can, writes Derrida in 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other': 'Letting the other come is not an inertia open to anything whatsoever [. . .]. But one does not make the other come, one lets it come by preparing for its coming' [PSY 55 / 53]. In this sense, I can only hope that my work will be itself deconstructive; since the other cannot be invented, 'the initiative or deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, destabilizing foreclosure structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other' [PSY 60 / 60].

*Part 1*

*Deconstruction and Democracy*

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## Introduction

If Derrida's identification of deconstruction with democracy in *Politics of Friendship* is startling, the reference to democracy is by no means an isolated case in Derrida's work, at least since his reference to 'the *form* of democracy' in 'The Ends of Man' [MAR 113–4 / 134–5]. Throughout the texts contemporaneous with *Politics of Friendship* there are insistent references to democracy, and to 'democracy-to-come': for example in *The Other Heading* [OH 78 / 76], 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism' [DAP 83–5], *Du Droit à la philosophie* [DP 70–1] and *Specters of Marx* [SoM 169 / 269]. In fact, Derrida offers at least two apparently divergent approaches to the concept of democracy: one more analytical, the other (apparently) more historical. It would be hasty to assume that distinct arguments in Derrida's work can be moulded into a cohesive unity, so in order to respect the heterogeneity of these texts, and for clarity, I will look at these two arguments separately.

The first is the question of 'democracy-to-come' which dominates *Politics of Friendship*, and in the first chapter I will discuss the main framework of that book, focusing on Derrida's analysis of the concept of friendship and its relation to democracy. This opens up a provisional understanding of what Derrida means by 'democracy-to-come' which the remainder of this book will be concerned to flesh out. The conceptual bias of Derrida's argument in *Politics of Friendship* may seem abstract: in the second chapter I will look at ways we might relate the argument to the context of the liberal democratic state. Here Derrida's other approach to the problem of democracy can be helpful, starting from the question of literature and leading to questions of freedom of speech, censorship, the secret and the distinction between the public and private sphere. However, Derrida's criticisms of a liberal understanding of democracy can also be extended to an alternative tradition of radical democratic thought, as I argue in the third chapter.

This makes deconstruction hard to situate politically, and so we might proceed with the following questions in mind: Does deconstruction finish in democracy? Is Derrida's appeal to 'democracy-to-come' to be considered an end to the question of the politics of deconstruction, the political product or outcome of Derrida's thought? Or is democracy perhaps a familiar name on an unfamiliar path; not a necessary conclusion to the deconstructive project but an example in an ongoing argument concerning the very nature of politics?

## *No Democracy without Deconstruction?*

Not only does *Politics of Friendship* contain the most extended analysis of ‘democracy-to-come’ in Derrida’s work, but the book as a whole can be read as being determined by the relationship between friendship and democracy. It is this relationship which will justify Derrida’s assertion that democracy is deconstructive in its ‘self-delimitation’, a phrase which must be read two ways at once: democracy acknowledges its own limits, but democracy also de-limits, it removes limits. Derrida’s interest in friendship is a traditional one: in *The Nicomachean Ethics* it is friendship which forms the junction for Aristotle between the question of justice and that of the proper constitution of the city, between ethics and politics. It is there that democracy is famously characterized as a political association modelled on the friendship between brothers [NE 209–10]. This analogy is invidious in Derrida’s view, and he seeks to develop the possibility of another reading of politics, of friendship and democracy, which would escape the rhetoric of brotherhood, and what he calls the logic of fraternization. To do so is to distinguish between democracy’s limitations and its de-limiting force. That we can have neither one without the other is characteristic not only of democracy, but also of deconstruction.

At its broadest, Derrida’s principal concern in *Politics of Friendship* is ‘to think and live a friendship, a politics, a justice’ [PoF 105 / 128]. Considered more narrowly, the book is an investigation of the traditional conception of friendship in political philosophy. A historical survey of texts by several major political thinkers, from Plato and Aristotle to Jean-Luc Nancy, via Cicero, Augustine, Montaigne, Nietzsche and Carl Schmitt, among others, is interwoven with a discussion and analysis of the recurrent structure and limits of the concept of friendship in their work. On a third level, and in its most modest formulation, Derrida’s aim is merely to ask ‘what is meant when one says “brother”, when someone is called “brother”’. He is ‘wondering [*demande*], that’s all, and request[s] [*demande*] that it be asked [*demande*], what the implicit politics of this language is’ [PoF 305 / 339]. On the basis of the first statement I have offered of his concerns, *Politics of Friendship* would appear to be the nearest Derrida’s work will have got to being political philosophy as we usually understand it – that is if we could ever be sure that this concern wasn’t precisely the inspiration behind all his books. However we would then have to account for the two refinements of this aim I have suggested. What kind of political thought can be organized around the category of friendship? How can an analysis of the ‘implicit politics’ of language lead us to ‘a politics, a justice’?

## FRIENDSHIP AND FRATERNIZATION

*Politics of Friendship* is structured by the discussion of the concept of friendship in the history of Western philosophy. The focus of Derrida's argument is the continuity within the concept of friendship from its canonical formulation in Aristotle to contemporary accounts such as those of Bataille and Blanchot, and crucially, through and in spite of the apparent break in the tradition inaugurated by Nietzsche. For Derrida this reversal is encapsulated in *Human, All Too Human* when Nietzsche overturns the famous aphorism, attributed to Aristotle, 'O my friends, there is no friend': 'Enemies, there is no enemy! shout I, the living fool.'<sup>1</sup> However, for Derrida, this apparent reversal is not what it seems to be. Attempting to overturn the established values and hierarchies of Western thought, Nietzsche succeeds only in unveiling the conditions of possibility which have always governed and conditioned that thought: 'Nietzsche's upheaval would [...] interrupt less than recall (and call again for) a rupture already inscribed in the speech it interrupts' [PoF 27 / 45]. The significance of Nietzsche's work in *Politics of Friendship* is not that it introduces something absolutely new to the tradition of thinking about friendship, but that it exposes a structure that has always been present within that tradition, in this case, the reversibility of the relationship between friend and enemy. Or, as Derrida describes it, a friend could not be my friend if he was not, at least potentially, capable of being my enemy: 'the two concepts (friend/enemy) consequently intersect and ceaselessly change places' [PoF 72 / 91]. In his essay 'Force of Law' Derrida asserts that 'deconstruction is generally practiced in two ways [...]. One takes on the demonstrative and apparently ahistorical allure of logico-formal paradoxes. The other, more historical [...], seems to proceed through readings of texts, meticulous interpretations and genealogies' [FoL 20 / 48]: here the name of Nietzsche stands for the focal point at which the structural analysis of the conditions of possibility and impossibility of the concept of friendship intersects and interrupts the empirical history of the development of that concept within Western philosophy.

The classical model from which Derrida begins is that of Aristotle. Yet he argues that Aristotle's very definition of friendship is already on the verge of contradiction. For on the one hand it is characterized by the value of reciprocity [NE 194] and equality [NE 200–1; 202–3] between those men who resemble each other [NE 196–7]. These values of equality, reciprocity and resemblance will also found both justice and the state [NE 192–3; 207–8]. The highest form of friendship is that founded on virtue rather than pleasure or utility, and on equality; this reciprocity distinguishes true friendship from that found in the relationship between father and son, man and wife, ruler and subject or elder and younger [NE 203]. Yet on the other hand, Aristotle's account of friendship is interrupted by elements which threaten the very possibility of this equality in friendship. Firstly, because for Aristotle friendship is defined by the act of being friends with someone



rather than by that of being befriended. Friendship is active. Yet friendship by definition continues in the absence of the friend, even in the event of their death. On the basis of a brief reference in the *The Eudemian Ethics*, but not *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Derrida finds within Aristotle what he (Derrida) had been saying about friendship since *Mémoires: For Paul de Man*: that the possibility of the death of the friend inhabits the possibility of friendship itself.<sup>2</sup> If friendship is always a priori potentially asymmetrical, since my dead friend can never return my friendship, could there ever actually be a perfect friendship [PoF 12–13 / 28–9]? This brings in the second moment of disturbance in Aristotle's account. Friendship is premised on wishing the best for the friend, but the very best would be for the friend to become a God [NE 204–5]. Three problems follow from this: a God cannot be a friend, because of his absolute remoteness; friendship is predicated on loving the other as he is and therefore depends on his remaining human; God needs no friend because he is self-sufficient [PoF 222–3 / 250–2]. On this account too, even the concept of perfect friendship would be impossible, because self-contradictory. If friendship founded on equality is impossible, then friendship must always be irreducibly dissymmetrical.

On this basis Derrida argues that the Greek model of friendship will always already be inhabited by a more Judaeo-Christian model: 'a problematic scansion [...] would have introduced dissymmetry, separation and infinite distance in a Greek *philia* which did not tolerate them *but nevertheless called for them*' [PoF 232 / 259]. Or in other words that 'the philosophical horizon of *philia* [...] carries in its determination, in the very form of its finity qua horizon, the potential but inexorable injunction of its infinitization, and hence also that of its Christianization' [PoF 233 / 260]. To grasp the full implications of Derrida's argument it is important to stress this dynamic within the text. Derrida 'will not follow Nietzsche', he notes, nor 'Nietzsche's sons' [PoF 33 / 51]. On this basis, Derrida's concerns about friendship would apply at least as much to the work of his post-Nietzschean contemporaries Bataille, Blanchot, Levinas and Nancy as to Aristotle and Montaigne. Both the final section of the book, and several explicit comments within the text, make this clear [PoF 293–305 / 325–38; 46 n.15 / 56–7 n.1]. So I cannot agree with John Caputo who asserts that Derrida's model is 'largely inspired by [...] his Jewish friends' Levinas and Blanchot.<sup>3</sup> Simon Critchley's account of the text is similarly misleading since he attributes 'a crucial place in [the] exposition and argumentation' of *Politics of Friendship* to Blanchot.<sup>4</sup> Derrida's analysis must apply to both the Greco-Roman and the Judaeo-Christian model of friendship and a crucial change between the earliest versions of the text and its final publication reinforces this point. Discussing the rupture in the concept of friendship, what is phrased as a question in the earlier texts – 'shall one say that this fracture is Judeo-Christian?' [PoF(a) 644; PoF(b) 385] – becomes a statement: 'one can no longer speak here of a *simple* fracture and say that it is Judaeo-Christian' [PoF 293 / 325].

What the thought of this fracture – the necessary asymmetry within friendship – exposes is twofold. The texts on friendship, Derrida argues, are opened up to two recurrent questions of number. The first, which responds to the paradox that ‘true’ (equal) friendship is impossible, or nearly impossible, is that the texts tend to refer to a very few, legendary friendships from which to define the conditions of friendship as such. The second is that friendship is by definition exclusive. The paradigmatic experience of friendship, Derrida suggests, can be seen to be determined by what he calls ‘the question of number’: as both the necessity of enumerating or counting friends, and as an implicit limit to the number of friends I can have. Since friendship is always defined by the act of loving, being loved is not enough to qualify as friendship. Conversely there must be a limit to the number of people I can (actively) love. In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle argues that ‘it is not possible for affection to be active in relation to many at once’ since it takes time to test a friendship, and friendship is an experience reserved for humans (not immortals).<sup>5</sup> As an active experience, friendship is by definition an exclusive experience. I cannot be friends with everyone, Derrida explains, ‘one must choose and prefer: election and selection between friends and things, but also between possible friends’ [PoF 19 / 37]. This shows up in the canonical accounts as a recurrent question: how many friends can be true friends, how many friends can one have?

However, even if any actual (finite) friendship would be exclusive, in theory at least, I could be friends with anyone. Derrida seeks to separate out this possibility in friendship from its exclusive aspect, even though he knows they are inexorably connected. What would it mean to think what Derrida calls *aimance*, an experience of friendship which eluded the distinction between active and passive? This would have to be a relation without distinction, without the exclusion of those who are not my friends. *Aimance* would be a quasi-transcendental condition of friendship, a relationality prior to any activation or instantiation in the act of befriending. The grammatical form of *aimance* recalls Derrida’s famous neologism ‘différance’, and in his essay of that name we find the comment that:

that which lets itself be designated by ‘différance’ is neither simply active nor simply passive, but announces or rather recalls something like the middle voice, that it speaks of an operation which is not an operation, which lets itself be thought neither as a passion nor as an object of a subject upon an object [...]. [MAR 9 / 9]

*Aimance* would be something like a middle voice of friendship.<sup>6</sup>

Friendship for Derrida is split between these two contradictory moments. Friendship, as election by decision, is made possible by the multiplicity of possible friends among whom I choose, with whom I am already in a relationship of neither active or passive affection, but *aimance*; but I betray

this multiplicity of possible friends by preferring my friends, even by calling them friends. The necessity of this betrayal and exclusion is what Derrida calls the logic of fraternization, and which he claims dictates the relationship between friendship and brotherhood.

To understand the significance of fraternization for Derrida and its consequences, we need to bear in mind his thought of responsibility. This begins with what Geoffrey Bennington calls ‘a deceptively simple’ argument which I will summarize briefly here.<sup>7</sup> Responsibility, Derrida argues, is only responsible if it is not the unfolding of a programme or the following of a set pattern: that would simply be obeying a rule, and in doing so I could disavow responsibility – I would only be obeying orders, rather than acting in my own name. Yet as soon as I determine a course of action I must betray some others, and the infinity of others – ‘I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others’ [GoD 68 / 98]. I am destined to an absolute responsibility before the wholly (infinite and completely) other which I can only transgress. This is not a responsibility which I could ever fulfil: it is infinite not because it is a task larger than any individual could complete but because as soon as a responsibility can be fulfilled, there is no responsibility.

Responsibility is the thought of inevitable irresponsibility; and any attempt to think responsibility in terms of obligation or the categorical imperative, or in any limited sense, is irresponsible from Derrida’s point of view. Responsibility is infinite or it is not responsibility at all, but merely acting out of obligation to a determined, finite set of others:

If I conduct myself particularly well with regard to someone, I know that it is to the detriment of an other; of one nation to the detriment of another, of one family to the detriment of another family, of my friends to the detriment of other friends or non-friends, etc. This is the infinitude that inscribes itself within responsibility; otherwise there would be no ethical problems or decisions. [DAP 86]

The principle of fraternity is what dictates the choice between others, and therefore the becoming-irresponsible of friendship. For if friendship can be with anyone, friendship as brotherhood contradicts it, by naturalizing the bond. ‘The brother is never a fact’ [PoF 159 / 184] declares Derrida, ‘fraternity requires a law and names, symbols, a language, engagements, oaths, speech, family and nation’ [PoF 149 / 171]. Derrida’s aim is not some nihilistic assault on the family but to draw attention to the ‘renaturalizing rhetoric’ of ‘the process of *fraternization*’ [PoF 202 / 230]. A natural bond dictates my allegiances, and thus disables responsibility and decision: where it is a question of a debt which requires to be paid off, I cannot take responsibility for it.

While friendship and brotherhood seem to be absolutely opposed in Derrida's account, this is not in fact the case. The traditional concept of friendship is split between two moments, one of *aimance* and one of fraternization, but only the latter is of the order of the possible. One does not follow the other. Brotherhood is always already at work within friendship, predicting my choices and cancelling my responsibility. For even if I do not privilege my friends in any way, I will always already have preferred them simply by calling them my friends. *Aimance* is not a present moment in a temporal scheme, but the necessary condition of friendship. Without the suspension of my choices, and the possibility of being friends with just anybody, I could never have any friends at all; but as soon as I have a friend, I have determined him as a brother.

#### DEMOCRACY AND FRATERNITY

The political implications of Derrida's reading of the concept of friendship rest on the traditional association of brotherhood and friendship with democracy and justice. This can be shown quite clearly in Aristotle's work, and Derrida offers several further points of comparison. The important question for us here is whether this association is purely linguistic – only a matter of names – or if there is a more logical or conceptual relationship at work.

For Aristotle, not only is friendship a virtue, but it is fundamental to the welfare of the state and to justice itself. In his *Politics* Aristotle describes three forms of constitution: monarchy, the rule of one man; aristocracy, the rule of a few men; and polity [*politeia*], the rule of all. Each constitution is working well when decisions are made which benefit the whole of the people rather than just the rulers. When this is not the case, each constitution becomes its own deviant form: tyranny; oligarchy; democracy.<sup>8</sup> In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle compares these paradigmatic constitutional forms with forms of friendship. Monarchy is said to be like the friendship between a father and son; aristocracy is compared to the friendship between man and wife; and polity to the friendship between brothers [NE 211].

There are however two complications we should note which arise from this scheme. I take the first from Geoffrey Bennington, who has argued that the position of 'democracy' as the least bad of the deviant constitutions makes it the best constitution, if we deny the possibility of the ideal functioning of the state; moreover, the distinction between polity and democracy seems to be confused from the start. How could we distinguish between the many ruling on behalf of the many, and the many ruling on behalf of the people?<sup>9</sup> The second complication is introduced by the analogy with friendship. Aristotle claims that monarchy is the best constitutional form. Yet he has also argued that friendship is vital to the well-being of the state. From

this account, polity (or democracy), modelled on the equality of the relationship between brothers – the exemplary form of friendship – should be the best constitution. There can be little or no justice or friendship when one man, or a few men, rule, since there is little or nothing in common between the rulers and ruled, but when the many have some degree of equality there will be more friendship and justice rather than less. On Aristotle's account then, democracy is the exemplary politics of friendship and since Derrida takes this to be an exemplary account of democracy, the founding analogy of his text is established: 'democracy [...] is rarely determined in the absence of confraternity or brotherhood' [PoF viii / 13].

Derrida gives several further references for this fraternal rhetoric within accounts of democracy: 'from Plato to Montaigne, Aristotle to Kant, Cicero to Hegel, *the great philosophical and canonical discourses on friendship* will have explicitly tied the friend-brother to virtue and justice, to moral reason and political reason' [PoF 277 / 308]. However Derrida's argument is that there is more at stake than simply the rhetoric of republicanism. It is the logical structure which underlies both the concept of friendship and democracy in their traditional interpretations in which Derrida is interested, but this is a structural model which he claims can be found from Aristotle to Nietzsche and then to Blanchot and Nancy beyond.

Democracy is structured around the same problematic dichotomy as friendship:

With this becoming-political [of friendship], and with all the schemata that we will recognize therein – beginning with the most problematic of all, that of fraternity – the question of democracy thus opens, the question of the citizen or the subject as a countable singularity. And that of a 'universal fraternity'. There is no democracy [*pas de démocratie*] without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but there is no democracy [*pas de démocratie*] without the 'community of friends', without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal. These two laws are irreducible one to the other. Tragically irreconcilable and forever wounding. The wound itself opens with the necessity of having to *count* one's friends, to count the others, in the economy of one's own, there where every other is altogether other. [PoF 22 / 40]

This passage contains within it a remarkable condensation or compression of the argument of *Politics of Friendship*, so we will need to proceed slowly in unravelling it. What Derrida calls 'the wound' in democracy is already present in the double movement which we discerned in the structure of friendship. Friendship is instituted by a decision taken in the context of absolute possibility – anyone could be my friend – but at the same time friendship is guarded or restricted by a question of number – I cannot be

friends with everyone. The same goes for democracy. Democracy contains both a universal appeal – equality for all – and necessary limits which condition and govern that appeal. These mostly form around the question, again, of fraternization: of the naturalization of the decision which would limit democracy and equality to the members of one state, to one set of boundaries or one people, grounded in a spiritual or ideal identification which need not, but always potentially could, be expressed in a violent particularism or an ideology of nation, blood or soil.

There are three sets of problems introduced into the concept of democracy by this structural homology with friendship, all exemplified for Derrida in Plato's *Menexenus*. There democracy is described as aristocratic: 'a form of government which receives various names, according to the fancies of men, and is sometimes called democracy, but is really an aristocracy or government of the best which has the approval of the many' [PoF 95 / 117]. As for friendship, so the question of democracy revolves around a question of number: 'If the word "democracy" allies itself or competes with that of aristocracy, it is because of number, of the reference to the required approbation of the greatest number' [PoF 101 / 124]. Derrida does not expand this point further, but it would be possible to find many of the most dominant concerns within the tradition of thinking about democracy suggested here. Where democracy is defined in opposition to oligarchy or aristocracy, there will remain an uncertain borderline between 'the few' and 'the many'. Rather than try and distinguish one from the other, or true democracy from aristocracy – and this will form the substance of the debate within democratic theory over forms of democracy – Derrida simply insists that this question will persist within democracy. In turn, this would make such debates as those over the best mechanisms for inclusive and just decision making, between representative and direct democracy, concerning the question of bureaucratization of the political sphere, and regarding the extent of the influence of business or other interests over democratic decision-making, not only inevitable but also necessary and interminable.

The second set of problems, on which Derrida focuses at some length, can be seen at work within the assertion in the *Menexenus* that 'the basis of this our government is equality of birth. [...] we and our citizens are brethren, the children all of one mother' [PoF 95 / 117]. In this referral of democratic equality to a principle of birth, Derrida sees the same suspension of decision that was at work in the fraternization of friendship: 'Everything seems to be decided where the decision does not take place, precisely in that place where the decision does not take place *qua* decision, where it will have been carried away in what has always-already taken place: at birth' [PoF 99 / 121]. The law of the polis is determined in advance by a natural law: 'nature commands law, [...] equality at birth founds *in necessity* legal equality' [PoF 99 / 121]. This is 'the place of fraternization as the symbolic bond alleging the repetition of a genetic tie [...]. In more modern terms one might speak

of the foundation of citizenship in a nation' [PoF 99 / 121]. The foundation of democracy in the naturalization of the law repeats the effect of fraternization on the thought of friendship, locking up decision and therefore any chance of responsibility:

Such a bond between two structurally heterogeneous ties will always remain obscure, *mystical*, essentially foreign to rationality – which does not mean simply irrational, in the equally modern sense of the term. It will always be exposed, to say the least, to the 'sophistications', 'mystifications', and perversions of rhetoric. Sometimes to the worst symptoms of nationalism, ethnocentrism, populism, even xenophobia. [...] Are we certain that throughout all the mutations of European history (of which, of course, the most rigorous account must be taken) no concept of the political and of democracy has ever broken with the heritage of this troubling necessity? Made a radical, thematic break with it? This is the question we are concerned with here. [PoF 99–100 / 121–2]

Democracy founded on a supposedly natural bond will always be a limited or conditioned form, and equality in this case will never be justice. Derrida draws on Nicole Loraux's work to ground this argument in a historical analysis of the relationship between autochthony and the Athenian state, but his assertion is that this analysis ought to be extended to every state or democratic politics in the history of the concept.<sup>10</sup> Any franchise based on birth will institute inequality, just as it would if it were to be based on wealth, property or gender. A qualification for citizenship based on a period of residence only substitutes one similar law for the law of 'natural' birth; residence is taken to be as good as having been born to the right bloodline, or on the right soil. Derrida's claim is that just as friendship could not be thought without the notion of brotherhood, and that election and exclusivity were part of the concept's very definition, so the concept of democracy itself must also be similarly self-contradictory. The principle of equality and its naturalization in terms of birth can never be reconciled.

The third foundational limit to the concept of democracy, alongside the question of number, and the problem of fraternization as naturalization, is the question of the sister which contributes a dominant undercurrent to *Politics of Friendship* as a whole. It can be seen to develop most obviously from the association of friendship with brotherhood in the texts of the tradition. For Aristotle, the highest model of friendship is that between men. The relationship between husband and wife is defined as friendship between a superior and an inferior [NE 203] and can therefore become the model for an aristocratic constitution [NE 211]; moreover there is no mention at all of the sister, or of the daughter [PoF 202 / 228]. Yet Derrida wonders what room is left for friendship between women, or between men and women. 'This double exclusion of the feminine in this philosophical paradigm,' he

writes, 'would then confer on friendship the essential and essentially sublime figure of virile homosexuality' [PoF 279 / 311].

The exclusion of women from the discourse of the tradition on politics and friendship confirms this hypothesis. For example, Derrida notes of Carl Schmitt that 'not even in the theory of the partisan is there the least reference to the role played by women in guerrilla warfare, in the wars and the aftermath of wars of national liberation [...] [PoF 156 / 180–1]. Derrida emphasizes the hegemony of a discourse which, when it recognizes the existence of the woman, neutralizes her difference. For example, in Kant's reading of modesty: 'It would equalize the sexes by moralizing them, getting the woman to participate in universal fraternity: in a word, in humanity. The modest woman is a brother for man' [PoF 274 / 304]. The problem Derrida poses through his insistence on this exclusion is whether politics itself, all the concepts and models we have of politics, might not be founded on the absence of women, or at least on the neutralization of sexual difference. In which case it would be impossible to address inequality between the sexes *within* politics, except at the cost of reducing the sister to a brother.

What future for democracy if it has always been rhetorically organized around a model which excludes the woman, or the sister, if, as Derrida says, 'a political phallogocentrism has, *up to this point*, determined *its* cosmopolitical democracy, a democracy, *qua* cosmo-phratrocentrism' [PoF 263 / 294]? This problem may not be just any problem among those of the text. Derrida registers the importance of this question as one of 'the two major questions of "deconstruction": the question of the history of concepts and (trivially) so-called "textual" hegemony, history *tout court*; and the question of phallogocentrism. Here *qua* phratrocentrism' [PoF 278 / 309]. The possibility seems to be left open here, as so often in Derrida's work, that, in the form of the question set out by Paola Marrati, sexual difference might not be merely one difference among others; this question must at least remain open.<sup>11</sup>

These final two questions appear to be addressed as much to any form of politics and political system or any state as they are to democracy in particular. In the latter case, the concept of politics appears to be *de facto* and *de jure* exclusive of women. Following the logic of the former instance, any political system which restricts political equality – or the allocation of resources, welfare, security – to its citizens rather than its non-citizens will define itself by an act of political exclusion, as not only limited democracy, but as injustice: if justice is a principle of equality, can it be limited by law to the occupants of the state rather than its neighbours? Pushed to its own limits, the challenge posed by Derrida's analyses is whether politics could ever be said to have taken account of the sister, or to be just.

Following some reflections on the challenge posed by the figure of the sister to a political tradition constructed on the rhetoric of fraternity, Derrida formulates this more general problem and proposes two options for dealing



with this situation. The first would be to ‘admit that the political is in fact this phallogocentrism in act [. . .]: political virtue [. . .] has always been *virile virtue* in its androcentric manifestation’. If politics is by definition founded in inequality, should we seek to displace politics altogether? The emancipation of women, ‘woman’s slow and painful access to citizenship’ would then appear to indicate that ‘politics’ itself was disappearing. Our problem would then be that of thinking about what would replace politics as such, rather than how we might modify our current political situation, and of ‘carrying oneself beyond the political, beyond the name “politics”; and by forging other concepts, concepts with an altogether different mobilizing force’ [PoF 158 / 183]. The second option Derrida formulates would be to keep the ‘old name’ of politics, but to ‘analyse the logic and the topic of the concept differently, and engage other forms of struggle’ [PoF 158 / 183]. Not only does Derrida refuse to decide between these options, he insists that there can no longer be a choice. Not only must we invent a new politics, as well as a new concept of politics, but we cannot simply give up on the old concepts. We must negotiate with them, or attempt to think them through differently. This in turn suggests that we might read *Politics of Friendship* itself in terms of this double strategy.

### DIFFÉRANCE AND JUSTICE

Having examined Derrida’s extension of the structural dynamics he sees at work in the concept of friendship to democracy, we are in a position to understand *Politics of Friendship* as a ‘genealogical deconstruction of the political (and through it, to the democratic)’ and what kind of way this is ‘to think, interpret and implement another politics, another democracy’ [PoF 104 / 128]. This project would be equivalent to a combination of the two options Derrida describes in the passage I have just referred to: on the one hand thinking through the old names of politics; but on the other hand seeking to think a new concept of politics. The focal point for this process in the book is the re-description of the traditional concept of democracy in terms of what Derrida calls ‘democracy-to-come’, which I will now present in a relatively systematic form.

The key to understanding ‘democracy-to-come’ comes in the relationship between democracy, equality and justice as itself a question of number. For before any of the issues I have discussed so far, which define a democratic space that must be limited in number, constituted by exclusion and haunted by the risk of relapsing into oligarchy or demagoguery, it is the very question of enumerability which contradicts and frustrates the democratic appeal:

the question of the citizen or the subject as a countable singularity. There is no democracy without respect for irreducible singularity or alterity, but

there is no democracy without the ‘community of friends’, without the calculation of majorities, without identifiable, stabilizable, representable subjects, all equal. [PoF 22 / 40]

That is to say, it is not the empirical or theoretical contradiction of the equality which grounds democracy which must come into question, but the very structure or possibility of equality itself which is the problem. The limits of democracy do not begin after the question of equality, and are not even separable from that question. To be or to become a citizen or a subject, to be *equal* to one’s political fellows, is already to introduce a violent imposition into the heart of democracy. The violence of fraternity begins not when counting goes wrong, but with the necessity and principle of counting. So far I have dealt with the problems of the ‘community of friends’ and of the calculation of majorities: but the relationship between ‘respect for irreducible singularity or alterity’ and ‘the citizen as countable singularity’ must also be addressed.

Derrida’s description of democracy here is directly parallel to his account of responsibility in *The Gift of Death*:

responsibility [...] demands on the one hand an accounting, a general answering-for-oneself with respect to the general and before the generality, hence the idea of substitution, and, on the other hand, uniqueness, absolute singularity, hence nonsubstitution, nonrepetition, silence and secrecy. [GoD 61 / 88–9]

The concept of responsibility is structured by the same dilemma as that of democracy: on the one hand, the undeconstructible condition of justice [FoL 14–15 / 35–6] is the demand for absolute respect for each and every other, as other; on the other hand, there is the necessity of law, which can only address the singular as an example of a general rule.

In the passage above, this continuity of structure is confirmed by Derrida’s concluding words: democracy is violence, ‘there where every other is altogether other’ [PoF 22 / 40]. This is a translation of a phrase which Derrida analyses at some length in *The Gift of Death* as a compact expression of the dilemma of responsibility, the sentence ‘*tout autre est tout autre*’ [GoD 68 / 98; 82 / 116; 87 / 121]. There is no easy translation of this sentence, although David Wills’ ‘every (one) other is every (bit) other’ is clear enough. The phrase states an equivalence between two undecidable phrases, which might refer to absolute alterity (the wholly other) or every (individual) alterity. This suggests an unstable equivalence between the absolute alterity of each other and the being alike in being other of every other. Derrida pushes this to paradox by replacing the absolutely other with the name of God, and apparently demonstrating that every other is God, or that God is every other [GoD 86–7 / 120–1].

Responsibility only begins in this situation of infinitization, as we have seen, where my duty is owed unconditionally to each and every other, and not to some rather than others – whether this restriction is based on family, nation or state allegiances – or to my friends. That ‘democracy-to-come’ is infinite responsibility follows from that moment (although not strictly temporal) in which I could be friends with just anyone, in the multiplicity of possible friends, and Derrida’s attempt to think an experience of *aimance* prior even to the distinction between active or passive. This is an experience or condition rather than a logical or historical situation, irreducible to language or discourse. This law of ‘irreducible singularity or alterity’ for Derrida names democracy *as* democracy. It is the recognition of absolute and infinite responsibility, responsibility for every other as wholly other. It is a paradoxical law prior to and irreducible to all law. This is not a thinking of equality as such, but something like an equality beyond equality; for to claim equality with the other is to reduce the other to the same: ‘*It would therefore be a matter of thinking an alterity without hierarchical difference at the root of democracy*’ [PoF 232 / 259].

This critique of the concept of equality is undertaken in the name of justice as a hyperbolic and excessive form of equality itself. In fact, this passage between ‘irreducible’ and ‘countable’ singularity takes us towards one of the more persistent themes throughout Derrida’s recent writing, ‘justice as the undeconstructible condition of any deconstruction’ [SoM 28 / 56; cf. FoL 15 / 35]. As Geoffrey Bennington has suggested, to consider justice in terms of this impossible aporetic – ‘*an alterity without hierarchical difference*’ [PoF 232 / 259] – can be seen as a translation of the early concept of *différance*.<sup>12</sup> For one of Derrida’s central concerns has been the relationship between singularity and totality, the possibility of thinking difference without reducing it to the same. A singularity is only singular to the extent that it cannot be described as being like anything else; yet as soon as it is a singularity, it must always be, at least minimally, like something, and ultimately everything, else. This is Derrida’s peculiar twist on conditions of possibility: the condition of being a singularity depends on not being purely or absolutely singular, its possibility on its impossibility. Were there to ever be anything absolutely singular it would be unrecognizable. Thus there can only be non-singular singularities and non-absolute difference. If each difference is even minimally distinguished from every other difference, they might all be said to be nothing but the traces of all the other differences. However, these differences, or singularities, are still different, or singular, and thus cannot be accounted for or named in terms of anything else. Something will always remain or resist, whether the order of questioning is logical, ontological or ethical.

In his essay ‘*Différance*’ Derrida refers to several of his own texts, as well as sources in Levinas, Nietzsche and particularly in Heidegger, in order to propose ‘*différance*’ as the name for this field of non-absolute differences,

which cannot be identified with either language, things or ideas, but comprehends all. However, 'différance' cannot itself be a final word, since it is only another one of the non-absolute differences, and can only provisionally claim to name them. Derrida often suggests that this can be understood in terms of exemplarity. Effectively, any mark, or a difference capable of functioning as a mark (even a blank) signifies not only itself, but also its own condition as mark, as being like, but unlike, every other mark, that is every other thing. On the one hand the mark is unique, on the other it is a copy of every other mark. Thus each mark, each event, each decision, is exemplary, according to the fortuitous compression of meanings in that term: both the model and only a sample, the paradigmatic case, and only a typical one.

Transferring this to the question of the citizen-subject, we could say that the identity of the subject can never be exhausted by his being-citizen, that something will escape. However this 'something' is nothing interior, not a residue of consciousness or subjectivity. What escapes is the inexhaustibility of the reference to every other subject, or difference that singles out the subject. However just as *différance* is only a provisional or strategic name rather than a 'truth' – 'strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field' [MAR 7 / 7] – so in thinking about politics and responsibility we are forced to rely on names which cannot be entirely satisfactory. Derrida asks 'in what sense may one still speak of equality – indeed of symmetry – in the dissymmetry and boundlessness of infinite alterity? What right does one have to speak still of the political, of law, and of democracy?' [PoF 233 / 260]. Derrida's identification of democracy with deconstruction seeks to provoke. To think democracy alongside this excessive account of justice must mean rendering it unrecognisable, disconcerting our assumption that we know what democratic government is, or what democratic equality means. Such an analysis must be pursued to the point at which we can no longer be certain that we are still speaking of democracy.

Derrida's use of the term 'democracy-to-come' is a way to formalize and condense this complex dissection and reinscription of the concept of democracy. It does not name a new concept, but redescribes what will always have been the case for democracy. Like friendship, Derrida argues, democracy is to be thought in terms of a double movement. On the side of its appeal to equality and to the rule of the many, rather than the few, democracy has an emancipatory value: but there can be no democratic state or democratic theory which will not limit this appeal by grounding it in an association of citizens organized around a naturalizing principle which locks up and neutralizes the possibility of political responsibility. The very structure of the concept of democracy implies that there can be no full democracy in the terms of the ideal which determines the concept, there will be no democracy which does not sustain an anti-democratic current, no democracy worthy of the name.

For the concept of friendship, Derrida tentatively distinguished *aimance* from fraternization. For democracy, Derrida separates out the principle of what he calls ‘democracy-to-come’. Democracy-to-come is what makes democracy what it is – the principle of equality or emancipation attested to by the name of democracy – but, like *aimance*, it is immediately effaced. It can never be made present or presented as such; the ‘to-come’ indicates that it is permanently deferred. Yet it provides a principle against which any state which claims to be democratic may be judged. The arithmetic of friendship – not only the quantification of true friendship evident in the traditional texts, but the fact that it is necessarily structured by a drawing of limits, by an act of exclusion – is analogous to democracy considered as a matter of calculation. Before all the classical difficulties of defining democracy – how many people defines the ‘rule of the many’; how to protect the rights of the minority from the will of the majority; how to calculate the opinion of the people; how to preserve the rule of law from the dictatorship of the many – the difficulty of democracy will be a question of number. For every citizen must be considered as equal under the law, as being equivalent to one another, as being precisely subject to a law of generality; as countable, and counting equally. Not only will a democracy have to consider its own limits, criteria for membership (a democracy is not the rule of just anyone, but its own citizens), but in arraiging its subjects as subjects it is already inflicting injustice on them. ‘Irreducible singularity’ resists calculation.

It should be clear by now that Derrida must not be taken to be arguing for an ideal of democracy which no actual or empirical democracy will live up to, or which a democratic theory could describe. The mutual co-implication of ‘democracy-to-come’ and democracy as fraternity are not merely the result of a gap between the empirical and the ideal, but an inexorable necessity. Democracy, and perhaps politics itself, can be nothing other than the negotiation within countable categories, in the name of an undeconstructible limit which is nicknamed justice, or ‘democracy-to-come’. Derrida remarks of his attempt to think another friendship, that it would have nothing to do with community, being ‘of the order neither of the common nor of its opposite, neither appurtenance or non-appurtenance, sharing or non-sharing, proximity or distance, the inside or the outside, etc.’ This friendship would no longer be ‘community’:

Not because it would be a community without community, ‘unavowable’ or ‘inoperative’, etc., but simply because it would have nothing to do, with regard to what is essential in that which is called friendship, with the slightest reference to community, whether positive, negative, or neutral. [PoF 298 / 331]<sup>13</sup>

A community must always presuppose a decision and rules as to who does or who ought to form part of it. We can assume that the same strictures

might apply to democracy, and that Derrida is attempting to think something which would not be recognizable as democracy, but whose promise may be found to be contained within democracy. If *Politics of Friendship* operates in the terms set out at the end of the last section, we might expect 'democracy-to-come' to function as both a name for a concept of politics thought beyond politics, and the conditions of a prolonged negotiation with actual existing democracy. It is this compression which informs Derrida's recurrent query:

would it still make sense to speak of democracy when it would no longer be a question (no longer in question as to what is essential or constitutive) of country, nation, even of State and citizen – in other words, *if at least one still keeps to the accepted use of this word*, when it would no longer be a political question? [PoF 104 / 126–7]

Derrida's use of 'democracy-to-come' must serve as a strategic intervention which combines both a reference to actual political conditions; and an attempt to think towards something which would exceed the order of politics – or at least our conventional understandings of the term. However, having set out the structure of what Derrida calls 'democracy-to-come', his choice of the term remains to be explained. As I have suggested, there can only be a strategic justification for this, rather than an absolute one. The reference to democracy is fairly clear, however, so what requires explanation is the reference to futurity written into the 'to-come', Derrida's displacement of the French word *avenir* (future) into *à-venir* (to-come). This is the final element we require to begin to assess Derrida's deconstructive genealogy as a politics of the promise.

### THE PROMISE OF POLITICS

In the 1981 interview to which I referred in the Introduction, Derrida specifies a double strategy with regard to politics:

the difficulty is to gesture in opposite directions at the same time: on the one hand to preserve a distance and suspicion with regard to the official political codes governing reality; on the other, to intervene here and now in a practical and *engagé* manner whenever the necessity arises. This position of dual allegiance, in which I personally find myself, is one of perpetual uneasiness. I try where I can to act politically while recognizing that such action remains incommensurate with my intellectual project of deconstruction.<sup>14</sup>

Adapting this suggestion to the terms of *Politics of Friendship* I have suggested that Derrida's intervention in that text consists in re-writing one of

‘the official political codes governing reality’, democracy, in terms which attempt both a political transformation in the here and now, and to gesture to the necessity for a continual rethinking of the basic concepts of politics itself. Just as the neologism ‘différance’ should be accorded no special privilege in reading Derrida’s work, but located as a strategic response to his institutional and theoretical surroundings – roughly the hegemony of a structuralism (and of a structuralist Marxism) informed by a crude Hegelian reading of the relationship between difference and identity – so the phrase ‘democracy-to-come’ is coined in an attempt to effect a certain kind of transformation. What remains to be clarified is the nature of this as a form of political practice. The answer lies not so much in the word ‘democracy’ as in the ‘to-come’.

Derrida’s account of democracy-to-come seems extremely ambiguous from the point of view of more conventional political theory. It proceeds neither from analysis of the history of the democratic state form, nor from the observation of what democracy means in the contemporary world. Nor does it consist in constructing practical and pragmatically oriented normative models for the functioning of a political democracy, or of adapting such models to local conditions. While Derrida clearly expresses a hope that there will be more democracy rather than less in the future, on the condition that ‘democracy’ is understood not as one state form among others, but something like a principle of equality and emancipation, he is unable to make any concrete suggestions as to how this might be brought about. Instead what *Politics of Friendship* establishes is: 1. the possibility and the necessity of criticizing any current form of democracy in the name of an ideal principle of ‘democracy-to-come’; 2. the necessity of attempting to think towards a political relation which would be more ‘democratic’ than any democracy imaginable – but could for these reasons perhaps no longer be called democracy or even political. All this is signified by Derrida’s qualification that democracy remains ‘to come’. Strictly speaking, however, deconstruction prohibits any prediction as to whether in fact there will be any more or less of what we call democracy in the future, nor whether another form of political system or thinking will emerge or not. The futurity of the ‘to-come’ is of another order:

For democracy remains to come; this is its essence in so far as it remains: not only will it remain indefinitely perfectible, hence always insufficient and future, but, belonging to the time of the promise, it will always remain, in each of its future times, to come: even when there is democracy, it never exists, it is never present, it remains the theme of a non-presentable concept. [PoF 306 / 339]

Rather than ‘democracy-to-come’ Derrida might have chosen to insist that there is no democracy worthy of the name; or that democracy, like justice,

is an experience of the impossible. None of these descriptions is *not* true of democracy in Derrida's terms, but in attesting to a 'democracy-to-come', Derrida also affirms something within democracy that does confirm the possibility of there being more democracy rather than less.

This is the dimension of the promise within democracy. Insisting on it reinforces not only the fact that what we call democracy can never be fully present; but that something of democracy is already present here and now. While stripped of any specific content, this affirmation remarks something within democracy; the gap between the two logics which makes necessary the negotiation. This negotiation is the possibility of there being greater justice, a more equitable distribution of resources or power; but it must also be the risk of the opposite being the case. This is not a utopian social thought.<sup>15</sup> For it locates the promise of 'democracy-to-come' in the past as much as in what we call the present, and gives no grounds for thinking that it will or will not come to pass in the future. 'Democracy-to-come' is what opens to the future, but it is not the future thought in terms of a future-present. Without this opening to the future there would be no democracy at all. Beyond democracy, we are called to imagine another experience of democracy, or of friendship, of equality. But we can only imagine this as monstrous, frightening and disturbing, as 'absolute danger' [GRA 5 / 14]. Any promise, Derrida insists, is indissociable from a threat, since the necessary condition of a promise is that it might not come true.<sup>16</sup>

The structure of democracy is caught between the promise of emancipation, of there being more democracy, more justice, more equality, and the threat of there being less democracy, of the disappearance of the democratic moment in its fraternal recuperation. The 'futurity' of the 'to-come' in 'democracy-to-come' is not of the order of something for which an arrival could be predicted; nor is it to be associated with a teleology – it is entirely possible that there have been 'more' democratic societies in the past. What Derrida is describing is more like a principle of disruption which opens democracy as we know it to the possibility of something else happening. Because this 'something else' cannot be specified, it could be 'good' or 'bad' – more equality or less equality. What is clear is that it must not be thought of as the arrival of 'democracy-to-come' itself. What Derrida also calls 'justice', a condition of absolute respect for every singularity in its singularity is not just difficult to describe, but is also potentially the worst violence, since law, politics and democracy, the mechanism of negotiation between different injustices would no longer be possible. To think 'democracy-to-come' is also in some sense to hold off this threat; to defer the possibility of the worst violence, the violence which would abolish politics, while seeking to negotiate for a less violent politics in the here and now.

In seeking to reaffirm this democratic promise, but without resigning the right and the necessity of negotiating an improvement in what we now call democracy, Derrida's text is structured as a re-enactment of that promise.



The book's heavily marked performative dimension draws attention to this. By repeating so much of the traditional conceptualization of friendship and of democracy, Derrida does not dismiss it, but confirms its necessity and importance. Derrida does not reject the tradition, but places his work within it or alongside it. In particular, by repeating the traditional apostrophe 'O my friends there are no friends' he underlines the structure of any communication:

We would not be together in a sort of minimal community – but also incommensurable to all others – speaking the same language or praying for translation against the horizon of a same language, if only to manifest disagreement, if a *sort of friendship* had not already been sealed, before all contracts[...]: a friendship prior to friendships, an ineffaceable friendship, fundamental and groundless, one that breathes in a shared language (past or to come) and in the being-together that all allocution supposes, up to and including the declaration of war. [PoF 236 / 264]

*Aimance*, preceding and making possible any so-called friendships, bears witness to the possibility of friendship, just as Derrida, in writing about the texts of the tradition is not simply criticizing their accounts of friendship and of democracy, but is also repeating, underwriting, signing up to, not only their sense of the importance of democratic friendship, but their assumption of responsibility for the experience and the theory of friendship and of politics.

This offers us a first account of how Derrida's identification of democracy with deconstruction might be understood, and of how *Politics of Friendship* might be considered as itself a political intervention. Derrida's text is an intercession on behalf of democracy which is neither celebration nor condemnation, and which underlines an excessive and unsettling deconstructive and de-limiting force already at work within the concept of democracy, a name of which no self-proclaimed democracy could ever be worthy. In acknowledging this force, deconstruction follows, responds to, what was already there in democracy: but only deconstruction allows us to see democracy for what it is, or the promise of what it could be. 'No deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction' [PoF 105 / 128].

## *Deconstruction and Liberal Democracy*

Derrida's account of 'democracy-to-come' in *Politics of Friendship*, like his provocative identification of democracy with deconstruction, can be seen as a deliberate challenge to more familiar protocols of political analysis. This raises major problems for Derrida's readers. What is the advantage in distinguishing a concept so broad that it can contain the whole tradition of Western political thought; and what would this concept have to do with resolving problems in any particular state, today or tomorrow? Would we not do better to focus on distinguishing between different models of democracy, whether on a historical or a conceptual basis? How can Derrida justify making no reference to any analysis of the contemporary liberal democratic state?

Not only does Derrida's strategy appear to risk effacing what might be most valuable in democratic theory, whether theoretically or empirically based, by reducing it to the expression of some underlying conceptual framework, but it would seem to leave Derrida open to the charge of proposing – in Thomas McCarthy's phrase – 'a politics of the ineffable'. Or worse perhaps, does Derrida's failure to consider the specific tradition of liberal democratic government lead him towards a massive failure of political judgement? We might see this as the pre-emptive challenge to *Politics of Friendship* made by Claude Lefort when he addressed Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy's Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political in 1980 and threw out this challenge to an audience which included Derrida:

How can they handle ontological differences with such subtlety, vie with one another in exploiting the combined resources of Heidegger, Lacan, Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, and then fall back upon such crass realism when the question of politics arises? [...] They are unable to discern freedom in democracy, because democracy is defined as bourgeois. They are unable to discern servitude in totalitarianism.<sup>1</sup>

Lefort's comments betray an odd understanding of his hosts' work, but many readers of *Politics of Friendship* may well feel some sympathy towards them, faced with a work in which Derrida (deliberately) makes no reference to contemporary political events.

What seems a reasonable objection in fact misunderstands the principles of Derrida's analysis. Until we have come to terms with the concept and ideal of democracy, how could we criticize any particular liberal democratic

state? Derrida has not been shy of commenting on specific political issues, although he has also reserved the right not to comment, in accordance with whichever seems the most responsible political strategy at the time. But because these comments are contingent to their occasion and their location, they cannot and should not be built up into a specific programme for democratic reform – as Derrida also remarks in such interviews: ‘The decision in which political responsibility consists, is that of determining in which situation it is necessary to be on the side of the State or against it’ [PM 344]. Nothing can predict this for me in advance.

What Derrida is interested in are the limits, and what carries beyond the limits, of the concept of democracy as such. Since any analysis of any particular democracy must first presume the identity of the concept, these limits cannot come into focus within those analyses. If *Politics of Friendship* is read as an attempt to bring these limits into focus, the test of Derrida’s analysis will not be how well it conforms to pre-existing interpretative norms, but its applicability and utility. We might say that Derrida operates with a strategy of calculated indifference to the theory and practice of democracy, in order to focus on what places restrictions on both. This is undoubtedly a violent procedure. But if Derrida is correct, then any discussion of democracy which does not pass through some form of deconstructive questioning will be guilty of either naivety or a far worse violence.

That having been said, it is possible to make some generalizations about Derrida’s specific elaboration of the links between liberal democracy as a contemporary mode of government and the idea of ‘democracy-to-come’. For example one might note that although he is willing to argue from the idea of equality and of justice, unlike his friend Jean-Luc Nancy he is reluctant to invoke freedom: ‘As for freedom, let us leave that for another interview. I am ‘for it’, naturally, but if we had the time and space for it, I would try to explain why I only rarely, and very soberly, use that word’ [PM 343]. Following the account of justice and equality in *Politics of Friendship* and elsewhere, the second most consistent strand in Derrida’s work on ‘democracy-to-come’ is that which links democracy to literature. This argument is also worth reviewing here because it raises the problem of articulating Derrida’s genealogical deconstructions of concepts with the specific institutional and cultural circumstances of their dissemination.

## LITERATURE AND DEMOCRACY

Derrida’s account of the connection between democracy and literature also passes through the question of deconstruction itself. In his essay ‘Passions’, Derrida explicitly links democracy and literature. ‘Literature [...] ties its destiny,’ he writes, ‘to a certain noncensure, to the space of democratic freedom (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.). No democracy

without literature; no literature without democracy' [PAS 28 / 65]. In making this connection, Derrida again links democracy with deconstruction, since a concern with literature has been at work since his earliest texts; indeed his (abandoned) dissertation was a phenomenological study of the literary work.<sup>2</sup> However, the status of literature in deconstruction is complex. By examining the fate of literature in deconstruction, we can consider more closely Derrida's assertion of a relationship between literature and democracy.

A version of 'Passions' was first published as Derrida's own contribution to *Derrida: A Critical Reader*.<sup>3</sup> Given this context, not only is Derrida's essay playful and humorous in tone, but he seems particularly interested in playing on his audience's expectations of him — for example editor David Wood's suggestion that he contribute 'an oblique offering'. After satirizing and questioning the situation of the book, likening it to a sacrificial ritual, and commenting on the perceived ethical turn in deconstruction, Derrida confesses that he wants to tell his readers a secret. But the secret turns out to have been given away long ago. For Derrida confesses that 'all I wanted to do was to confide or confirm my taste (probably unconditional) for literature, more precisely for literary writing' [PAS 27 / 63]. This may have been an open secret, for Derrida's passion for literature has always been well known, from both the essays collected in *Dissemination*, the two essays on Jabés in *Writing and Difference*, and his interest in and texts on writers like Joyce, Ponge, Blanchot or Celan.<sup>4</sup> In fact Derrida has been often accused of liking literature too much, or of reducing philosophy to literature,<sup>5</sup> as he acknowledges when he explains:

Not that I like literature in general, nor that I prefer it to something else, to philosophy, for example, as they suppose who ultimately discern neither one nor the other. Not that I want to reduce everything to it, especially not philosophy. Literature I could, fundamentally do without, in fact, rather easily. [PAS 27 / 64]

Derrida goes on to emphasize that what he likes in literature is not a matter of aesthetics, nor is it simply a question of preferring novels to other forms of prose. Instead his preference for literature is its connection with democracy, and freedom of speech:

I have often found myself insisting on the necessity of distinguishing between literature and belles-lettres or poetry. Literature is a modern invention, inscribed in conventions and institutions which, to hold on to just this trait, secure in principle its *right to say everything*. Literature thus ties its destiny to a certain noncensure, to the space of democratic freedom (freedom of the press, freedom of speech, etc.) No democracy without literature; no literature without democracy. [PAS 28 / 68]

This apparently offers us the possibility of a more historically based account of democracy within a deconstructive framework than the conceptual exploration of ‘democracy-to-come’ in *Politics of Friendship*, but it also raises two immediate difficulties. The first problem is the fact that Derrida has offered several answers to the question ‘what is literature?’ The second is that at least one of those definitions has questioned the existence of literature at all: is the literature which is tied to freedom of speech that same literature of which Derrida notes that ‘there is no – hardly any, ever so little – literature’ [DIS 223 / 274]? On the one hand Derrida tells us that ‘literature is a public institution of recent invention, with a comparatively short history, governed by all sorts of conventions connected to the evolution of law, which allows, in principle, anything to be said’ [DAP 80] but on the other hand it is a distant possibility, perhaps impossibility itself.

Perhaps we should not try too hard to reconcile Derrida’s statements on the subject of literature, as on other topics. As Rodolphe Gasché puts it, ‘Since what we might call Derrida’s “performative turn”, such plurality appears to be inevitable,<sup>6</sup> since each statement is necessarily bound to its context and to its own singularity as a response. However in this case, turning to Derrida’s well-known early essay ‘The Double Session’ can help us clarify his comments on the relationship between democracy and literature. In this essay Derrida comes closest to posing what he described in his thesis defence as one of the key questions of deconstruction:

What is literature? And first of all what is it ‘to write’? How is it that the fact of writing can disturb the very question ‘what is?’ and even ‘what does it mean?’ To say this in other words – and here is the *saying otherwise* that was of importance to me – when and how does an inscription become literature and what takes place when it does? To what and to whom is this due? What takes place between philosophy and literature, science and literature, politics and literature, theology and literature, psychoanalysis and literature? [...] Why am I so fascinated by the literary ruse of the inscription and the whole ungraspable paradox of a trace which manages only to carry itself away, to erase itself in marking itself out afresh, itself and its own idiom, which in order to take actual form must erase itself and produce itself at the price of this self-erasure.<sup>7</sup>

In ‘The Double Session’ Derrida poses the question of literature, as he puts it, ‘between Plato and Mallarmé’ [DIS 183 / 225]. He proposes one reading of mimesis based on Plato, and then juxtaposes it with another interpretation of mimesis which he finds to be both at work and thematized within Mallarmé’s text ‘Mimique’. However, as with his reading of Nietzsche’s relationship to Aristotle, this does not mean that Mallarmé invents or discovers a new version of mimesis, which overturns or disproves Plato’s arguments. In the early pages of his text Derrida sets this out quite clearly. These ‘proper

names', he notes, 'are not real references but indications for the sake of convenience and initial analysis' [Dis 183 / 225].

What Derrida finds in Mallarmé is a general possibility within mimesis as such, but which a traditional interpretation of Plato has dismissed – we might think of this as a Mallarméan moment already present within Plato's writing. This moment also passes between philosophy and literature, but to show that there is a 'literary' moment within philosophy's account of the relationship between image and copy, truth and fiction, is not to privilege one account (philosophical or literary) of this relationship. While literature is able to pose questions to philosophy which might not be available within its history [DAP 80], literature is in its turn a philosophical concept. If a certain avant-garde literary practice exposes this dimension of mimesis more readily than other texts, this does not make it an experience restricted to these texts.

Traditionally, a mimetic object is either considered to be a transparent copy, to be judged according to the truth of the thing imitated, or it is considered qua copy, and judged according to the truth of its representation of the object copied; mimesis is the performance of a 'truth'. In 'Mimique' Mallarmé describes the scene of a performance which imitates nothing except itself, and which might be considered as a mimetic act which escapes the order of copy and original. Derrida argues that this possibility already inhabits, not only every so-called copy, but everything which is capable of being copied or imitated. Thus the order of truth is subsequent to the order of imitation: there is repetition before the unique, and non-absolute difference before either singularity or difference, self or other. Around a thematics of the hymen, as that which both separates and joins, Derrida advances the possibility of thinking an 'in-between' which cannot be organized around oppositions such as inside/outside, truth/falsehood [Dis 212–22 / 261–74].

This argument within the text is doubled by the second section of 'The Double Session'. Here Derrida argues that the structure of what he calls the 're-mark' resists any attempt to exhaust the meaning of Mallarmé's work by thematic criticism. Writing in the context of Richard's analysis of Mallarmé in which the blank, or whiteness is proposed as the exemplary theme of his writing, Derrida shows that the blank, the possibility of distinction between two terms in a series, must remain a term within that series, and thus cannot be considered the ultimate theme, any more than any of the other terms in the series can. Each mark, in fact, is both an exemplary member of the series of all marks, and a mark on its own. It refers both to itself, and to the fact of its being distinguished from all other marks: this is the structure of *différance*. The re-mark is an attempt to formalize a structure inherent in every mark whereby it not only functions as a mark, but is doubled, since it also marks its own status as a mark. The mark is in other words divided, since this structure introduces a gap or delay between the moment in which the mark labels itself as a mark, and in which it marks whatever it refers to. This

also defeats any attempt to idealize a mark, since it will never be complete in itself, referring to every other mark.

This structural *restance* (remainder), exemplarity, *différance*, re-marking, effect of the hymen, supplement, contamination, is what Derrida likes in literature – and wherever else it might be found. It is this which he relates to democracy, under the guise of the fortunes of literature as a historical set of institutions and definitions, defined legally or generically within a culture. The significance of the truth/fiction opposition is not only that it determines the traditional account of the relationship between philosophy and literature, but the account of all meaning and of all events of meaning (events as meaning). It therefore determines the very possibility of assigning a meaning to such terms as ‘literature’:

If this handbook of literature meant to *say* something, which we now have some reason to doubt, it would proclaim first of all that there is no – or hardly any, ever so little – literature; that in any event there is no essence of literature, no truth of literature, no literary-being or being-literary of literature. And that the fascination exerted by the ‘is’, or the ‘what is’ in the question ‘what is literature’ is worth what the hymen is worth – that is, not exactly nothing – when for example it causes one to die laughing. All this, of course, should not prevent us – on the contrary – from attempting to find out what has been represented and determined under that name – ‘literature’ and why. [DIS 223 / 275]

The literary signifies that there is something within any text which opposes or resists, and is certainly irreducible to any thematic description. ‘This handbook of literature’ refers both to Mallarmé’s text, and the work of Derrida’s which describes it and becomes in its turn a handbook of literature. Thus Derrida proposes two tasks. Firstly, we must pursue the structural or deconstructive analysis of the concept of literature, and secondly its historical or genealogical aspect – ‘what has been represented and determined under that name’. Two things are at stake. Derrida is proposing both the possibility of thinking the entire heritage of metaphysics otherwise – whether conceived in terms of an opposition between truth and fiction; of critique as unveiling; of philosophy as truth against literature as fictionality; or of history against myth – and the genealogy of the historical codification of this possibility. The irreducible literary moment or trace within a text is thus the deconstructive moment which shows not only that the oppositions on which philosophy and everything that participates in it (even those disciplines to which philosophy is opposed, which must therefore be contaminated by it) are not natural, but depend on a more general structure, for example, that of *différance*, or ‘democracy-to-come’. The literary moment is impossible to the extent that it shows itself only through its effects, but is in itself only a principle of non-closure, of the impossibility of the complete analysis of a

text, of reducing it to transparency – that which remains. On this basis we can see that the ‘literary’ also undermines the stability of a final opposition between literature and philosophy. Both ‘philosophy’ and ‘literature’ supervene on this field of undecidability, and are effects of more or less historical stabilizations of that undecidability.

The relationship Derrida perceives between democracy and literature operates on both the two levels we have distinguished. Not only is there a relationship between literature and freedom of speech in a certain tradition of law, cast as the right to say anything, but this legal apparatus testifies to a less transient, but more opaque structure. This is not a necessary connection, and Derrida calls it a ‘great good fortune’ [DAP 80]. Such a connection raises the possibility of a historical supplement to *Politics of Friendship*, which would trace the development of the idea of democracy in connection with the specific institutional and legal enactments of the principle of equality, and of the right to say anything.

What such a history would reveal, of course, is that the right to free speech, to say anything as literature, has always been limited. If free speech is a condition for what we call democracy then a correlate of this must be that there will always be censorship of literature. There must always be some code, if not of censorship, then another’s right to privacy or a law against libel or slander, which regulates what can be said in the public sphere. Even if this is not externalized in a legal requirement, it is a responsibility which comes with writing; the possibility of a self-censorship by the author. Again we might understand this in terms of the hyperbolic experience of absolute responsibility: the irresponsibility of being able to say anything precedes and is the very condition of the responsibility which is imposed upon it to limit it. We cannot imagine a democracy without a debate on the possibility or the need for censorship. Without this debate, we would no longer be in a democracy: the society which did not debate censorship would no longer be democratic. Yet at the same time, on Derrida’s account, ‘each time that a literary work is censored, democracy is in danger’ [PAS 28 / 65].

Derrida has given several interviews in which he has discussed the role of the media in contemporary society, which illustrate this paradoxical situation. In an interview published as ‘Another Day for Democracy’, Derrida reflects on the relationship between ‘democracy-to-come’, public opinion and the question of the media. This makes apparent that the relationship between democracy and freedom of speech is subject to constant negotiation and demands the most extreme vigilance. For example he specifies that a free press should also allow a ‘right to reply’; ‘France is one of the rare countries which recognises the [...] right of response. It’s a fundamental right.’ However, Derrida goes on to suggest that this right is so attenuated as to be threatened: from interpretative violence, abusive simplification, insinuations, which



most often go without an immediate and public response, on the radio, on the television, and in the newspapers. [...] To the extent that the right to reply does not receive its full extension and its effectiveness (again, an infinite task), democracy as such will be limited. Only in the press? Certainly, but the press is everywhere *today*.<sup>8</sup>

Within the fundamental opening of democracy, guaranteed or accompanied by freedom of speech, what we might call hegemonic or anti-democratic forces are at work. Derrida speaks approvingly elsewhere in interviews of the diversification of the media, and of the dangers posed by monopolization of the press. To the extent that speech is free, not just as a right enshrined in law, but in terms of economic and social conditions, we might speak of democratization; to the extent that it is conditioned or limited, anti-democratization. These forces can never cancel each other out: there can never be 'full' or 'present' democracy, but nor can the restriction of the freedom of speech ever crush the very possibility of speaking without any controls. Or, as Derrida puts it in his 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', 'it is obvious that if democracy remains to come, this right to say anything, even in literature, is not concretely realized or actualized' [DAP 80]. The title of the interview to which I have referred brings out this problem: the published translation bears the name 'Another Day for Democracy' but it might equally have been translated as 'Democracy adjourned'. We see the same sense of deferral and promise that structured the concept of democracy-to-come in *Politics of Friendship*.

What is perhaps more evident here than in the longer work, is the way in which the elaboration of the concept of democracy-to-come authorizes an indefinite and prolonged criticism of the failure of democratic institutions to live up to an ideal, without giving up on democracy in favour of something else. So 'democracy-to-come' is not a utopian idea: it is not a perfect political system either imaginable, but to be found somewhere else, or indefinitely postponed. It is the experience of the impossibility of a full democracy which compels us here and now to criticize the inadequacy of so-called democracies. A democratic system will always be torn by democratizing and anti-democratic forces. A deconstructive analysis will hope to support the former by resisting the latter, but without any final authority by which to absolutely distinguish the two. This idea of resistance can be developed through an account of the place of the secret in Derrida's analysis of literature and of democracy.

#### THE POLITICS OF THE SECRET

Throughout the period of Derrida's reflections on 'democracy-to-come' and often in the same texts, an association is made between literature and 'the

secret'. Derrida's use of the term 'secret' can be directly connected to the questions of exemplarity and *différance* which I have already described: but it allows us to take a further step and to see 'democracy-to-come' as partly a problematization of the public/private distinction on which the concept of politics is often founded, particularly in the tradition of liberal political thought.

Derrida gives a long account of the secret in 'Passions', and it is possible to read this description as articulating precisely the connection between literature (the trace, the remark), or *différance*, and democracy that we have been following. Derrida combines the modes of affirmation or testimony ('there is something secret') and indication ('*there* is something secret'), based on the close relationship between the French phrases '*il y a du secret*' and '*il y a du secret*'. Mixing the two modes of address (claiming both that 'there *is* something secret' and that '*there* is something secret') gives the text a performative dimension which precedes and overflows the apparently apophatic presentation [PAS 24 / 56]. For the secret is approached entirely in terms of what it is not. The secret is not an art hidden within the human, either that of artistic genius or of the transcendental imagination, nor is there a question of election for anyone who knows the secret [PAS 24 / 56–7]. The secret is not an unconscious representation, whether recoverable or reconstructible by psychoanalysis. It is not of the order of subjectivity, nor of resistance to the Hegelian system, neither existential nor Kierkegaardian; nor is it either sacred or profane [PAS 24–5 / 57–8]. The secret is not an effect of religious revelation. It belongs 'no more to the private than to the public' [PAS 25 / 58–9]. The secret is not any form of interiority, but a structural effect, irreducible to the conceptual distinction between inside and outside. It is not of the order of secret as we understand it in terms of possible revelation – any secret which could be revealed is not an absolute secret in Derrida's sense. The secret withholds itself from the order of truth as either adequation or unveiling. The secret must remain foreign to 'knowledge and of historical narrative, and outside of all periodization, all epochalization' [PAS 27 / 62]. In other words, the secret is another word for the experience of singularity – for what resists all categorization or generalization, but cannot be recognized by any law.

Translated into political terms, Derrida draws on the secret – this principle of absolute singularity – to affirm a dimension of privacy which could be thought beyond the opposition between the public and the private, and perhaps therefore irreducible to any politics: 'I have attempted to think an experience of the secret and of singularity to which the public realm has no right and no power' [DAP 81]. It is worth bearing in mind here that the distinction between public and private has been used on the one hand to reserve a realm of experience from a political intervention – often in the liberal tradition, economic activity, religious belief or morality – while on the other hand it registers a boundary which can always be crossed by the

state: the private person as citizen is already wholly bound to the law. The non-absolute secret, a secret which can be passed on or revealed, from which Derrida distinguishes his own account of the secret, would be equivalent to this right to privacy; a right which has been violated in advance, as a revocable concession made on the basis of a prior public claim to know everything. This is again clear from Derrida's 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism':

this secret is not something that I keep within me; it is not me. The secret is not the secret of representation that one keeps in one's head and which one chooses not to tell, it is rather a secret coextensive with the experience of singularity. The secret is irreducible to the public realm – although I do not call it private – and irreducible to publicity and politicization, but at the same time, this secret is that on the basis of which the public realm and the realm of the political can be and remain open. [DAP 81]

The secret is not a question of any particular or possible content, but of a political limit. This limit would entail both a desirable restraint on the power of the state, but also a limit which generates political responsibility as such. Only to the extent that each citizen is not a citizen – that is, in the terms of our previous discussion, is not a countable singularity – is there any need for calculation, for negotiation. Only once there is infinite responsibility is there any responsibility at all. The secret may not *be* anything, but the principle of the secret is irreducible if there is any politics at all. It is perhaps in this sense that the secret, literature and freedom of speech are found to be the necessary conditions of democracy, rather than through an accident of history. In 'Passions' Derrida proposes just this, linking the secret to 'a hyperbolic condition of democracy which seems to contradict a certain determined and historically limited concept of such a democracy, a concept which links it to the concept of a subject that is calculable, accountable, imputable and responsible' [PAS 29 / 66–7]. What Derrida describes as the exemplary secret of literature is that of a principle of *restance* – that which remains – on which might be articulated a thought of resistance.<sup>9</sup>

## *Deconstruction and Radical Democracy*

Derrida's provocative identification of deconstruction and democracy is an attempt to think something like a constitutive flaw in the very concept of democracy: which generates 'democracy-to-come' as an ideal of justice which democracy can never reach, beyond enumeration and equality; but also opens the possibility of an analysis or a criticism which would permanently bear witness to this gap, seeking to reduce it, yet without claiming to know how to do so. Derrida calls this situation 'democracy-to-come', but it is a structural effect of what he elsewhere calls deconstruction meaning what happens. Deconstruction would also name the approach which best claims to represent or think this situation, proposing this critique of any existing form of democracy, while stressing a principle of ruin within the concept itself which rules out proposing an ameliorative programme or solution.

In its implicit criticisms of such fundamental liberal principles as abstract rights, universal law and the social contract, Derrida's work on democracy shares common ground with a heterogeneous body of political thought which it is convenient to call radical democratic theory. This is broadly left-wing in political affiliation and characterized by a rejection of revolutionary practice in favour of a commitment to furthering the critique of liberal democracy within the democratic system. In particular, radical democracy calls for a re-evaluation of the space of politics in terms of opposition and dissensus rather than a search for consensus and agreement – for an 'agonistic' (Chantal Mouffe) or 'antagonistic' (William Connolly) democracy rather than what Bonnie Honig has called the traditional aim of political theory, the displacement of politics itself.<sup>1</sup> Radical democratic theorists have been prepared to accept the incommensurability of competing political claims rather than seeking to reconcile such claims within a broader rational discursive horizon or an overarching political theory or theory of society.

In her introduction to *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, Chantal Mouffe identifies as typical concerns of radical democratic thought: a dissatisfaction with both liberal and communitarian theory; a suspicion of rights as masking historical and ideological or economic interests of particular groups; an attempt to distinguish political and economic liberalism; an interest in active citizenship dissociated from a theory of national identity or unity. In similar terms to Derrida's, Mouffe concludes:

our understanding of radical democracy [...] postulates the very impossibility of a final realization of democracy. It affirms that the unresolvable

tension between the principles of equality and liberty is the very condition for the preservation of the indeterminacy and undecidability which is constitutive of modern democracy. [...] Radical democracy also means the radical impossibility of a fully achieved democracy.<sup>2</sup>

Mouffe, her collaborator Ernesto Laclau, and the school of discourse analysis influenced by their writings, all take their bearings in part from deconstruction. But while there are undoubtedly *political* sympathies between Derrida and Laclau and Mouffe, as with other post-Althusserian thinkers such as Etienne Balibar, we should be wary about labelling Derrida's work in terms of 'radical democracy'. If only to the extent that its self-identification stems from its opposition to liberal thought, radical democracy risks reinstating the kind of constitutive division which a more deconstructive approach might want to unsettle.

In this chapter I will attempt to evaluate Derrida's work on the concept of democracy by comparing it with the notion of radical democracy, in particular as it is advanced in the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Through this comparison, and a discussion of Claude Lefort's analysis of the relation between democracy and totalitarianism, I will be able to formulate both the constitutive limits of radical democratic thought and the alternative offered by the deconstructive thinking of democracy.

## HEGEMONY AND DECONSTRUCTION

The work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe has been possibly the only sustained attempt from within the discipline of political theory to negotiate with deconstruction.<sup>3</sup> Not only does their theorization of radical democracy, first proposed in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, predate Derrida's own turn to the question of democracy, but in formulating their theory they draw explicitly on his writing. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* attempts three things at once. Grounded in a re-reading of the Marxist tradition intended to draw out an alternative logic for the Left – without discarding the Marxist heritage – and in particular to adopt and adapt Gramsci's theory of hegemony, their book proposes both 1. a diagnosis of the political and historical situation of the last two hundred years and 2. of the contemporary scene in terms of radical democratic emancipation and neo-conservative reaction to it; and further, 3. a rethinking and redirection of socialist strategy on the basis of the first two objectives.

This last aim is met by two criteria: first, by embracing post-structuralist thought to help theorize the field of the social and to recognize the limits of political intervention; and secondly, by the widening of traditional left-wing politics. Laclau and Mouffe drop the notion of a unified working class as the motor of revolution; accept that economic conditions may

not necessarily be primary; and seek to establish what they call a chain of equivalence between various otherwise distinct political struggles – between ecological and feminist politics as well as more traditional socialist projects, for example. Importantly, where traditional political theory has either worked from empirical observation or a projected ideal of a political body, Laclau and Mouffe place their emphasis very heavily on method rather than on conclusions; they attempt to think of politics as unending. Where most political theory has proposed endpoints or utopianism, or at least an end to politics, Laclau and Mouffe want to pass on a mobile conception of politics in terms of strategic gains and demands rather than universal, often disabling, conceptions of aims and means, ‘the two extremes represented by the totalitarian myth of the Ideal City, and the positivist pragmatism of reformists without a project’ [HSS 190]. The theory of hegemony, they emphasize, offers a way of thinking contingency rather than historical necessity [HSS 3; 6].

The socialism the two authors put forward is subordinated to a wider project, of maintaining and working within what they call ‘radical democracy’. In relation to this end, ‘socialism is *one* of the components for a project of radical democracy, not vice versa’ [HSS 178]. This drastic reformulation of the role and aims of socialism, traditionally seen as the absolute transformation of both the political sphere and of civil society – including the abolition of such a distinction – on the basis of the internal contradictions of capitalist economics, depends largely on the diagnosis of the theoretical and empirical-historical situation which Laclau and Mouffe put forward. This is where deconstruction and other strands of what they call ‘post-structuralist’ thought come into the equation. For it is from ‘post-structuralism’ that Laclau and Mouffe draw their major premises: the social is to be taken as ‘the constitutive ground or “negative essence” of the existing, and the diverse “social orders” as precarious and ultimately failed attempts to domesticate the field of differences’ [HSS 95–6]. They follow Hindness and Hirst’s influential critique of Althusser, and in particular their attack on determination and causation: ‘The social formation is not a totality governed by an organizing principle, determination in the last instance, structural causality, or whatever’ [HSS 100–1].<sup>4</sup> From Derrida they take the impossibility of fixing meanings, although they correctly see that there must be partial fixings of meaning, interventions, which they call articulations (and these articulations imply a relation in which both elements are transformed):

*The practice of articulation, therefore, consists in the construction of nodal points which partially fix meaning; and the partial character of this fixation proceeds from the openness of the social, a result, in its turn, of the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.*  
[HSS 113]

Radicalizing Gramsci, they claim that we need to think of a plurality of political spaces, which are not to be totalized into one political claim or struggle.

A radical thinking of democracy attempts to recognize both the space of emergence of new political subjects and the conflictual and antagonistic nature of the social sphere. The competing claims of various political particularisms represent for Laclau and Mouffe both a response to the fragmentation of the social sphere and resistance to its subsequent homogenization, articulated within the historical legacy or residue of the liberal-democratic egalitarian imagination. The task of the New Left is to deepen and radicalize this egalitarianism – against any essentialism, including that of a class-based socialism – with a commitment to a political pluralism. To this end they supplement the demand for equality with a demand for liberty [HSS 184]. This pluralism is called for and made possible by the nature of the social sphere as they conceive it: ‘It is to this plurality of the social that the project for a radical democracy is linked, and the possibility of it emanates directly from the [...] displacements which take place within that plurality’ [HSS 181]. Laclau and Mouffe recommend a strategy whereby separate political struggles are articulated together, not so much as alliances but through a process of mutual transformation: a logic of equivalence must be established between the distinct conflicts (‘anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-capitalism’ [HSS 182], for example) which entails a dissolution of the autonomy of the spaces in which each of these struggles is constituted. All must become ‘the equivalent symbols of a unique and indivisible struggle’ [HSS 182]. Laclau and Mouffe oppose the notion of each struggle being autonomous, since this would imply a closed totality, and instead demand political logics which intervene in the constitution of identity, but refuse to dominate or produce an ‘ultimate foundation’ of the social. Acknowledging these multiple spaces of struggle constitutes their vision of radical democracy as ‘pluralist’ [HSS 184].

Even on this brief account it is apparent that there may be some basic compatibility between a deconstructive and a radical democratic approach. However, before comparing the two strategies, I will set out three reservations with regard to Laclau and Mouffe’s account. The first concerns the status of radical democracy itself. There seems to me an ambiguity within the logic of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* which is not clarified in the later work of either author. Either radical democracy is the objective of radical democratic practice – a ‘radicalization of democracy’ for which, as Laclau puts it in a later text, contemporary social struggles ‘create the preconditions’<sup>5</sup> – or it is the dimension of democracy as already in existence which makes such a radical democratic practice possible. To put it another way, having argued for a model of politics considered as unending struggle to replace both the liberal teleology of progress towards consensus and revolutionary socialism, does a more sophisticated, but equally teleological, model

of the ends of politics creep in: the ideal social and discursive conditions for such a political process? Or is radical democracy a re-description of the relationship between politics and the social sphere – akin to recent work on civil society – designed to recognize a radical potential already at work within democracy, which forms the preconditions on which a better socialist project is to be built, with the objective of ‘the abolition of capitalist relations of production’ [HSS 192]?

My second reservation concerns the logic of equivalence by which specific oppositional political struggles are to be articulated. In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* Laclau and Mouffe insist that ‘the discourse of radical democracy is no longer the discourse of the universal’ [HSS 191] but also that through the category of equivalence, different political struggles may be articulated. But are these two claims compatible? The possibility of a radical incommensurability between political struggles or demands cannot be dealt with in these terms; indeed it is ruled out in advance. Laclau and Mouffe’s first formulation of equivalence appears to return the universal under another name, as the universal right to contribute to the socialist struggle. The argument that ‘For the defence of the interests of the workers not to be made at the expense of the rights of women, immigrants or consumers, it is necessary to establish an equivalence between these different struggles’ [HSS 184] may have been borne out by the apparent equivalence of the contradictory demands made on behalf of economic and trade protectionism, workers’ rights, anarchism and environmentalism by the disparate elements of recent anti-capitalist and anti-globalization protests around the globe. But it still seems uncertain both in theory and in practice whether the formal equivalence between these demands is not merely an effect of their opposition to an ill-defined status quo.

Laclau has subsequently offered a revised account, which appears to accept this criticism. The logic of equivalence is now to be understood in terms of universalism and particularism.<sup>6</sup> Any particularist demand – for higher wages or against a minimum wage, for freedom of the press or for formal privacy laws, for cheaper food or against the influence of supermarket chains – makes a universal claim at the same time, and that this universal logic of each particular claim makes it available for articulation with other struggles: ‘there is no logic of pure particularism’.<sup>7</sup> However, the possibility that demands might be irreconcilable cannot be dealt with within this schema: in fact, the future for the left depends on precisely this universal articulation of emergent particularisms, but the foundation of this universal remains not ‘an empty signifier’, as Laclau wishes, but an anti-system or anti-State stance.<sup>8</sup>

My third reservation about Laclau and Mouffe’s account of radical democracy can be more clearly related to Derrida’s work, and in particular to the confrontation between Claude Lefort and Derrida’s philosophical friends involved in the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political



to which I referred in the introduction to this chapter. Lefort's work plays a crucial role in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* and I will argue that the difficulties of his analysis of democracy are carried over into the radical democratic project.

## DEMOCRACY AND TOTALITARIANISM

Laclau and Mouffe draw on Claude Lefort to pull together several arguments which, although they do not emphasize this, are vital to their project in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. In particular they depend on Claude Lefort's distinction between democracy and totalitarianism. First, this distinction serves to guarantee the radical potential of democracy itself. They recognize an inherent danger in their own account, 'from the moment at which this space of equivalences ceases to be considered as *one* political space amongst others and comes to be seen as the centre, which subordinates and organizes all other spaces' [HSS 186]. This danger is of a final closure of the space of the political which has 'paradoxically' been made possible by 'the very logic of openness and of the democratic subversion of differences' [HSS 186]. The name for this closure is totalitarianism. Without this point of reference, the specificity of their account of democracy would lose its purchase, and they would be simply describing the nature of politics as such, rather than being able to draw specific strategic recommendations within the general field of politics. Secondly, Lefort's account of the historical development of totalitarianism, grounded in the attempt of the *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group to draw a line between their own socialism and that of the Soviet Union, at a time when other left-wing intellectuals were defending or ignoring the failings of existing state socialisms, both distances *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* from less reputable socialist forms and injects a sense of crisis into the text: once liberal democracy has become no longer the target for socialism but its very foundation, totalitarianism becomes not only the enemy, but also an ever-present menace. Thirdly, Lefort's account of the empty space at the centre of democracy provides a reassuringly philosophical *and* historical account to which they can refer.<sup>9</sup> However, in relying on Lefort, Laclau and Mouffe neutralize the radicality of their own project, as we shall see.

Lefort's influential account of democracy can be summarized in the claim that under a modern democratic regime, 'the locus of power becomes *an empty place*'. This is, he claims, its 'revolutionary and unprecedented feature' and implies 'an institutionalization of conflict. [...] Democracy is instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*'.<sup>10</sup> The historical roots of democracy lie in the loss of the identification of the body of the monarch with the body politic, the liberal detachment of the individual from society, and the disengagement of civil society from the state.

These conditions combine to generate a form of society in which the place of power is contested, and some form of balance of forces is necessary.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, totalitarianism – ‘the major fact of our time’ – is defined by ‘the development of the fantasy of the People-as-One, the beginnings of a quest for a substantial identity, for a social body which is welded to its head, for an embodying power, for a state free of division’.<sup>12</sup> Under such a regime, ‘it is denied that division is constitutive of society’.<sup>13</sup> The importance of such a distinction for Lefort is that it opens up a possibility within socialism to criticize certain forms of state socialism, but also that it provides a principle of a certain kind of political realism. As he argued when presenting his paper ‘The Question of Democracy’ to the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political in 1980, it no longer becomes possible to summarily dismiss democracy as ‘bourgeois’.<sup>14</sup> To attempt to present democracy as in some way concealing subtle forms of totalitarianism becomes at best naive, at worst dangerous and cynical.

There are some curiosities about Lefort’s account, as we shall see, not least the free intermingling of psychoanalytic, historical and political arguments, but it has been drawn upon by a number of recent theorists, including not only Laclau and Mouffe, but also Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, for example in their paper ‘The Re-treat of the Political’.<sup>15</sup> However, their account develops the logic to which Lefort objects, and which was immediately raised against him when he gave the paper: ‘Does not present-day democracy conceal a totalitarian threat? Is not democracy another, perhaps more subtle, form of totalitarianism?’<sup>16</sup> Although differing with Lefort over the distinction between totalitarianism and democracy, what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy share is his concern with the representational or imaginary dimension of the political sphere; when considering his arguments from Derrida’s point of view, however, there is less common ground.

If we read *Politics of Friendship* as a response to Lefort, there is indeed little room for dialogue. For the logic of democracy-to-come, as I argued in relation to the issue of freedom of speech, is precisely an attempt to distinguish between democratizing and totalitarian (anti-democratic) movements within the so-called democratic state itself. Indeed, Derrida’s concern to distinguish between the promise of equality within democracy – but a paradoxical equality which would exceed or ruin the very boundaries of the state, taken to its limit – from the reductive dependence of citizenship on some principle of autochthony, from the naturalization of the political decision, can be productively read as a blurring of the distinction between totalitarianism and democracy, considered as conceptual forms. The very possibility of partially disentangling the logics suggests that the opposition may still be maintained, up to a point, as a useful historical category. But the essential task for Derrida is clearly not to fortify the boundaries of democracy by threatening it with the spectre of the totalitarian, but to provide a principle against which democracy might also be judged.

Lefort's historical derivation of the categories in question itself runs into trouble. For while his model claims to be historically aware, it must remain unable to account for historical change. If totalitarianism is effectively the end of politics, if we could ever imagine a full totalitarianism, we would be unable to conceive of political resistance to that system. Attempting to answer this dilemma, concerning the political success of civil society in Poland, Lefort argues that 'the vulnerability of the totalitarian system in a crisis situation stems from the fact that the internal social divisions are subordinated to a general division between the sphere of power and that of civil society'.<sup>17</sup> But if civil society can offer a principle of resistance, it must already be at least potentially politicized. Lefort has no apparent solution to this problem. At one point he refers to 'forms of resistance to the totalitarian project' which while not 'conscious, political resistance' are 'social relations that elude the grip of power',<sup>18</sup> but elsewhere he provides the only possible convincing resolution of the problem, which is to argue that no totalitarianism is ever total. 'In emphasizing the logic of totalitarianism', Lefort admits, 'I do not at all wish to suggest that it is insurmountable.' We must distinguish between what totalitarianism 'ideally' is and what it is 'in actual development'.<sup>19</sup> Lefort's psychoanalytic vocabulary, in which the social body is the site of an imaginary identification, obscures the extent to which his categories depend on an idealized dualism. If no totalitarianism is ever total, the opposition with democracy will not hold: rather than an ideal of totalitarianism, we are left with an ideal opposition, which risks, as Simon Critchley argues, leaving Lefort as an apologist for liberal democracy [ED 211–12].

This difficulty of keeping the concepts of democracy and totalitarianism distinct in turn sheds some light on Derrida's work on democracy. As I have argued in this chapter, both what Derrida calls 'democracy-to-come', the effect of a twist within the logic of democracy which leads it to contradict its own promise, and his more historical reading of the relationship between literature and democracy, might lead us to the conclusion that there is no democracy, or 'or hardly any, ever so little'. If Derrida is read as offering a genealogy of the type which Laclau and Mouffe undertake, this would render his work either self-contradictory, or effectively useless. However, the deconstructive genealogy of the concept has a quite different effect. The problem of defining democracy as a concept is twofold: internally, democracy is always contradicting its own promise; externally it can never be rigorously separated from other political forms. But these structural or conceptual problems provide a kind of ground for both a continual critique of democracy – no democracy ever lives up to its name, so there can be no temptation to be satisfied with democracy as we have it – and a point of opposition to the kind of historically based political theory which serves to justify and naturalize actually existing democracy or, indeed, any imaginable democratic politics. But this is also done in the context of an

affirmation of the positive content of the concept of democracy (equality, freedom of speech) without any triumphalism, and an extension of the possibility of positive political effects to both civil society and the state apparatus. For if the opposition of democracy to totalitarianism on which Laclau and Mouffe depend does not hold up, their underlying opposition to the power of the state can be questioned, and the interminable strategic and contingent negotiations with the political as we experience it can begin.

### THE LIMITS OF RADICAL DEMOCRACY

We are now in a position to formulate the principal differences between Derrida's work on the concept of democracy and that of Laclau and Mouffe. Mouffe suggests in her introduction to *Dimensions of Radical Democracy* that 'the problem [...] is not the ideals of modern democracy, but the fact that its political principles are a long way from being implemented'.<sup>20</sup> However, for Derrida the problem is an internal dehiscence in the concept and ideal of democracy itself, not just the distance of modern democracies from democratic ideals. Whereas Laclau and Mouffe are able to formulate strategic models based on the principle of narrowing the gap between the reality and the ideal of democracy – even if they do not wish to reduce that gap altogether and project an end to politics – for Derrida such work, however necessary, requires a supplementary project. That project would be the deconstructive concern with the limits inscribed within the concept of democracy itself and which cannot be diagnosed as the effect of historical circumstances; nor resolved by strategic and historical intervention. In this section I will demonstrate the difference that Derrida's conceptual analysis makes for thinking about politics, and the importance of insisting on that difference.

For Laclau and Mouffe the historical existence of democracy is the necessary precondition for radical political action. This necessity is bolstered in their argument by the spectre of totalitarianism and functions to guarantee both the historical pertinence of their work (which they distinguish from normative or prescriptive theorizing) and its pragmatic realism. As I have argued, however, for Derrida the opposition between totalitarianism and democracy cannot be made absolute on a historical basis, but is closer to being the effect of an internal contradiction within the concept of democracy itself. Because this problematizes the possibility of defining democracy in contrast to other historical political regimes, democracy must in some sense also function within Derrida's work as a name for politics as such. In *Politics of Friendship* Derrida underlines the attempt 'to think, interpret, and implement another politics, another democracy' [PoF 104 / 128]. Throughout this chapter I have assumed that 'democracy' is the name of that particular political system which Derrida has been seeking to think. But the syntax

is ambiguous and another interpretation can be suggested. What if politics and democracy are synonymous? Once we accept that we cannot rigorously tell the friend from the enemy, or the self-interest of the many from the good of the many and, moreover, that this is not a reversal but the very foundation of the logic of friendship and of politics, wouldn't democracy not only be the political form par excellence but also the very name of politics as such? 'We are dealing here, as regards number', Derrida suggests, 'with an analogy between friendship and the *polis*, between friendship and what constitutes the political *as such*' [POF 212 / 239]. The difference between Laclau and Mouffe and Derrida would on this account appear to be that the former offer a historically situated political theory while the latter is attempting to rethink the concept of politics itself.

This opens up the possibility of a critique of the ideal of democracy which would no longer keep the name democracy. While Derrida may choose to retain the name here, in his formulation of a 'democracy-to-come', his work presumes the possibility that in another time, in another space, the term could be disregarded or jettisoned. However, the strategic options for Laclau and Mouffe remain more limited, since their argument depends on the affirmation of the existence of both an ideal and a reality of democracy. Derrida leaves open the possibility of a more radical political theory or practice, even if maintaining that possibility requires considerably less detail to his strategic political suggestions, as is certainly the case in *Politics of Friendship*. Simon Critchley has argued that

what the infinite ethical demand of deconstruction requires is a theory of *hegemonization*, that is, an account of the political conceived in terms of strategy and tactics, power and force [...] and most importantly, the question of identification, of social movements, and the credibility of the party form. The logics of deconstruction and hegemony need to be soldered at this point, I think, in a reciprocal relation of supplementarity.<sup>21</sup>

However, what he is calling for is a theory of political deconstruction as the symptomatology of political movements and a political programme based upon it; or in other words, the development of rules, and precisely the kind of naturalization of the decision which restricts the possibility of a 'democracy-to-come'. The rethinking of the space of politics, which Derrida announces under the guise of a genealogical deconstruction of the concepts of democracy and friendship, may not be strictly incompatible with the project of radical democracy, but it overflows it and exceeds it. Radical democratic thought would be inscribed within the space of politics whose possible understanding is opened up by deconstructive thought.

This is not how Laclau and Mouffe see things. For their account depends on the possibility that deconstruction can be subordinated to their account of hegemony. They tend to reduce deconstruction to a theory of

the 'constitutive outside' which provides one tool for their analysis of the incompleteness of the social sphere. It is for this reason that Chantal Mouffe can only reflect on a political approach which would be 'informed by deconstruction' rather than accepting that deconstruction is already both political theory and practice.<sup>22</sup> In responding to some comments by Ernesto Laclau, Derrida has made much the same point. While agreeing with most of Laclau's analysis, Derrida emphasizes that there is something missing from it, something which deconstruction offers, but the theory of hegemony or of radical democracy cannot: 'there is, in the opening of a context of argumentation and discussion, a reference – unknown, indeterminate, but none the less thinkable – to disarmament'. Politics as violence 'can only be practised and can only appear as such on the basis of a non-violence, a vulnerability, an exposition'. Moreover,

This is not the dream of a beautifully pacific relation, but of a certain experience of friendship perhaps unthinkable today and unthought within the historical determination of friendship in the West. This is a friendship, what I sometimes call an *aimance*, that excludes violence; a non-appropriative relation to the other that occurs without violence and on the basis of which all violence detaches itself and is determined. [DAP 83]

Like the secret, which opens the possibility of a resistance to all politicization while disrupting any opposition between the public and the private, so *aimance* interrupts while keeping open the closure of politics as necessary violence. (Contra Mouffe, deconstruction is not simply 'hyperpoliticizing' but also interrupts politics.<sup>23</sup>) Politics as violence is to be thought on the basis of *aimance* rather than vice versa. But this suggestion is itself political, and therefore violent in its turn. The relationship between *aimance* and political friendship is not based around the opposition of 'a beautifully pacific relation' to violence. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, while perhaps a necessary form of political violence, lacks the concern of deconstruction for this impossible moment of non-violence. It is this concern which makes deconstruction a more radical political theory than that of Laclau and Mouffe, as I will briefly suggest.

The performative dimension of 'democracy-to-come' enables Derrida to think affirmatively, without programming the future in terms of a particular historical configuration of forces. The promise of democracy is to be found not only in so-called democratic regimes, but in every political situation, and as in the case of the foundation of politics on the distinction between public and private, the definition of political space is greatly extended by deconstruction. This would mean that there is a promise of democracy within the apparatus of the state, as well as outside it, and a promise of change within every oppositional or conservative social or political movement, which does

not depend on the establishment of a chain of equivalences, but which can include the recognition that opposing demands may be radically incommensurable. Repressive state structures can be thought of as only temporary ‘stabilizations of power’ [DAP 83]: conversely there will be no state structure that is not ‘repressive’ in this way. As Derrida remarks: ‘In order to continue to pose the question of the political, it is necessary to withdraw something from the political and the same thing for democracy, which, of course, makes democracy a very paradoxical concept’ [DAP 85].

Derrida’s work offers a less certain and more disconcerting account of both politics and democracy than Laclau and Mouffe’s can. Apparently more radical, in extending its criticism to the limits of democracy itself, it also seems less radical, in refusing to underwrite an opposition between the state and the social, between a redemptive politics from below and a repressive politics from above. Ultimately I suspect that to the extent that their objectives are identified with a particular political system (that of ‘radical’ democracy), rather than with any external criteria, Laclau and Mouffe remain unable to negotiate between rival political claims within that space, except in terms of their politicality: the degree to which they affirm and maintain the plurality of democracy. Derrida however, despite the extreme asceticism of his political thought, *can* maintain criteria for distinguishing the totalitarian and democratic tendencies within any political system, even if any such distinction must remain a provisional judgement, and can never be absolutely upheld. This gives Derrida’s work its distinctive affirmative dimension. As he describes his own strategy in *Politics of Friendship*,

the apostrophe ‘O my friends’ also turns toward the past. It recalls, it points to that which must indeed be supposed in order to be heard, if only in the non-apophantic form of prayer: you have already marked this minimal friendship, this preliminary consent without which you would not hear me. Otherwise you would not listen to my call, you would not be sensitive to the element of hope in my complaint. [PoF 236 / 264]

The paradox of deconstruction as political practice is that while taking the form of a ‘complaint’, as an interminable work of mourning or of bearing witness to disaster, it is able to maintain an element of hope, the promise of something different. In this, deconstruction is perhaps more radically democratic – open to whatever happens to come to pass [*arrive*] – than any theory of radical democracy.

## POLITICS BEYOND DEMOCRACY?

In his essay on 'Derrida and politics' Geoffrey Bennington helpfully formulates the relationship between deconstruction and democracy as one of exemplarity:

Deconstruction then, on the one hand generalises the concept of politics so that it includes all conceptual dealings whatsoever, and on the other makes a precise use of one inherited politico-metaphysical concept, democracy, to make a pointed and more obviously political intervention in political thought.<sup>24</sup>

Bennington makes clear the doubleness of the deconstructive approach to politics. 'Deconstruction' names both a rethinking of politics as such, of both its extension and its limits, and a strategic or context-specific engagement with a particular political moment. These are inseparable. It is clear however that the boundaries between these two movements within deconstruction are also variable, and that it may not be possible to distinguish them so precisely.

I have argued in the two preceding chapters that from at least two points of view, 'democracy' for Derrida labels the possibility of politics as such. Both in terms of its classical roots and the structure of democracy's appeal, democracy names the space of politics and justice itself. Considered in terms of the secret, as a constitutive disruption of the opposition between public and private, democracy again names the possibility of the foundation of politics. This understanding of democracy clearly exceeds such distinctions as that made between the democracy and the totalitarian in radical democratic theory. But does this in turn mean that Lefort was correct to accuse Derrida and his friends of being 'unable to discern freedom in democracy, because democracy is defined as bourgeois [and] unable to discern servitude in totalitarianism'? Is the concept of democracy as Derrida understands it, as McCarthy claims, 'ineffable'? Would this confirm our lingering suspicions that a messianic politics is a politics that *waits* for an interruption that could only come from outside the system within which that politics functions?

Only by bearing certain factors in mind can we avoid rushing to such a hasty and dismissive conclusion. The first is to do with context. *Politics of Friendship* offers a deconstructive genealogy of the concept of democracy. This is clearly not the same thing as a critical analysis of the various historical and theoretical forms that the concept of democracy has taken. But such an analysis is not ruled out by Derrida's work; indeed, in some sense, it is both required by it and called for at the same time. For if the necessary prerequisite for action in any particular situation is as much knowledge as possible, even if that knowledge can never make a decision, without programming it, and if a decision must be made without submitting to a *theoretical* rule – democracy should take this or that form – we are obliged to



undertake the closest possible historical and empirical study. But we must do so without expecting that this will take away the decision itself. Rather than rejecting history in favour of philosophy, Derrida has often insisted on the necessity of more, and more sophisticated, historical work. This would be historical work that did not seek to submit the example to the rule (waves of democratization, a theory of modernity or postmodernity, globalization).

The second factor we should bear in mind is that the performative dimension of Derrida's text re-marks it as a contingent contribution. To assess his account of 'democracy-to-come' as a political strategy in its own right would require detailed analysis of the public space in France, of the reception of the book, of the effects of the original seminar 'Politics of Friendship' on those who attended it, or on the after-life of the book, an after-life which has yet to begin, in some senses. We would also have to read the book in more detail as a response to Nancy, Blanchot and perhaps also Levinas. If an appeal to democracy seems politically naive now that 'democracy' has become the rule not the exception (but in this case, what kind of criteria would define democracy?) wouldn't the possibility of renewing the criteria for judging democracy be an important counterbalance to a certain democratic triumphalism?

The third significant factor is that Derrida's intervention around the concept of democracy is not a final end or destination for deconstruction: but that this intervention is only one of the (infinitely) many possible, more or less political, deconstructive operations. It is also in some sense an attempt to describe what is already happening. This means a constant affirmation of both the potential for a democratization and the risk of the totalitarian closure of the political field at work everyday, everywhere, and certainly not a holding out for a revolutionary transformation by some mysterious external force. The risk of Bennington's account, and this can be seen to a greater extent in many positive but politically quiescent receptions of Derrida's work, is that while deconstruction is certainly considered to be political, the deconstruction of political thought and of politics as such is forgotten: if 'democracy-to-come' is the answer, what work is there left to do other than reiterate Derrida's conclusion? The mistake is to see 'democracy-to-come' as an end rather than a step along the way. Derrida chooses to maintain the name of democracy at one point, in one 'here and now'. Our response to Derrida, the response called for by his re-inscription of the democratic appeal – 'O my democratic friends...' [PoF 306 / 340] – will have to take its own time and its own strategies.

*Part 2*

*Deconstruction as Political Practice*

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## *Introduction*

In the preceding chapter I argued that Derrida's work on democracy must be understood as both an attempt to intervene in a specific political and historical context, under the name of democracy, and an attempt to think the limits, and therefore the possibility of a transformation, of the concept of politics itself – but perhaps so extensive a transformation that none of the old names would be appropriate. 'Democracy-to-come' is only one of the possible names under which such an intervention might be made.

There is some potential confusion here. Since it is generally understood as a label for a particular state form, rethinking 'democracy' risks restricting the scope of politics to the questions which relate to the management and allocation of resources within a state, ruling out in advance the possibility of a political appeal beyond the borders of the state, perhaps even beyond what is conventionally understood as the domain of international relations. As Derrida argues, 'the foundation of modern citizenship in a nation' repeats the foundation of democracy in a legal principle of equality symbolically tied to a natural equality based on birth. This is 'the place of fraternization as the symbolic bond alleging the repetition of a genetic tie' [PoF 99/121]. This restriction of political power or social goods to citizens of one state rather than another (leaving on one side the case of those without a state, to which we will return) is a programming (and ultimately the destruction) of politics; there can be no question of political responsibility when the decision is naturalized, when it is predicted in advance according to set criteria.

Just as there could be no democratic politics which did not fail to live up to the ideal carried within the concept of democracy, so there could be no politics which evaded the fraternal politics of deciding for some and against others. Responding to this situation means articulating political strategies which do not simply seek to wash their hands of their violent inscription into this situation. In the following chapters I propose to demonstrate how Derrida's own work exemplifies and commends deconstruction as a political practice of negotiation with its own prior political circumscription.

## *Deconstruction and Philosophical Nationalism*

Derrida himself suggests that the sequence of investigations conducted in his seminars might provide a revealing context for *Politics of Friendship*. In the Foreword he notes:

I count on preparing for future publication a series of seminar studies within which this one actually finds its place, well beyond this single opening session, which thus presupposes its premisses and its horizon. Those that immediately preceded it, then, if it is anything but useless to recall the logical development at this point, were centred on: *Nationality and Philosophical Nationalism* (1. *Nation, Nationality, Nationalism* [1983–4]; 2. *Nomos, Logos, Topos* [1984–5]; 3. *The Theo-logical Political* [1985–6]; 4. *Kant, the Jew, the German* [1986–7]); and *Eating the Other (Rhetorics of Cannibalism)* [1987–8]. Subsequent seminars concerned *Questions of Responsibility* through the experience of the *secret* and of *witnessing* [1989–93]. [PoF vii / 11]

My hypothesis is that this sequence can help us understand not only *Politics of Friendship*, but also the development of Derrida's thought over the period with which this book is concerned. The significance of Derrida's seminars has rarely been recognized: perhaps because so few sessions have been published in their original form. *Politics of Friendship* itself is the most extensive work to be attributed to the seminar, although in a greatly revised form, as a prolonged preface or introduction to the seminar itself. While the second version, published in *American Imago*, is described as two individual seminar sessions [PoF(b) 390], the final book is introduced by Derrida as a distended exposition of a single session: 'this work replays, *represents*, only the first session [...] less a first act than a sort of preview' [PoF viii / 12]. Derrida's choice of '*séance*' may denote a course of seminars rather than a single 'session', but underlines the preliminary status of the investigations under way here as well as the spectral implications largely absent from its prosaic English translation. Elsewhere, only the first of his seminars on nationalism (1983–4) and two of a much later course on hospitality (1995–6) have been published verbatim.

Yet many of Derrida's published conference papers, articles, interviews and essays bear traces of his seminars. Should we wish to construct a provisional

intellectual genealogy of Derrida's work, these seminars would make more than a convenient starting point: a possibility Derrida seems to anticipate when he comments on their future publication. One of my aims in this second part of *Deconstruction and Democracy* is to suggest the value of such a genealogy, by discussing the relationship between several of Derrida's key texts, written both before and after the publication of *Politics of Friendship* itself. In this chapter I focus on Derrida's four-year study on 'Nationality and Philosophical Nationalism'.<sup>1</sup> Not only does Derrida draw attention to it as the starting point for the sequence which leads to *Politics of Friendship*, but he returns to the material discussed in this seminar on a regular basis, and presumes its conclusions throughout his subsequent work: for example in more recent addresses to UNESCO (1996) and to the European Parliament (1997).<sup>2</sup> More importantly, grasping the central argument of this seminar is crucial to understanding Derrida's account of responsibility and decision, as I will show with reference to *The Gift of Death*. On this basis we can both appreciate the importance of the national philosophical dimension of *Politics of Friendship*, and assess the re-formulation of deconstruction as political practice.

#### NATIONALISM, COSMOPOLITANISM, EXEMPLARISM

The first session of Derrida's seminar on 'Nationality and Philosophical Nationalism' has been published as 'Onto-Theology of National Humanism: Prolegomena to a Hypothesis'. Its central claim is deceptively straightforward. Derrida proposes that there is a significant connection between philosophy and nationality:

The national problem, as we shall have ceaselessly to verify, is not one problem among others, nor one philosophical dimension among others. Even before any elaboration of the concept of nation and of philosophical nationality, of idiom as national philosophical idiom, we know at least this much – it's a minimal but indubitable predicate – namely that the affirmation of a nationality, or even the claim of nationalism does not happen to philosophy by chance or from the outside, it is essentially and thoroughly philosophical, *it is a philosopheme*. [ONH 10]

Nationalism – or the thinking of the nation – belongs to philosophy, just as philosophy belongs to the nation. This claim will turn out to have implications both for our understanding of the nation, and for our conception of philosophy. For once worked through to its conclusion, what Derrida is proposing is that via the question of idiom, philosophy is already national – and therefore already political.

This irreducible political dimension of any philosophical (or other) utterance is what we are concerned with here. It is irreducible because the

question of idiom – what Derrida describes as both ‘a *scandal*’ and ‘the very *chance*’ [ONH 3] of philosophy – is unavoidable for philosophy. Philosophy cannot happen without language:

in so far as the only possibility for a philosophy, for philosophy itself to speak itself, to be discussed, to get (itself) across, to go from the one to the other, is to pass through idioms, to transport the idiom and translate itself via or rather in the body of idioms which are not closures or enclosings of self but allocutions, passages to the other. [ONH 4].

To make clear what Derrida is suggesting here, it is worth bearing in mind his general understanding of the relationship between deconstruction and philosophy, which he first develops in his work on Husserl, and continues to hold to in the texts of this period, as he acknowledges in several places [SOM 74–5 / 125–6; SST 91–2; DAP 81–2].

Following Husserl’s arguments in *Ideas*, Derrida underlines the ‘necessity of posing transcendental questions in order not to be held within the fragility of an incompetent empiricist discourse [...] it is in order to avoid empiricism, positivism and psychologism that it is endlessly necessary to renew transcendental questioning’ [DAP 81].<sup>3</sup> Husserl argues against ‘sciences of the dogmatic standpoint’ which ‘take their start from the primordial givenness of the facts they deal with (and in the testing of their ideas return always to these facts)’.<sup>4</sup> Such sciences – and naturalism, historicism and psychologism in particular, as Husserl argues in ‘Philosophy as a Rigorous Science’<sup>5</sup> – are unable to account logically for their own premises. In the essay to which Derrida devoted his first major published work, ‘The Origin of Geometry’, Husserl asserts that:

all [merely] factual history remains incomprehensible because, always merely drawing its conclusions naively and straightforwardly from facts, it never makes thematic the general ground of meaning upon which all such conclusions rest, has never investigated the immense structural a priori which is proper to it.<sup>6</sup>

If Derrida is in agreement with the necessity of pursuing such a philosophical interrogation of the presumptions of more naive discourses, he goes on to criticize Husserl’s own quest for a rigorous science. Derrida’s study of ‘The Origin of Geometry’ suggests that the possibility of even the most abstract and universal science – geometry – both requires a finite origin within the world, and depends on a necessary passage through language or some form of inscription: ‘Historical incarnation sets free the transcendental, instead of binding it. This last notion, the transcendental, must then be rethought.’<sup>7</sup> Deconstruction presumes the questioning which philosophy as a universal science or a science of the universal can put to any discourse of empirical

facts, but also presumes that philosophy in its turn can never escape its own inscription in the empirical and contingent and, moreover, that this inscription is the very condition of possibility of philosophy.

The very condition of philosophy, 'its chance' in Derrida's words, is its idiomatic passage through language. That this is also a 'scandal' for philosophy will help us understand Derrida's point:

A scandal: i.e. what makes philosophy trip and fall, what stops it in its tracks if the self-styled philosopher considers that philosophy is essentially universal and cosmopolitan, that national, social, idiomatic difference in general should only befall it as a provisional and non-essential accident that could be overcome. [ONH 3]

In his later essay presented to a UNESCO conference, Derrida puts it this way: 'philosophy names at the same time here a discipline which is part of the "humanities" and that which claims to think, elaborate, criticise, the axiomatic of the "humanities", singularly, the problem of their humanism and their presumed universalism.'<sup>8</sup> Philosophy's problematic claim to universalism is a necessary precondition for an investigation of universalism which does not immediately relapse into relativism.

While it might appear that Derrida is here simply subordinating the natural or human sciences to philosophy understood as universal knowledge, as Greater Logic in the Hegelian sense, there is a sense in which Derrida is at the same time challenging this transcendental claim in the name of the empirical remainder that has always, within philosophy, named that which cannot be philosophy. Derrida clarifies this in 'Onto-Theology of National Humanism':

So if I insist on this problem – on the fact that the situation of the philosophical international I'm talking about is not determinable on the basis of a social or human science – this is not in order to reconstitute a higher critical, transcendental or ontological authority over the human or social sciences, but also in order to problematise a certain authority of the same type that a given social science might claim over the treatment of this problem, and as to its competence to deal with it. [ONH 8]

In this case, the return or challenge of the empirical would be the observation that no philosophy is outside of one language or idiom or another, which will in turn be overdetermined or inflected in relation to one national language or another. Derrida argues that:

I have tried to show how in apparently regional scientific practices, in ontologies that philosophy says are regional, one can find general deconstructive movements, where the ground falls away or shifts, disorganising



or calling into question the beautiful order of dependence between a fundamental ontology and regional ontologies. [ONH 8]

If deconstruction disrupts philosophy by asking impertinent empirical questions, it also contests the authority claimed by the social or human sciences to answer such questions. Following Derrida's apprenticeship to Husserl's thought, such approaches will always look to him like failed philosophies. This does not disqualify the object of their investigations from being of interest: indeed what we might be tempted to call deconstruction's 'empiricism' is better seen as an exploration of just this interference between the universal and the particular.

This disqualifies the further objection to Derrida's analysis of philosophy, language and nation, that his notion of idiom is too vague. In fact, Derrida raises this concern himself elsewhere: in *Monolingualism of the Other*, one of the voices of the text objects to a similarly broad claim that 'a language is no idiom, nor is the idiom a dialect'. The other voice replies: 'I'm not unaware of the necessity of these distinctions. Linguists and scholars in general can have good reasons for upholding them. Nevertheless in all rigor and stretched to their extreme limit, I do not believe them to be tenable' [MON 8 / 23]. Language for Derrida is a diffuse and heterogeneous system in which particular idioms, dialects or languages can only be isolated by means of an ethico-theoretical decision.

There are two consequences of Derrida's claim, one for thinking about the nation, and one for philosophy as such. Since a nation is a philosopheme, an idea rather than a fact, it can never be definitively accounted for on the basis of the kind of evidence available to the human sciences: it is not the possible object of an ethnography, a discourse of racial characteristics, a linguistic or social analysis. No such discourse can examine the nation without presupposing in advance a definition of the nation. This definition is philosophical: 'the self-positing or self-identification of the nation always has the form of a *philosophy* which, although better represented by such and such a nation, is none the less a certain relation to the universality of the philosophical' [ONH 10]. Nationality is no 'thing' but a spiritual or cultural concept. There is nothing 'natural' about the nation. Conversely, philosophy, whether it openly theorizes its relation to nationality or not, will always already be engaged in such a relation, by virtue of happening in language. Nationality, Derrida writes,

can never be an *object* of study, meaning by that a theme or a problem that one has before one and in which one is not really and gravely situated, circumvented, precomprehended, in what is precisely a historical and philosophical situation with respect to which no overarching view is possible – and in the first instance for the obvious reason that the question is set out in a language, in an idiom, and with certain features of the national idiom. [ONH 5]

Derrida's choice of example also requires some qualification. To demonstrate that philosophy is national and that nationality is philosophical he turns to Fichte's *Addresses to the German Nation*, a set of public lectures given in Berlin over the winter of 1807 to 1808 which explicitly address these questions and whose significance is much debated – as Etienne Balibar puts it, 'the ambivalence of Fichte's political philosophy is one of the great commonplaces of our culture'.<sup>9</sup> Derrida's choice of Fichte is designed to exemplify his own principal claim, since even Fichte's overtly nationalist philosophy is not concerned with any 'German naturalness or factuality' [ONH 13]. As an idealist philosophy, it is concerned with truth as such, rather than with a particular 'German' truth: 'This nationalism does not even present itself as a philosophy, but as philosophy *itself*, philosophy par excellence' [ONH 13]. Fichte serves to illustrate this structure of exemplarism which Derrida sees as being central to both nationalism and philosophy.

Derrida's main interest in Fichte is that within the *Addresses to the German Nation* there is no apparent contradiction between the national spirit of philosophy and Fichte's own cosmopolitanism, which he inherits from Kant (compare, for example, 'Toward Perpetual Peace' with Fichte's 'Outline of the Right of Nations and Cosmopolitan Right'<sup>10</sup>). Fichte speaks of a 'German philosophy' which is 'strictly, earnestly and inexorably opposed to any foreign philosophy that believes in death'<sup>11</sup> but which is not based on any racial or ethnic characteristic. The 'true criterion' for being German is whether 'you believe in something absolutely primary and original in man himself, in freedom, in endless improvement, in the eternal progress of our race.'<sup>12</sup> Fichte's is a philosophy of spirit, which he opposes as a philosophy of life to any foreign philosophy of death. But this lends a certain equivocality to both nationality and philosophy. Derrida argues: 'you can see quite clearly that everything that ought thus to withdraw it from reappropriation into a Nazi heritage (Which is biologising, racist, etc.) remains in essence equivocal' [ONH 16]. Even a spiritual nationalism can provide criteria on which to combat enemies of the state or 'enemies within, the false Germans, who even though they speak German, are Germans living on the German soil, are essentially less authentically German than certain 'foreigners' who, etc.' [ONH 16].

In his seminars Derrida traces the development of this relationship between the German language, the German nationality and philosophy. Derrida refers not only to Fichte, Nietzsche ('inexhaustible on this subject' [ONH 17]) and Heidegger, but also to Arendt [MON 84–90 / 100–9; HOS 89 / 83] and Adorno: 'at the very moment when the latter opposes all philosophical nationalisms, Heidegger's *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit*, he nonetheless reiterates in his 'Reply to the Question: "What is German"' [...] the affirmation of a "metaphysical character of the German language"' [ONH 22–3].<sup>13</sup> In the 1986–7 seminar session, 'Kant, the Jew, the German', described in 'Force of Law' as concerning 'the varied but insistent recurrence of the reference

to Kant, indeed to a certain Judaism in Kant, on the part of all those who, from Wagner and Nietzsche to Adorno, sought to respond to the question “*Was ist Deutsch?*” [FoL 65 n.6 / 72], writers covered also include Cohen, Buber, Rosenzweig, Scholem and Benjamin. However, Derrida’s interest is not only in German national philosophy. He comments in ‘Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German’ that ‘the spiritualist determination of national exemplarity does not belong to the German nation only. What would one say were it to be stated that it does not belong to it except in an exemplary manner?’ [KJG 89]. In *Monolingualism of the Other* he imagines a larger study, entitled ‘*The Monolingualism of the Host: Jews of the Twentieth Century, the Mother Tongue, and the Language of the Other, on Both Sides of the Mediterranean*’ [MON 78 n.9 / 91]. In ‘Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German’ Derrida also refers to Renan [KJG 88–91] and a 1984 paper addresses Descartes’ use of French rather than Latin [DP 283–341].

Derrida’s interest in this problem is not a matter of historical curiosity. Nor is he attempting to reveal nationality as an ideological component which could be stripped away from philosophy; he refers to Marx as a philosopher whose interest in the problem takes this form [ONH 18]. Rather, Derrida is seeking to expose one symptomatic effect of a wider structure, which he calls ‘the exemplarist logic in which we have recognized the profound strategy of all nationalisms, patriotisms or ethnocentrism’ [PoF 237 / 265]. Here is a lengthy account of this structure taken from *The Other Heading*:

The value of universality here capitalizes all the antinomies, for it must be linked to the value of *exemplarity* that inscribes the universal in the proper body of a singularity, of an idiom or a culture, whether this singularity be individual, social, national, state, federal, confederal, or not. Whether it takes a national form or not, a refined, hospitable or aggressively xenophobic form or not, the self-affirmation of an identity always claims to be responding to the call or assignation of the universal. There are no exceptions to this rule. No cultural identity presents itself as the opaque body of an untranslatable idiom, but always, on the contrary, as the irreplaceable *inscription* of the universal in the singular, the *unique testimony* to the human essence and to what is proper to man. [OH 72–3 / 71–2]

Derrida’s point is that there is no – could be no – assertion of an identity which does not claim also to be an identity like any other, staking an unfounded claim to its own universality. This would be the case whether the identity in question was that of a single individual, of a family or of a nation. As soon as I claim to be an individual like every other, or like any other, I am also making a presumption about the universality of the concept of the individual. The historical and global extension of the concept of the ‘nation’ from its place of origin bears witness to the portability of the philosophical claim made in the French and American Revolutionary constitutions to

bear witness to the universal right of national self-determination. Every nationalism is also then a humanism since it implies that the proper political essence of man is to associate in nations. Like every other form of association or political collectivity, it is an exemplarism.

The overdetermined relationship between political identity and nationality suggests that philosophy is inscribed with a political value as soon as it happens in one language rather than another, as an effect of the impossible but insistent identification of the universal with the singular. In the next section I turn to two later texts of Derrida's both in order to show the continuity of their concerns with those of this seminar, and also to examine what may seem the melodramatic and hyperbolic assertion that political violence and responsibility begin with the use of language itself.

### LANGUAGE AND RESPONSIBILITY

The continuity between the question of language or idiom, national or otherwise, and that of responsibility could be demonstrated by reference to any one of a number of Derrida's texts. I will focus on two: *The Gift of Death*, which casts the problem most plainly in theoretical terms, and *Monolingualism of the Other*, to be discussed in the following section, which both enact the problem performatively and begin to proffer suggestions as to how it may be handled in general. Both texts come from the period 1991–2 and both are quite clearly concerned, at least in part, with the political negotiation of the question of idiom.

In fact, not only does the second half of *The Gift of Death* demonstrate the importance of the problem of language in Derrida's thinking of responsibility, but the question of language can help us read this difficult text. Derrida is concerned with Kierkegaard's reading of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, with what Kierkegaard calls the teleological suspension of the ethical. This discussion follows a lengthy reading of the fourth of Patočka's *Heretical Essays on the Philosophy of History* in which Derrida has suggested that the Czech phenomenologist's account of Europe as responsibility deploys a radicalized Christian account which can puncture Heidegger's own thinking on responsibility.<sup>14</sup> With the turn to Kierkegaard in the second half of *The Gift of Death* Derrida appears to be drawing his own account of responsibility from *Fear and Trembling*. Indeed, some commentators have taken this as revealing the extent of Derrida's own debt to Kierkegaard.<sup>15</sup> Responsibility, Derrida argues, must be infinite or it is not responsibility at all. The infinitization of responsibility is what begins or makes possible any responsibility at all, but also which disables the possibility of being able to claim to have done one's duty: 'Guilt is inherent in responsibility because responsibility is always unequal to itself: one is never responsible enough' [GoD 51 / 77]. Derrida presents this as an extension (but this is also a revision) of Kierkegaard's understanding of

Abraham's impossible decision about the sacrifice of his son, into an account of the decision in general. What is for Kierkegaard the exceptional decision of Abraham is for Derrida the kind of decision that must be made every day if there is to be any responsibility at all.

For Kierkegaard, the paradox of Abraham's position is that as a singular individual he is required to disregard the universal law of ethics in order to fulfil his absolute duty to God, or as Derrida puts it, that

the ethical can therefore end up making us irresponsible. It is a temptation, a tendency or a facility that would sometimes have to be refused in the name of a responsibility that doesn't keep account or give an account, neither to man, to humans, to society, to one's fellows, or to one's own. [GoD 61–2 / 89]

Derrida's radicalization of the concept of responsibility suggests that there can be responsibility only where duty is absolute. If a duty is only the enactment of a finite set of obligations there is no question of responsibility. If the absolute is identified with alterity as such, rather than with the absolute alterity of God, we must transgress this obligation all the time. The sacrifice of ethics for an absolute duty to the other is not simply what deconstruction may attempt to do but is 'the most common and everyday experience of responsibility [...] isn't this also the most common thing?' [GoD 67 / 97]. A generalized duty or obligation precedes ethics or ethical duty. In the terms we encountered in *Politics of Friendship*, a duty to the incalculable precedes any calculable responsibility. Calculable responsibility, in its turn, betrays and sacrifices responsibility itself.

Derrida's examples walk a fine line between melodrama and pathos. There is his cat: 'How would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people' [GoD 71 / 101].<sup>16</sup> More sweeping still, Derrida continues: 'How would you justify your presence here speaking one particular language, rather than there speaking to others in another language?' [GoD 71 / 101]. There can be no question of responsibility without the necessary adjunct of such apparently excessive or absurd questions. Infinite responsibility, the ordeal of the undecidable choice between coming to the assistance of one rather than another, is the necessary condition of responsibility.

Such claims have unsurprisingly attracted criticism. In particular, David Wood has questioned not only Derrida's example, but the very structure of his argument. He suggests that the price of Derrida's transformation of responsibility 'from being an attribute of a subject to being an openness that makes a subject possible [...] is the disabling of any quantitative characterizations of this responsibility'.<sup>17</sup> Derrida's error is a category mistake,

in moving from the impossibility of claiming to be responsible on the basis of having fulfilled finite obligations, to the infinity of actual obligations to others. Derrida is right to point out that the excess of responsibility must always destroy a claim to have done enough, and to disable the satisfaction of good conscience, but his emphasis on the incalculable ignores the real and apparent practical constraints on individual responsibility – ‘I am not a divine being, or even a health care organisation’.<sup>18</sup> Wood is correct: the calculable notion of responsibility cannot be enough from Derrida’s point of view, but nor can it be dismissed either, and Derrida does not mean us to do so. Within the horizon of the incalculable, everyone must (and does) negotiate with their own calculable responsibility. We might also be concerned that understanding responsibility as excessive or transgressive, as unfulfillable, might render any lesser concept of duty, or doing good, uninteresting or naive: why bother to do something for one other, if by doing it I am still doing harm to the other others? I think this is indeed one of the questions raised by Derrida’s account, but I suspect that this is, at least in part, his intention.

What Wood does acknowledge is that, for Derrida, this is not a question of capacity, about what a subject can or could do. Wood’s objection is that Derrida ‘is giving no privilege to those obligations, precisely that we have not willed, but that we find ourselves in, to those obligations we have voluntarily acquired, to those expectations we have allowed others to have of us’ but Derrida’s decisions are not those which could ever be taken by a subject, but have already been taken for a subject.<sup>19</sup> The decision is already inscribed within the subject; it would be more appropriate to suggest that the subject is taken by the decision. To start from the subject is already a mistake, as Derrida puts it in *Politics of Friendship: A theory of the subject is incapable of accounting for the slightest decision* [PoF 68 / 87]. So this is not an ethics, a prescription that we must act out of concern for all the cats in the world, but a statement of a structural condition which precedes us each time that we think we have decided, or have acted responsibly.

Derrida’s question ‘how would you justify being here speaking one language?’ underlines this. As well as being about choices a subject may have made, or may think they have made, this excessive, non-subjective dimension of Derrida’s account of responsibility is also about those choices which they cannot possibly have made; which is brought into focus neatly by the issue of national or philosophical idiom. As Derrida also writes in *The Gift of Death*:

By preferring my work, simply by giving it my time and attention, by preferring my activity as a citizen or as a professorial and professional philosopher, *writing and speaking here in a public language, French in my case*, I am betraying at every moment all my other obligations: my obligations to the other others whom I know or don’t know, the billions of my

fellows (without mentioning the animals that are even more other others than my fellows), my fellows who are dying of starvation or sickness. I betray my fidelity or my obligations to other citizens, *to those who don't speak my language* and to whom I neither speak nor respond. [GoD 69 / 98–9, my emphases]

If by speaking in one language rather than another I am already betraying my responsibility, Derrida does not imply that we should not speak – staying silent might be a worse crime.<sup>20</sup> My argument is that this is a relocation of the argument from the realm of ethics, in which 'I' may make a decision, to the realm of politics. It is our involvement in a public sphere, which extends far beyond that narrow concept of the public realm which is defined against the private, in a public decision taken as to which language we are able to engage in, to think in, in which we have been born and come to consciousness, which makes us pre-originarily irresponsible, already friends with some others rather than other others. It is the public space itself, 'to which I sacrifice my so-called private space', which renders my language exclusive, since 'each of those who listen or read, and to whom I neither respond nor address myself in the proper manner, that is, in a singular manner' is already sacrificed, even in my supposedly private moments [GoD 69 / 99]. Communication – a response or an address – is already a matter of political responsibility, and always a failure or betrayal of responsibility.

The discussion of *tout autre comme tout autre* which I touched on in the first chapter returns, precisely in the form of 1. a translation of Derrida's arguments about communication, the structure and iterability of the mark and 2. a reinscription of exemplarism as the principle not just of identity politics in its worst sense, but as the principle of the relation of identity to politics in the widest possible sense, from the moment that I articulate myself in language, or even when I respond by not responding. Both within the state and in the relations of the state to its neighbours, a structural principle of exemplarism is at work as soon as I identify myself, that is as soon as I am idiomatic. This is why Derrida must also draw attention to the impossible situation in which the very idiomatic nature of the phrase *tout autre est tout autre* is already irresponsibility itself, a statement of its own inadequacy to describing the situation it seeks to draw attention to:

The essential and abyssal equivocality, that is, the play of the several senses of *tout autre est tout autre* or *Dieu est tout autre*, is not, in its literality (that of French or Italian, for example), universally translatable according to a traditional concept of translation. The sense of the play can no doubt be translated by a paraphrase in other languages; but not the formal economy of the slippage between two homonyms in the language that can here be called singularly my own [...] We have here a kind of *shibboleth* [...] like a secret within one's so-called natural or mother tongue.

One can regret such a limiting function or on the contrary take pride in it; one can derive some national prestige from it but either way there is nothing to be done or said about such a secret of the mother tongue. It is there before us in its possibility, the *Geheimnis* of language that ties it to the home, to the motherland, to the birthplace, to economy, to the law of the *oikos*, in short to the family and to the family of words derived from *heim* – home, *heimlich*, *unheimlich*, *Geheimnis*, etc. [GoD 87–8 / 121–2]

The etymological relationship between *oikos* and economy, to which Derrida often returns, highlights two important points. 1. Derrida continually refers to etymology not in order to appeal to an original meaning for any particular word, but to insist on the material or empirical origin of languages, words and concepts. 2. The rethinking of politics, the politics to come which Derrida calls for or hopes for in *Politics of Friendship*, is a thinking of politics beyond the *polis*, or beyond the state, but it must also therefore be thought beyond both the bond with a family, metaphorical or literal, or an attachment to a homeland or other place of origin. The danger Derrida takes, since he must write in one language that is ‘singularly his own’ is that of privileging the language into which he was born, even if not the state or place. In turning to another example, Derrida’s strange and violent text *Monolingualism of the Other*, I will show this impossible negotiation – how to think beyond the home, or beyond economy read as the law of the home or the hearth – at work.

## DECONSTRUCTION IN FRENCH

*Monolingualism of the Other* can be taken to be a performative demonstration of the structure that Derrida gives a more conventional account of in ‘Onto-Theology of National Humanism’ and *The Gift of Death*; that language conveys a political responsibility which precedes and exceeds the subject who speaks. Written predominantly in the first person, and in an impatient and angry tone, it is structured as an apparently perverse criticism (‘without wishing to hurt [his] feelings’ [MON 12 / 29]) of the poet Abdelkebir Khatibi, whom Derrida describes as an old friend [MON 10 / 26]. Having referred to their common French Algerian background, Derrida proposes that he himself might claim to be the exemplary Franco-Maghrebian present at the conference on bilingualism at which the first version of the text was read, held in Louisiana in 1992. In order to ‘decipher the essence of the Franco-Maghrebian from the paradigmatic example of “the *most* Franco-Maghrebian,” the Franco-Maghrebian *par excellence*’ [MON 11 / 27] Derrida imagines himself saying: ‘I therefore venture to present myself to you here, *ecce homo*, in parody as the exemplary Franco-Maghrebian’ [MON 19 / 39].



The text is accordingly based around the exposition of one central aporetic phrase, Derrida's assertion that 'I only have one language, it is not mine' [MON 1 / 13], or, in an expanded form, that:

1. *We only ever speak one language – or rather one idiom only.*
  2. *We never speak only one language – or rather there is no pure idiom.*
- [MON 8 / 23]

Derrida describes some of the events of his childhood, focusing in particular on his appreciation of linguistic differences, and the relation between Algiers and Paris – and indeed, France as a whole – across the Mediterranean. He suggests there was a more powerful sense of marginality to growing up in Algiers than there would have been between a province such as Brittany and Paris. His understanding of French culture is both as a colonial culture and as his so-called mother tongue. This he claims makes him a more exemplary Franco-Maghrebian than his friend, who can always have recourse to a language which was not that of the colonizer.

Whereas Khatibi has never been a French citizen, Derrida has been: not only that but in 1943, along with all the Jewish French citizens of Algeria, his French citizenship was removed by the Vichy French government. Citizenship for Derrida 'does not define a cultural, linguistic, or, in general, historical participation. It does not cover all these modes of belonging. But it is not some superficial or superstructural predicate floating on the surface of experience' [MON 14–15 / 33]. In other words, like nationality, it is an idea, rather than the possible object of an empirical science, but it is not simply a contingent intrusion on a universal subject. Like nationality, it is also inherited at birth, and therefore precedes the subject. As in *Politics of Friendship*, citizenship implies a politics of the birthplace, of the autochthony which is at stake here; but so does a maternal language: 'Birth, nationality by birth, native culture – is that not our theme here? [...] the language called maternal, [...] birth as it relates to soil, birth as it relates to blood, and birth as it relates to language, which means something entirely other?' [MON 13 / 30–1]. That 'language is not mine' implies a pre-original dispossession of language against which a linguistic purism or nationalism will always be a defensive reaction. That 'I only have one language' means that I must continually negotiate with the political privilege I cannot help but ascribe to it.

But Derrida's aim is not to reconstitute his personal experience as the basis for an argument ('not the beginning of some autobiographical or anamnestic outline, nor [...] an intellectual bildungsroman' [MON 70 / 131]), nor simply to offer a model by being the 'most' non-identical, or the most displaced person. The text must be read as a performative provocation based around the central quasi-logical proposition: what Derrida describes as his own neurotic cultivation of the French language, his desire to write,

in particular, absolutely accurate, non-provincial French. Derrida here complicates what might be an assumed re-valorization of the linguistic situation of the colonized subject – and this is the significance of his reference to Khatibi's work on bilingualism, and also to Edouard Glissant's work on the French Antilles – by situating himself both at the margins and at the centre of French language and culture:

Though the 'non-mastery [...] of an appropriated language' of which Glissant speaks qualifies, above all, more literally and more sensitively, some situations of 'colonial' alienation or historical servitude, this definition [...] also holds for what would be called the language of the master, the *hospes*, or the colonist. [MON 23 / 44]

All language is colonial, we might say. This 'constitutive' lack or alienation however is not negative, since it is the very condition of our 'possessing' anything, including ourselves. Furthermore, there is perhaps the basis of some form of resistance being elaborated here as well:

the master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything. Because the master does not possess exclusively, and *naturally*, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate [*dire*] this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as 'his own'. [MON 23–4 / 45]

Derrida describes himself as having been dispossessed not just of the language of authority, but the so-called maternal language too, and this is to be taken as exemplary of the situation of every subject. Every subject is first of all hostage to the language of the other, every home is already opened to the other, every state is already the place of the other – '*what is proper to a culture is not to be identical to itself*' writes Derrida elsewhere [OH 9 / 16]. The recognition of this 'universal structure' [MON 63 / 121] does not produce the impossibility of politics, but its vital condition: and it calls for the recognition of the difference within this structure, to recognize and denounce or combat the most violent forms of exemplarism, in a general economy which is unavoidably that of exemplarism, and of violence. 'This debate with monolingualism', Derrida writes, 'will have been nothing other than a piece of *deconstructive* writing. Such writing always attacks the body of *this language, my only language*, and what it bears the most or in the best

way, namely the philosophical tradition that supplies us with the reservoir of concepts I definitely have to use' [MON 59 / 115, first emphasis Derrida's, second emphasis mine]. In Derrida's case, then, deconstructive writing must be first and foremost an attack on, or a negotiation with, the French language.

In the light of this discussion, of deconstruction as the negotiation with the language of the other, of that language which is my only language and yet is not mine, another way of reading *Politics of Friendship* is opened up. One of the many startling comments in his essay on monolingualism is Derrida's remark that the French dispossession of their Algerian Jewish citizens 'taught me the disasters toward which incantatory invocations of the mother tongue will have pushed humans headlong'. 'My culture', continues Derrida, and we must also hear the implied sense of 'your culture' or 'every culture' in his words,

was right away a political culture. 'My mother tongue' is what they say, what they speak; as for me, I cite and question them. I ask them in their own language, certainly in order to make them understand me, for it is serious, if they indeed know what they are saying and what they are talking about. Especially when, so lightly, they celebrate 'fraternity'. At bottom, brothers, the mother tongue, and so forth pose the same problem. [MON 34 / 61]

Here Derrida announces the project of *Politics of Friendship* itself, the interrogation of the value attached to brotherhood. But rather than being just any political problem, of a problem of political philosophy as such, given this context, it becomes clear that *Politics of Friendship* does not have just any relation to the language in which it was written. To question the value of 'fraternity' in the tradition is explicitly to challenge a French tradition of philosophy. Just as *Politics of Friendship* is a negotiation with thinkers whom we might presume to be Derrida's philosophical friends, so it must also be read, at least in part, as Derrida's negotiation with the culture, language and philosophical tradition which he has inherited: which is his only culture, but yet not his. This is made plain in a parenthetical aside, in which he writes that

This book set itself up to *work and be worked relentlessly*, close to the thing called France. And close to the singular alliance linking nothing less than the history of fraternization to this thing, France – to the State, the nation, the politics, the culture, literature and language which answer for the name 'France' and, when they are called by this name, answer to it. [PoF 264 / 295]

It is precisely the French revolutionary slogan with its equation of liberty, equality and fraternity which Derrida has in mind, as well as the apparent

repetition and celebration of that fraternity in the work of his friends Blanchot and Nancy on community. This would also account for Derrida's reference, in the very first chapter of the work, to Montaigne as 'another reader hailing from my homeland' [PoF 2 / 18]; for his discussion of Michelet's 'andro-gallo-fraternocentrism' [PoF 236–9 / 265–7]; for the section on Victor Hugo [PoF 264–7 / 295–9]. Yet, because *Politics of Friendship* is written first of all in French, the book may not be taken as a simple disavowal or rejection of its own national-linguistic philosophical context. Just as democracy and friendship are both criticized but reaffirmed in the book, so the book must also be considered a national affirmation, as a result of the same structure which Derrida has identified in 'Onto-Theology of National Humanism'. In other words, *Politics of Friendship* can only proceed by thinking through its own national situation; an intrinsic part of its project must be the political questioning of this implied politics of language. Like *Monolingualism of the Other* and, by extension, all of Derrida's work, it must be read as a performative self-problematization of the status of deconstruction. When he suggests a one-line definition for deconstruction in a set of *Mémoires* for another friend, Paul de Man, Derrida proposes 'plus d'un langue'. This idiomatic French phrase means both more than one language, and not one language. By being written in French, and by virtue of being both translatable but not absolutely translatable (the condition of all linguistic utterance), the phrase acts out its own meaning.

In this chapter I have argued, on the basis of Derrida's seminar on nationality and philosophy, that because I am within language, political decisions precede me. This entails a concept of the decision as something for which I am responsible, even if I could have done nothing about it, and with the violence of which I must negotiate, as soon as I inherit a language which is not (wholly) mine but to which I have no alternatives. Deconstruction, it is beginning to appear, might be the name for the exemplary vigilance which keeps watch over this violence.

*The Politics of Exemplarity:  
Derrida and Heidegger*

To understand Derrida's works as a form of political practice means reading them in terms of their complex negotiation with the idioms in which they are situated. This means not only a particular dialect or national language, but an intellectual heritage and a political history. This is particularly evident in Derrida's reading of Heidegger, which develops in tandem with the political development of Derrida's work under discussion in this book. Derrida stresses in the 'Letter to a Japanese Friend' that 'deconstruction' (and we might understand by this both the word itself and the intellectual project) remains a borrowing or translation of Heidegger – a French, and now English, substitute for *Abbau* and *Destruktion*. In those works in which Derrida deploys and manipulates his vocabulary in increasingly explicit and provocative ways, we should not forget that this reference to Heidegger is still implied. For example, Derrida's claim that 'deconstruction is justice' [FoL *passim*] is closely linked to his discussion of Heidegger's 'Anaximander fragment' in *Specters of Marx*, rewritten as Hamlet's appeal: 'The time is out of joint.' If this is the case, we should expect to find that identifying deconstruction with democracy also implicates Heidegger. That such an association should be made in the context of the so-called Heidegger Affair, in which Heidegger's own political affiliations were raised once again in the most public fashion in France and the United States underlines Derrida's concern to confront rather than evade the question of philosophy's political responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

Just as *Monolingualism of the Other* may be read as a performative negotiation with the political responsibilities of a language which is inherited rather than chosen, so I will suggest that Derrida's reading of Heidegger bears a significant, and politically significant, performative dimension. From this perspective the inclusion of a long essay on Heidegger in the French edition of *Politics of Friendship* must be read as an important supplement to the movement of the main body of the text: its absence in the English edition is a major omission. The essay appended to *Politics of Friendship* bears the subtitle 'Geschlecht IV'. Two other essays have been published under this heading, and all three can be considered as supplementary to or coextensive with the aims of Derrida's seminar on 'Philosophical Nationality and Nationalism': Derrida has described the first as a 'short preface' [OS 7 / 22] or 'an introduction' [GES II 161 / 416] to that seminar, the trajectory

of the second is announced within it [ONH 13]. A third instalment was at one point circulated as a photocopy by Derrida but has not been published [GES II 183 / 439; 188 / 446].<sup>2</sup> Derrida's major work on Heidegger of this period, *Of Spirit*, is not directly a part of the series, but takes its bearings from the same texts of, and the same questions addressed to, Heidegger [OS 7 / 22]. I will give a brief account of these texts, in which it should become clear how the question of nation is situated with regard to Derrida's work on Heidegger, and how Derrida's own work responds to that question. This genealogy underlines the relationship between 'Heidegger's Ear: Philopolemology (Geschlecht IV)' and *Politics of Friendship*.

Despite the volume of extant commentary on Derrida's debt to Heidegger, it remains somewhat unclear what position we can ascribe to Derrida's thought in relation to that of Heidegger.<sup>3</sup> My intention here is not to even attempt to draw such a debate to a close: Derrida's own *Auseinandersetzung* (critical debate or dialogue) with Heidegger depends for its force on a refusal to simply distinguish their respective projects. However such a deconstructive strategy does not preclude explicit political criticisms. While Derrida has no sympathy with Heidegger's involvement with Nazism, he takes the political stakes of his thought with the utmost seriousness. To understand his reading of Heidegger as itself a form of political practice is to complicate the possibility of taking a position for or against.

### BEING AND NATION

At the heart of Derrida's *Geschlecht* series of essays lies the interpretation of one highly ambiguous word in German, found not only in Heidegger but also in Fichte's account of the nation [ONH 13]. Derrida's interest in this word is already apparent in his first essay on the subject, 'Geschlecht: sexual difference, ontological difference'. Here he focuses on *Geschlecht* as a term for sex, whether male or female, and Heidegger's apparent ascription to *Dasein* of an asexuality. By examining closely a seminar course given shortly after the publication of *Being and Time* Derrida clarifies what is nowhere made clear within the published book, that not only is *Dasein* neutral in sexual terms, but that this is not the traditional assumption of philosophical discourse that being is to be understood from the normative standpoint of masculinity. Rather, by choosing the word *Dasein* rather than *Mensch* (man) Heidegger deliberately implies that sexual difference is inessential to *Dasein*. However, this raises the possibility that sexual difference cannot be reduced to the object of an anthropological or ethical discourse, from which Heidegger has already distinguished the project of fundamental ontology. By insisting on the neutrality of *Dasein*, moreover, Heidegger implies that *Dasein* must be thought as prior to the binary distinction between sexes, beyond the either-or implied in neuter (*ne-uter*), rather than as simply

being without sex; or even, read carefully, prior to negativity or the logic of dialectic and opposition as such. From this Derrida teases out the possibility of thinking a pre-original sex, neither male nor female, which would not be asexual, but 'a predifferential, or rather a predual, sexuality – which does not necessarily mean unitary, homogeneous, or undifferentiated, as we shall see later' [GES I 387–8 / 402]. What would be at stake in pursuing this reading is the possibility of thinking sexual difference without thinking opposition.

The general difficulty of which this is a specific example is that *Dasein* is only in dispersion. Being is not an essence prior to beings themselves, it is nothing other than its own distribution among them. As Heidegger puts it in *Being and Time*, '*Dasein*'s facticity is such that its Being-in-the-world has always dispersed [*zerstreut*] itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in'.<sup>4</sup> It is announced in the pre-ontological analytic, but cannot be removed from *Dasein* as existents, as being there in the world. The consequences of the argument are not drawn out at this stage. In 'Geschlecht II', however, Derrida begins to fill out the implications of Heidegger's use of *Geschlecht*, and in particular in his reading of Trakl, which he has hinted at in 'Geschlecht I' – 'Much later, at any rate thirty years later, the word "*Geschlecht*" will be charged with all its polysemic richness: sex, genre [*genre*], family, stock, race, lineage, generation' [GES I 385 / 400] – and pursued as part of the nationalism seminar [GES II 161–5 / 415–20]. Reading Trakl, Heidegger calls forth the full range of meanings of *Geschlecht*, as the name for the *Dasein* of *Mensch*:

the word 'generation' [*Geschlecht*] here retains the full manifold meaning mentioned earlier. For one thing, it names the historical generation of man, mankind as distinct from all other living beings (plants and animals). Next the word 'generation' names the races, tribes, clans and families of mankind. At the same time, the word always refers to the twofoldness of the sexes.<sup>5</sup>

Derrida locates these comments of Heidegger within the context of a summary of the results of his seminar on philosophy and nationalism, 'the paradoxical but regular association of nationalism with a cosmopolitanism and with a humanism' [GES II 162 / 416]), which suggests not only the filiation between Heidegger and Fichte, but also Heidegger's adherence to the schema of a national humanism. As Fichte did with the concept of the nation, so Heidegger is careful to distinguish the *Geschlecht* of mankind from a 'biological fact'. The consequence is a precarious balance to be struck between the original dispersion of *Dasein* and the unity implied by *Geschlecht* as 'one generation [in which] there is a unifying force'.<sup>6</sup>

In the second *Geschlecht* essay Derrida is concerned to show that there are metaphysical axiomatics which intrude into the attempt to think pre-

ontologically: that the being *Geschlechtlich* of *Dasein* is not contingent but originary and inescapable. So for example, the word *Geschlecht* itself has an

irreducible bond to the question of humanity versus animality, and of a humanity whose name, as the bond of the name to the 'thing', if one can say that, remains as problematic as that of the language in which the name is written. [GES II 165 / 419]

It is the hand, in this case, by which man is to be distinguished from the animal. The hand, Heidegger claims in 'What is Called Thinking', is that which is proper to man; in distinction from every other *Geschlecht*, including the ape. The analogy made by Heidegger between poetry and thought and authentic handiwork (*Handwerk*) gives rise to a discourse of authentic, non-technical activity, lifted from the realm of utility, profit, calculation, trade or commerce. Heidegger binds thinking to a thought or situation of the human body, and especially of the hand.

He will also claim that his discourse on technics is not only a protest, but an act of *resistance* against the professionalization of university under the Nazi regime; the submission of philosophy to imperatives of technical productivity. Derrida notes that this argument has 'equivocal effects: it opens up to an archaistic reaction toward the rustic artisan class and denounces business or capital, notions whose associations then are well known' [GES II 172 / 427]. Just as Fichte seeks to understand the nation in terms which are not simply those of an empirical discourse, but spiritual, so too Heidegger refuses to draw on the biologist's account of the hand as a hand that grips, or uses tools. Instead for Heidegger the human hand is distinguished from that of the animal, and in turn this human hand comes to distinguish the animal from the human as such.

This, like the ascription of national exemplarity, may be an unavoidable distinction, but it is one that should not be taken for granted. Is it necessary to insist again that Derrida's aim is not to confound the differences between concepts, beings, human and animal, but precisely to think those differences in a more diffuse manner? Such borders blur themselves, Derrida claims: 'Elsewhere I have tried to show that, as every opposition does, this absolute oppositional limit effaces the differences and leads back, following the most resistant metaphysico-dialectic tradition, to the homogeneous' [GES II 174 / 429]. What Derrida objects to is not Heidegger's drawing of distinctions as such, but the inexplicable dogmatic upholding of an absolute border between the human and the animal.

The implicit consequences are taken on to seminar and other work: can *Dasein* for Heidegger be thought prior to *Geschlecht*, that is division into sexes, generations, humanity, nations? Derrida's questioning tends to take two forms. On the one hand, as in the discussion of animality, he is concerned to show that Heidegger makes metaphysical choices or decisions.



Derrida would prefer to think a regime of differences without such definitive oppositions as that between man and animal, or man and woman: in 'Geschlecht II' he distinguishes his 'dissemination' from Heidegger's 'polysemy', still governed by an original principle. However, while the attempt to think *différance* must always risk appearing as an attempt to think less ontologically than Heidegger's criticisms of ontology, Derrida does not dismiss Heidegger as the last metaphysician, as Heidegger does Nietzsche. Rather than convict Heidegger of failing to escape metaphysics, Derrida seeks to see what elements within his texts gesture towards something else. The potential for thinking another, a third, sex, beyond or prior to the binary division into male and female, would be one of those moments. Derrida finds resources in Heidegger for thinking (beyond) the constitutive failures of metaphysics, of a philosophical and political paradigm in which the division of mankind into nations, into friends and enemies, will always already have taken place. The equivalent of a third sex would be the possibility of *aimance*, which opens and frustrates the ideal of democracy.

#### OF SPIRIT

Given the extensive interest in the political implications of Heidegger's work, it is unsurprising that Derrida's reading of Heidegger in *Of Spirit*, elaborated before the so-called Heidegger affair had become a cause célèbre, has also attracted a fair amount of commentary. In view of this, and of the complexity of the text itself, I will confine myself here to those observations which seem most pertinent to the argument I am pursuing in this chapter. In particular, I am interested in what distinguishes the singular performance of this reading, originally a paper presented to a conference at Cerisy, from the more general programme for reading Heidegger outlined in the two earlier essays on *Geschlecht*, and indicated by some remarks made by Derrida at a colloquium at the University of Essex, to which he refers in the text [OS 8 / 23] and from which both an outline of Derrida's comments and a transcript of the ensuing discussion have been published.<sup>7</sup>

At the Essex colloquium Derrida had raised four points: the privilege attached to questioning in Heidegger's work; the privilege attached to essence (for example when 'the essence of technology is nothing technological' in 'The Question of Technology'); the structure of *Dasein* in relation to animality; and the problem of epochality as a principle of gathering. The same themes guide *Of Spirit* and, as with the *Geschlecht* essays (in which the theme of *Geist* is announced: 'the ambivalence of the fire or the flame of the spirit, which is at once the Good and the Evil' [GES II 192 / 450]), the pivotal text for reading Heidegger is again the 1953 writings on Trakl. What marks out *Of Spirit* is its systematic account of the use of the word 'spirit' in Heidegger's work, around which the other points are now organized.

Derrida finds three stages in the trajectory of 'spirit': at first, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger refuses spirit as a category, but later in the Rectorate discourse, spirit returns, although held in quotation marks, and associated with the political problems of destiny and the nation. Derrida's reading at this point runs in parallel to his work on Fichte which I have already discussed. On the one hand 'spirit' takes us beyond an empirical or biological discourse of race; but on the other hand, it is still attached to a nationalist affirmation: Heidegger 'confers the most reassuring and elevated *spiritual* legitimacy on [...] National Socialism'. Yet 'by taking the risk of spiritualizing nazism, he might have been trying to absolve or save it by marking it with this affirmation' [OS 39 / 64]. In the third step on this path, Heidegger's Trakl commentaries seek to reinstate the word spirit, but stripped of its Christian and metaphysical connotations.

The situation Derrida finds played out in Heidegger's words then, is that which we have seen to characterize the discourse of national philosophical humanism as such: if these texts are read as the attempt to avoid the worse violence, the violence of an allegedly biologically determinate racism, they may only do so by the path of the universal; yet even the supposedly universal is already marked as a national affirmation, a political decision, as violence. This path is also that of a return of spirit as humanism, as Derrida argues in connection with Heidegger's thinking of *Dasein* as human not animal, and of a privilege granted, once again, to the German language: spirit may only be truly spoken in German. Derrida queries both of these assumptions, but the fundamental problem of the text is that of the unavoidability of passing through spirit, or of some form of spiritual determination.

While he can draw attention to the metaphysical decisions which foreclose on the distinction between human and animal, and privilege one language over another, Derrida cannot escape the problematic affirmation of philosophy and spirit, which are already not only Occidental but national. I will quote two crucial passages from the text to show the centrality and ineluctability of this problem.

Because one cannot demarcate oneself from biologism, from naturalism, from racism in its genetic form, one cannot be *opposed* to them, except by reinscribing spirit in an oppositional determination, by once again making it a unilaterality of subjectivity, even if in its voluntarist form. The constraint of this program remains very strong, it reigns over the majority of discourses which, today and for a long time to come, state their opposition to racism, to totalitarianism, to nazism, to fascism, etc., and do this in the name of spirit, and even of the freedom of (the) spirit, in the name of an axiomatic – for example that of democracy or 'human rights' – which, directly or not, comes back to this metaphysics of *subjectivity*. All the pitfalls of the strategy of establishing demarcations belong to this program, whatever place one occupies in it. The only choice is

the choice between the terrifying contaminations it assigns. Even if all forms of complicity are not equivalent, they are *irreducible*. The question of knowing which is the least grave of these forms of complicity is always there – its urgency and its seriousness could not be over-stressed – but it will never dissolve the irreducibility of this fact. [OS 39–40 / 65–6]

This is the same problematic structure which Derrida has set out in his seminar on philosophical nationality. The discourse of the social or human sciences cannot be opposed except on the basis of transcendental gestures, however provisional or short-lived (or quasi-transcendental), which by restoring philosophy as a universal explanatory force rest on metaphysical foundations, however carefully these are qualified or subjected to ironic presentation. Spirit returns. This is unavoidable:

I do not mean to criticize this humanist teleology. It is no doubt more urgent to recall that, in spite of all the denegations or all the avoidances one could wish, it has remained *up till now* (in Heidegger's time and situation, but this has not radically changed today) the price to be paid in the ethico-political denunciation of biologism, racism, naturalism, etc. If I analyze this 'logic', and the aporias or limits, the presuppositions or the axiomatic decisions, above all the inversions and contaminations, in which we see it becoming entangled, this is rather in order to exhibit and then formalize the terrifying mechanisms of this program, all the double constraints which structure it. Is this unavoidable? Can one escape this program? No sign would suggest it, at least neither in 'Heideggerean' discourses nor in 'anti-Heideggerean' discourses. Can one transform this program? I do not know. [OS 56 / 87–8]

Derrida here gives an indication of how he understands his own procedure in *Of Spirit* and it is important to note that he does not pass a final judgment on Heidegger, despite pointing out the equivocations of his work. I suggested in the previous chapter that responsibility precedes the subject; that being born into one language rather than another is already a political decision for which I am culpable, if not fully accountable. Here Derrida formulates this problem in terms of 'a program'.

Yet if this 'program' has dictated to Heidegger, and to Derrida in his turn, neither can avoid their responsibility for an attempt to come to terms with it. Derrida nowhere suggests that his work is to be preferred to Heidegger's in any straightforward way. In the long footnote which appears to retract sections of the argument over the status of questioning in Heidegger, Derrida describes an affirmative engagement which precedes questioning, and which can be traced within Heidegger's work; yet this is something which Derrida has been describing in his own terms for several years at this point [OS 129–36 n.5 / 147–54 n.1]. While Derrida clearly wishes to isolate aporias

and limits, 'axiomatic' decisions in Heidegger's text, this is to exhibit these features of 'the program' rather than escape it. One of the consequences of the 'contamination' to which he refers is that 'Heidegger' and 'Derrida' as proper names denoting discrete bodies of work cannot be rigorously distinguished.

This dimension of the problem has often been commented on. What has not been dealt with is the way Derrida's response is inscribed with a national dimension: and in particular a confrontation between the German and the French language. This, it seems to me, repeats and complicates the identification between Heidegger and Derrida in the text. David Farrell Krell has noted that at the climax of the book, when Derrida comes to read Heidegger on Trakl, and identifies spirit as fire, he uses a word which is common to French and German – shared, but different, in each language. That word is *flamme*. In other words at the conclusion to the book 'spirit' [*Geist, l'esprit*] becomes that which German and French hold in common. The question of spirit is a 'thoroughly French question' [OS 4 / 16], as Derrida comments earlier in the book, and the relationship between German and French comes to replace, at least in the book's performative dimension, the question of translation between Greek, Latin and German ('*Spirit/soullife, pneuma/psyche/zoë* or *bios, spiritus/animalvita, Geist/Seele/Leben* – these are the triangles and squares in which we imprudently pretend to recognize stable semantic determinations' [OS 74 / 119]) and perhaps even of the exclusion of Hebrew from this problem [OS 100–2 / 165–8].

Spirit names both that which puts into question and ghosts or haunts the empirical, and the necessary return of metaphysics: 'However we interpret this awesome equivocity, for Heidegger it is inscribed *in spirit*. It is *of spirit* [*de l'esprit*]' [OS 41 / 67]. But in naming spirit in French, the national dimension of the book is affirmed. Where Heidegger explicitly claims that *Geist* can only be named in German, by translating it, Derrida cannot fail to repeat this claim on behalf of the French national idiom in which he speaks. But by naming this equivocity as '*de l'esprit*' Derrida is also naming his own book. Not only is spirit best spoken in French, but the book itself must be read as the exemplary exposition of spirit, as not just the 'formalization' but also the 'exhibition' of the 'terrifying mechanisms of the program', to refer back to the passage I have just quoted at length. Derrida also draws attention to the reference in his title to an eighteenth-century text by Helvetius. This earlier book, of which his becomes a partial repetition, was condemned, banned and burnt. Might we not take this to imply that Derrida's book of spirit is not only a book of fire, but another book to burn? From the moment that it is written in one language rather than another, however translatable that might make it, *Of Spirit* is the performative affirmation of the 'terrifying' program. Just as in *Monolingualism of the Other* Derrida plays out the ambiguity of his own relation to France itself, so in this text Derrida seeks to account for and respond to the necessary inscription of deconstruction into a metaphysics of spirit.

My claim here is somewhat stronger than that of Geoff Bennington who sees *Of Spirit* as an exemplary deconstruction: 'what deconstruction will always have been saying on its own account, in its own name, this is deconstruction's very signature'.<sup>8</sup> It also exceeds Simon Critchley's claim that while *Of Spirit* is a responsible engagement with its own politics through a reading of Heidegger, Derrida does not manage to *decide* and therefore ultimately refuses politics.<sup>9</sup> Derrida has written his own book of fire, his own book of spirit, his own book to burn, a book which burns. In doing so he foregrounds the decisions which have already been made for him, and which bind him to one language rather than another, and that language to one tradition rather than another, one set of religions rather than another, and thus to one set of political decisions rather than another. In doing so, Derrida (contra Critchley, as it were) raises the question of the very possibility of politics, of a political decision as something I could *take*: and repeats deconstruction (contra Bennington) as a work of violence, of a national exemplarism and spiritual metaphysics which are unavoidable and with which we can only negotiate.

#### EUROPE AS RESPONSIBILITY

Another of the arguments of *Of Spirit* has important consequences for this discussion. Derrida also begins a project of linking Heidegger's discourse on Europe with that of other contemporary thinkers, in this instance Valéry and Husserl, pursued at more length in a book which responds to the rhetoric of European community or unity, *The Other Heading*. In doing so he at once returns to one of his oldest themes, and pushes the political discourse and practice that deconstruction cannot help but be even further. For crucially, not only is Europe identified with philosophy, but with *responsibility* itself. So the situation we are describing cannot be one in which deconstruction figures a return of responsibility to a flawed Western metaphysics: Derrida's defenders need to resist the temptation to see deconstruction as somehow purer or more responsible than those positions which do not undertake deconstructive questioning. As a European concept, responsibility is also always already a political concept; not the neutral ground of politics or of political reflection, but already the taking of one side rather than another, and always on the side of the fraternal friend, rather than that of the other. This question of responsibility would make *The Gift of Death* a companion piece to *Of Spirit*, as Derrida turns from showing Heidegger's Trakl reading to be finely balanced at the crossing of a Christian metaphysics with a path to something completely other, to Patočka's genealogy of Europe as responsibility itself. The problem is flagged up in *Of Spirit*:

What I am aiming at here is, obviously enough, anything but abstract. We are talking about past, present and future 'events', a composition of

forces and discourses which seem to have been waging merciless war on each other (for example from 1933 to our time). We have here a program and a combinatory whose power remains abyssal. In all rigor it exculpates none of these discourses which can thus exchange their power. It leaves no place open for any arbitrating authority. Nazism was not born in the desert. We all know this, but it has to be constantly recalled. And even if, far from any desert, it had grown like a mushroom in the silence of a European forest, it would have done so in the shadow of big trees, in the shelter of their silence or their indifference but in the same soil. I will not list these trees which in Europe people an immense black forest, I will not count the species. For essential reasons, the presentation of them defies tabular layout. In their bushy taxonomy, they would bear the name of religions, philosophies, political regimes, economic structures, religious or academic institutions. In short, what is just as confusedly called culture, or the world of spirit. [OS 109–10 / 178–9]

David Krell reads this passage as privileging a figure of the desert over the European forest and wishes to recall that there is no pure outside, Judaic or otherwise, to this economy of violence: ‘To be sure, not in the desert. Yet the desert has often enough run red to the sound of “sibboleth”, a sound uttered without hope in many tongues. The prophetic discourses of the desert, propagated in other lands, have often enough served as clarion calls to closure of the triangle and violence in the wood.’<sup>10</sup> But if this is what Derrida’s appeal to the desert is for, it is only to the extent that Judaism has always figured Europe’s outside. Instead, we might take this as a reference to another idea of place, one that would be thought beyond the opposition of desert and forest, beyond the possibility of a sacred place: what Derrida refers to in *Specters of Marx* as a desert in the desert [SOM 167–8 / 266–7] or in his text on the Platonic *chora*, as the giving place to place.<sup>11</sup> The old problem of deconstruction is at work here: on the one hand we try to name the condition of possibility, but we can only name it under the name of what is to hand, what we have inherited. That is, here, a desert space.

Even before beginning *Of Grammatology* by linking logocentrism to ethnocentrism [GRA 3 / 11], Derrida was exploring the limits of the West. In his thesis, *Le problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl*, Derrida writes: ‘This idea of Europe is the idea that is born in Europe; it is the idea of philosophy that is, in its absolute originality, as Husserl tells us, a European idea. In fact, Europe is not the cradle of philosophy, it is itself born as spiritual signification, from the idea of philosophy.’<sup>12</sup> Constituted by its outside, bearing its other within, Europe just is the programme of Western thought, whether in its Eurocentric or anti-Eurocentric poles: ‘Avowal, guilt, and self-accusation no more escape this old program than does the celebration of self’ [OH 26 / 31]. Writing in *Of Grammatology*, Derrida suspected that this structure could be found in the work of Lévi-Strauss: ‘the critique of

ethnocentrism has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of original and natural goodness, of accusing and humiliating oneself, of exhibiting its being-unacceptable in an anti-ethnocentric mirror' [GRA 114 / 168].

In *The Other Heading* a third stage is written into the thinking of national humanism: we know it passes via a cosmopolitanism, but Derrida now asserts that it also passes through a privilege assigned to Europe as the avant-garde, the leading force, the head or header of the 'human' and 'national' world. This can be schematically set out as 'I am (we are) all the more national for being European, all the more European for being trans-European and international; no one is more cosmopolitan and authentically universal than the one, than this "we", who is speaking to you' [OH 48 / 49]. A nationalism, or the national affirmation of one idiom rather than another, also implies that 'what is proper to a particular nation or idiom would be to be a heading for Europe, and what is proper to Europe would be, analogically, to advance itself as a heading for the universal essence of humanity' [OH 48 / 49]. In other words, philosophy itself:

Europe is not only a geographical headland or heading that has always given itself the representation or figure of a spiritual heading, at once as project, task, or infinite – that is to say, universal – idea, as the memory of itself that gathers and accumulates itself, capitalizes upon itself, in and for itself. Europe has also confused its image, its face, its figure and its very place, its taking-place, with that of an advanced point, the point of a phallus if you will, and thus, once again, with a heading for world civilization or human culture in general. The idea of an advanced point of *exemplarity* is the *idea of the European idea*, its *eidos*, at once as *archē* – the idea of beginning but also as commanding [...] and as *telos*, the idea of the end. [OH 24 / 29]

Because Europe is identified with responsibility, our response to this situation is difficult. Derrida formulates it in terms of a series of aporetic duties: for example that of striking a balance between the nationalistic tensions of linguistic difference and homogenization of universal translating machine [OH 58 / 58], or how to keep *Geist* and *esprit* apart without making one simply an incomplete translation of the other, truer, word: 'The *same duty* dictates respecting differences, idioms, minorities, singularities, but also the universalizability of formal law, the desire for translation, agreement and univocity, the law of the majority, opposition to racism, nationalism and xenophobia' [OH 78 / 76–7]. Derrida has no option but to take up the old name of Europe (and culture, identity): if to be European is to be responsible, we must only be more so, but only by transgressing the path of responsibility as European, by thinking responsibility against itself [cf. OH 17 / 22]. As we shall see in the next chapter, this might mean not only 1. to

see what resources already open Europe, within its old name, to its outside but also 2. at its borders (both figurative and quite literal) to welcome what is already inside, not just that which appears to come from the outside [OH 82–3 / 80–1]. Derrida's memorandum to himself, that 'I am a good European intellectual' [OH 82 / 80] once again reminds us in our turn of the implacable programme of which he is writing. Deconstruction as political practice in this mode aims to appear at the head of this programme, but in such a way as to both commend and demonstrate ways of thinking the programme itself differently.

### HEARING THE OTHER IN *POLITICS OF FRIENDSHIP*

Turning from *Of Spirit* back to *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida appears to have moved away from the problem of responsibility. Friendship and the question of decision seem to have replaced what may be too European, too pious a discourse on responsibility. In this new strategy the distinction between friend and enemy reinforces the violence of the political inscription of the text. However, the book is not without a link back to Heidegger. 'Heidegger's Ear: Philopolemology (*Geschlecht IV*)' is an essay which deals with many of the same themes as the work we have discussed so far, but which also seems to stand on its own as a reading of the place of the concepts of 'friendship' in Heidegger. The text was published in the French edition of *Politics of Friendship* and I will here read it as having a supplementary relation to the main body of that book: as both the completion and the rendering incomplete of the text.

Derrida begins with a relatively obscure passage from *Being and Time* in which Heidegger refers to 'the voice of the friend whom every Dasein carries with it'.<sup>13</sup> Leaving aside the suggestions of Christopher Fynsk and Jean-Luc Nancy that this passage opens a possible reading of *Dasein* as *Mit-sein*, a primordial being-with, Derrida instead links this brief mention forward to both the reading of Trakl, and to the seminar work of the 1930s in which Heidegger also makes explicit reference to hearing. There are two dimensions to Derrida's argument. First he suggests how, on the basis of Heidegger's later work, this reference to the voice of the friend – a mode of hearing which is neither sense perception nor intellectual faculty – prefigures, calls for, and almost hears the approach of the thinking of Being as event [*Ereignis*], as world-disclosure and the fourfold, which will characterize the work of the later Heidegger, to which Derrida is much closer than he is to *Being and Time*. But Derrida is also suggesting that Heidegger here prefigures his own interest in *aimance* – as I discussed in the first chapter, a 'middle voice' of loving, neither active nor passive, a potential prior to the distinction between friends, and between friends and enemies: which Derrida in effect equates with the calling of / for a politics beyond friendship modelled on fraternity. He comments:



Heidegger is pushed by a ‘destructive’ necessity to try to hear and understand [*entendre*] *philein* before the Platonic and Aristotelian *philia*. He translates *philein*, of which he speaks a great deal, by *das Leiben*, loving, before any distinction between the loving of love and the loving of friendship, what in French, in a seminar I am devoting to these questions, I call *aimance* [GES IV 180 / 368].

While Derrida carefully marks this as a “‘destructive” necessity’, not many lines beforehand he has drawn attention not only to the difference, but also the similarity between the Heideggerean and the Derridean mode, if we provisionally accept such a distinction. ‘Deconstruction, or rather “Destruktion”’, he writes, commenting on Heidegger, ‘is also an experience of the appropriation of the tradition, and this deconstructive appropriation signifies first, it calls itself, it calls *heißt*: “open our ear”’ [GES IV 180 / 368]. What Derrida does not remind us is that on several occasions he has himself drawn on the metaphor of hearing to suggest that what he has been doing in his work is precisely ‘a process of appropriation (*Aneignung*) and of transformation. [...] The word *Aneignung* is used at least twice in this context, and something more remarkable still, not only to designate the welcome of the tradition but also its “destruction”’. In ‘Tympan’, *Otobiographies*, and ‘Of an apocalyptic tone recently adopted in philosophy’ Derrida has associated deconstruction with something very similar.<sup>14</sup> For both these reasons, above and beyond the general difficulty of distinguishing Heidegger and Derrida, this would appear to be another text in which Derrida performatively problematizes the issue of the propriety of a text, or of what is proper to an author.

The second focus of Derrida’s text is in the possibility of *polemos*, which Heidegger also appears to assign to this *philein*, in his reading of Heraclitus. Where *aimance* for Derrida would be ‘a passivity beyond passivity’, for Heidegger it appears to be linked to a rhetoric or metaphoric of violence and struggle. Derrida looks particularly askance at the implication that what is proper to the belonging together of people (or of a nation) is their communal struggle. *Polemos* and *philein* are ‘originarily the same’ for Heidegger [GES IV 209 / 410] and ‘what we identify as the history of the world, for example, political history’ [GES IV 210 / 411] is *Kampf* or struggle. In the work leading up to *Of Spirit* it was the privilege attached to questioning, later modified in a lengthy footnote, and to essence, which came into question. Here it is the subordination of difference as ‘dissociation, disjunction, scission, dissension, or secession’ to ‘gathering’ [GES IV 209 / 409–10]. (So still within the framework set out in *Essex*.) When Heidegger speaks of the relation between beings in terms of harmony, he appears to reinstall values based on ‘the reciprocity of the there-and-back, the going and coming of exchange. A serious problem when one tries to draw the consequences of this mutuality in the moral and political field of friendship.’ Derrida then echoes the key themes of *Politics of Friendship* when he asks:

What would be the political carrying-distance of a thought or an experience of *philein* that would no longer respect this law of reciprocity and would appeal to dissemblance, heterogeneity, dissymmetry, disproportion, incommensurability, non-exchange, the excess of every measure and thus of all symmetry? All these words are not synonyms of course. A democracy to come should give to be thought an equality that is not incompatible with a certain dissymmetry, with heterogeneity, or absolute singularity, an equality even requiring them and engaging them from a place that remains invisible but that orients me here, from afar, no doubt beyond the Heideggerian aim. [GES IV 183 / 372–3]

As with the problem of spirit, at the very least, Heidegger's association of world-history with struggle, with *Kampf* and *polemos* is equivocal. This ambiguity leaves the thought of Being open to some unpleasant interpretations. Derrida's example is of the possibility of Hitler understanding *Mein Kampf* in a Heideggerian manner: 'I speak, like you, Heidegger, of our responsibility, of the mission, of the "historical spiritual mission of the German people"' [GES IV 211 / 412–13]. Derrida is cautious about concluding: 'these strategies [...] are never totally objectifiable, thematizable, and formalizable. This limit is even the place of decision, of decision in general, of political decision in particular, its tragic condition of possibility, there where decision cannot finally let itself be guided by a knowledge' [GES IV 211–12 / 413]. Yet this is what Heidegger will not have 'sufficiently thematised or formalised' [GES IV 211 / 413]. The community of struggle is not first a community which then struggles, but is community as struggle itself: 'this force is also the spiritual force of the west, what gives to the German people the exemplary unity of its historical mission in order to make the people of spiritual historicity a people "*geschichtlich-geistige*"' [GES IV 203 / 400–1].

This is why the essay is situated at the end of *Politics of Friendship*. With the thought of *différance* reconfigured in terms of violence, politics and 'democracy-to-come', Derrida is attempting to think *aimance* as prior to and making possible the distinction between friend and enemy. But for Derrida *aimance* does not have an empirical or factual existence (and thus cannot be deduced with reference to a pre-Socratic thinker) or an affinity with any one language or the other (hence Derrida's worry about finding such a good idiom in which to express exemplarity – *tout autre est tout autre*). This suggests another context within which to read *Politics of Friendship*. Alongside deconstruction as the thinking of a 'democracy-to-come', and as the remarking of the inevitable political decision which language makes for me (national affirmation, exemplarity) can we not see deconstruction as simply this political re-writing of Heidegger? Derrida's cultured, French, European discourse in its shameful exhibition of its own violence, its appropriation of the discourse of others, and its idiomatic happening, would then be an

attempt to accept this situation, and then to act within it. These 'readings' must be read as an exemplary political practice, not as a theoretical programme which could be detached from or applied to this or that more or less pressing 'political' situation.

## *Hospitality and the Cosmopolitical*

Derrida's reconfiguration of deconstruction as a political practice, a practice of acknowledging and negotiating with its inexorable political dimension and its inscription into various political discourses, emerges most clearly in seminars and essays subsequent to the publication of *Politics of Friendship* in terms of the question of hospitality. I have already shown that in his work on the problem of philosophical nationality, and in his reading of Heidegger, Derrida is concerned to raise the inevitability, and even the necessity, of certain kinds of political decision, while attempting to acknowledge and perhaps alleviate the attendant violence of such decisions. Derrida's theoretical and practical engagement under the name of 'hospitality' – the object of Derrida's seminar in 1995–6 – is deconstruction as a political practice at its most explicit, developing themes which remain implicit, for example, in Derrida's work on witnessing and on the gift. Moreover, to understand deconstruction as hospitality in Derrida's sense, casts light back on the ways in which it will always already have been political. The main sources for the material of the seminar on hospitality are the two published sessions and Derrida's later text on Levinas, 'A Word of Welcome'. However, the work is also prefigured in *Specters of Marx*. Once again, Derrida's discussion is most easily approached through his structural analysis of the concept of hospitality: on this basis we will also be able to see the role his various examples play in his work on hospitality and, in particular, the place of Kant and Marx.

### HYPERBOLE AND HOSPITALITY

This passage from the second published seminar on hospitality 'Pas de l'hospitalité' (which can be translated as both 'step of hospitality' and 'no hospitality' [Hos 75 / 71]<sup>1</sup>) is worth quoting at length, since in it Derrida sets out the main features of his arguments concerning hospitality:

In other words, there would be an antinomy, an insoluble antinomy, a non-dialecticizable antinomy between, on the one hand, *The law of unlimited hospitality* (to give the new arrival all of one's home and oneself, to give him or her one's own, our own, without asking a name, or compensation, or the fulfilment of even the smallest condition), and on the other hand, the laws (in the plural), those rights and duties that

are always conditioned and conditional, as they are defined by the Greco-Roman tradition and even the Judeo-Christian one, by all of law and philosophy of law up to Kant and Hegel in particular, across the family, civil society, and the State. [Hos 77 / 73]

Derrida draws attention to the fact that the traditional concept of hospitality is a limited one. It is governed both by the value of reciprocity, and by the notions of law and of rights. Drawing on Benveniste's account of the origin of the word, Derrida argues that hospitality has generally been determined as mutual obligations between peoples.<sup>2</sup> Hospitality is presumed to be a pact between two states or nations, two families or groups. It is laid down as a law, and as a right available to whoever is subject to that law. On this basis hospitality falls foul of two objections from Derrida which I have already discussed in other contexts. First, if hospitality is the following of a rule, an acting out of obligation to the other, it cannot be the object of a responsible decision, but remains the unfolding of a programme. Secondly, if hospitality is only offered in expectation of a return, even in the minimal terms of knowing that one also has the right to hospitality, it is not freely given, but is conditioned or limited. Offered or owed only between those who are presumed to be equal, hospitality shares the structure we have already seen in Derrida's analysis of the concept of friendship. As a bond between one group and another, or some groups and some others, the laws of hospitality must also enact exclusion. Even if hospitality were to be offered universally to any other human, it would still be a limited hospitality – and perhaps the very definition of a humanism. (Can hospitality be offered to the non-human other: whether animal, vegetable or mineral?)

In practice however, hospitality is rarely to be offered to every other human as such. Derrida uses the example of an absolute stranger or foreigner as the limit question of hospitality:

we would have to note once again a paradox or a contradiction: this right to hospitality offered to a foreigner 'as a family' [Derrida uses Benveniste's terms. AT], represented and protected by his or her family name, is at once what makes hospitality possible, or the hospitable relationship to the foreigner possible, but by the same token what limits and prohibits it. Because hospitality, in this situation, is not offered to an anonymous new arrival and someone who has neither name, nor patronym, nor family, nor social status, and who is therefore treated not as a foreigner but as another barbarian. [Hos 23–5 / 27–9]

Derrida takes both the self-characterization of Socrates in his *Apology* and Oedipus as figures of the absolute stranger, the stranger to the law of the city, who asks for protection in the name of the law of hospitality. What these examples suggest, and which Benveniste also describes as the original

model of hospitality on the basis of its etymology, is a right and a duty offered between Greek nations, or between the Greeks and certain other peoples, but not to all (the barbarian). Derrida takes this to be the general structure of a limited hospitality. Moreover, that the barbarian is an outsider first of all in language, that they should speak in a language which is not recognized *as* language by the Greek, is not without importance. Derrida insists that this is another characteristic limit of hospitality:

the foreigner is first of all foreign to the legal language in which the duty of hospitality is formulated, the right to asylum, its limits, norms, policing, etc. He has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc. This personage imposes on him translation into their own language, and that's the first act of violence. [Hos 15 / 21]

More concisely, hospitality becomes limited as soon as I ask the stranger to divulge their name, or announce their arrival in my language, and not in theirs.

Derrida opposes another way of thinking about hospitality to all these limited forms of hospitality which are or have been practised, formulated or theorized. Like both the alterity beyond equality of 'democracy-to-come', and justice thought beyond any determinate law, the status of this unconditional hospitality is hard to define. It is neither a truth nor an essence of hospitality, of which all actual forms of hospitality would be flawed copies, pale imitations. It is not an Idea of hospitality towards which we could work, or towards which the world is progressing by some secret teleology. Yet in the same way that Derrida claims that law bears witness to justice, and democracy bears witness to a 'democracy-to-come', but which can never appear as such, limited hospitality is linked to unconditional hospitality. We are caught between '*two plurals that are different at the same time*': pure dispersion ('n + n + n, etc.') – nothing other than the various (conditioned) laws of hospitality – and the transcendental situation where one form of hospitality (an unlimited one, if you like) would govern the entire series: 'One + n' [Hos 81 / 77]. This being between is the mode of the quasi-transcendental: a Law of the law, which must also be a law like any other, and thus become part of the series of all laws, while claiming to govern the series, but in fact generating the opening to infinity of the series [Hos 81 / 77]. Let us follow the argument more closely for a while.

Derrida offers two main figures of this unconditional hospitality. The first follows from what we have already discussed, and consists in the offering of hospitality to the unknown, without even asking for a name:

absolute hospitality requires that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to

the absolute, unknown, anonymous, other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. [Hos 25 / 29]

The second figure for absolute hospitality is that of the possible substitution of the host for the guest. If the host, as master of the house, were to offer unconditional hospitality, would that not be to make the guest, in his turn, the master, and for the master to become the guest? This would no longer then be hospitality, which is precisely the offering of hospitality by the master. It is not surprising that Derrida quickly argues that absolute hospitality is also impossibility itself: Both the French idiom, *hôte* meaning guest and host, and the etymology offered by Benveniste, in which 'hospitality' is the product of the merging of words for guest and master, suggest this.

It also seems clear that Derrida's object here is substantially similar to that of *Politics of Friendship*. What he has called limited hospitality has the same structure as fraternity, and of a democratic model understood in terms of a limited duty offered or owed only to members of my family, where the state is understood in terms of birthright, nativity, or homeland, a natural or naturalized bond, the circulation of obligation without any excess: economy as reciprocity. Absolute hospitality is the figure of a hyperbolic duty which not only cuts across or exceeds these forms of obligation and of politics, but is heterogeneous, transgressive and violent. I have argued in the first two sections of this chapter that the form of much of Derrida's work has been structured as a negotiation of the contradiction between both these duties, and of the impossibility of their reconciliation, so that that very negotiation must be experienced as violent. We might also expect Derrida's work on hospitality to have such a form. This can be seen when we expand the insistent reference to Kant in these texts.

## KANT AND THE COSMOPOLITICAL

Kant appears to have a particular place in Derrida's work on hospitality. Three essays of his are referred to regularly, as the very model of a politics which would enact a limited hospitality, and therefore beyond which we must seek to think. While it would be possible to claim, following recent work on the irreducibility of Kantian problematics to political thought, and to international relations in particular, that this privileged reference to Kant follows from an empirical importance of his work, this would be a little misleading.<sup>3</sup> It would also risk rendering Derrida's analysis at least irrelevant, and at worst incorrect, if it could be proved that there was a way of thinking international relations which successfully broke with Kant. I suggest that the

place of Kant is again to be thought of as *exemplary*: that is as both the best example, and just another example; both paradigmatic and merely typical. I will pass quickly over the least frequently mentioned essay, 'On a Supposed Right to Lie From Philanthropy' to the more regularly cited 'On Perpetual Peace' and 'Of Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View'.

Derrida's point in discussing Kant's justification of the absolute value he assigns to the obligation not to lie reiterates the question of secrecy which I have expounded in my first chapter. Kant argues that 'to be *truthful* (honest) in all declarations is [...] a sacred command of reason prescribing unconditionally, one not to be restricted by any conveniences'.<sup>4</sup> Derrida argues that in this text Kant both founds morality on this principle of transparency, and also threatens the possibility of resistance by insisting that there can be no case of lying to the authorities: he 'secures social right in public right. But simultaneously [...] he destroys, along with the right to lie any right of [...] resisting the demand for truth, confessions or public openness' [Hos 69 / 65]. For Kant, the unconditional law of truthfulness outweighs the law of hospitality and demands its transgression. The example cited is that of being required to hand over to the authorities someone to whom you have offered hospitality and your protection. However, for Derrida, this Kantian host has acted in an exemplary manner, by offering hospitality to the stranger only in so far as he is still a subject of the law: 'Hospitality is due to the foreigner, certainly, but remains, like the law, conditional, and thus conditioned in its dependence on the unconditionality which is the basis of the law' [Hos 73 / 67]. Just as the secret represents a principle of resistance to the public sphere, or to the State, a right to non-response, a resistance to the law in the name of the law, so here Derrida implies, against Kant, that the 'infinite idea' of hospitality must also be the principle of a possible resistance to the state or the judiciary.

However, it is Derrida's use of the essay 'On Perpetual Peace' which is more germane to my argument here. In his reading of this essay Derrida links his account of hospitality to the problem of a cosmopolitanism, whose complicity with nationalism, with the national affirmation of even the most universalist philosophy, we have already seen Derrida questioning. At the heart of 'On Perpetual Peace', Kant formulates the principle of relations between states in terms of hospitality, and thus, as Derrida notes in 'A Word of Welcome', cosmopolitical terms:

The law and cosmopolitics of hospitality that he proposes in response to this terrible alternative [between a utopian irenism and the violence of *realpolitik*] is a set of rules and contracts, an interstate conditionality that limits, against the backdrop of natural law reinterpreted within a Christian horizon, the very hospitality it guarantees. [ADI 101 / 175]

Peace, for Kant, retains a trace of war: an armed peace is simply the suspension of war; peace is not natural, but instituted, and so perhaps not really peace at all [Adi 86–7 / 154–5]:



Kant does not say this, but can it not be thought, either with or against him, that an institutional peace is at once pure and impure. As an eternal promise, it must retain, according to a logic that I tried elsewhere to formalize, the trace of a threat, of what threatens it. [ADI 89 / 158]

Derrida does not condemn Kant for proposing only a limited hospitality. For he argues that what is brought out in Kant's essay is the limit to hospitality which must operate everywhere:

We know this only too well: never will a Nation-State as such, regardless of its form of government, and even if it is democratic, its majority on the right or the left, open itself up to an unconditional hospitality or to a right of asylum without restriction. It would never be 'realistic' to demand this of a Nation-State as such. The Nation-State will always want to 'control the flow of immigration'. [ADI 90 / 159]

From this point of view, and this echoes the challenge posed by Derrida's work on 'democracy-to-come' to the liberal democratic polity, the nation-state can never be just. The flow of immigration will always challenge the boundaries of the state, and to the extent that the state seeks to enforce restrictions on immigration (even if some restriction is always necessary) it will be less just. It is not fortuitous, Derrida writes, that it is the thinker of a universal right to cosmopolitan citizenship in 'On Perpetual Peace' who so limits the right to hospitality in terms of the law of veracity, of telling the truth, and of the right to the secret: 'who destroys at its source the very possibility of what he posits and determines in this way' [Hos 71 / 67] by commanding that the guest be handed over to those seeking to kill him. The figure of the absolute other, of someone without a place, or a state, without the means to return the obligation of hospitality, is the one to whom hospitality or the right of sojourn is not owed. We have several names for these unfortunates: in Britain, 'asylum seekers', in France 'sans papiers'. But we might also read the problems of international relations as limited hospitality in a widening economic North/South divide, in the challenge of sanctions enforced against a people under International Law to a hospitality owed to a people even if not to its leader. One of the reasons Derrida formulates the problem of hospitality in this way is because it is immediately apparent that this is the problem of frontiers in general, pre-eminently of the frontiers of the state, and thus the problem of the *polis* as such.

Concluding the second published seminar on hospitality, with which I began this section, Derrida asks:

In giving a right, if I can put it like that, to unconditional hospitality, how can one give *place* to a determined, limitable and delimitable – in a word, to a calculable – right or law? How can one give place to a concrete

politics and ethics, including a history, evolutions, actual revolutions, advances – in short, a perfectibility? A politics, an ethics, a law that thus answer to the new injunctions of unprecedented historical situations, that do indeed correspond to them, by changing the laws, by determining citizenship, democracy, international law, etc., in another way? So by really intervening in the condition of hospitality in the name of the unconditional, even if this pure unconditional appears inaccessible, and inaccessible not only as a regulatory idea, an Idea in the Kantian sense and infinitely removed, always inadequately approached, but inaccessible for the structural reasons, ‘barred’ by the internal contradictions we have analyzed? [Hos 147–9 / 131]

It is the question of ‘really intervening in the condition of hospitality in the name of the unconditional’ that is surely at stake here. My suggestion is that we must read deconstruction as precisely this intervention. Deconstruction as a political practice which, seeking to circumscribe of the necessity of ethico-political decisions, itself takes place as such ethico-political decisions, can be understood as both the theoretical and practical attempt to negotiate with these laws in the name of another law. On this basis, and on this basis only, is there a possibility of better laws, of more equality, of more democracy, even when these terms will never be just enough, equal enough, democratic enough. I will examine this first in relation to Derrida’s (practical, performative) call for a (theoretical) New International in *Specters of Marx*, and then in relation to a (more practical, more performative) intervention in the question of refugees in a short text published as part of *Marx en jeu*. On this basis, it should become clear that the question of politics is for Derrida not only a negotiation of responsibility, without any guarantees or certainty, but also a challenge made to the limits of the state, in the name of what lies beyond the state, and perhaps even beyond the field of politics and law as we usually define them.

#### FIGURES OF HOSPITALITY IN *SPECTERS OF MARX*

I am going to focus on one relatively short passage of Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*, a difficult text which has caused some controversy, particularly over the adequacy of Derrida’s treatment of Marx. I do not have space to deal with this topic here. Instead I wish to focus on the book’s subtitles, ‘The New International, and the State of the Debt’, read beyond the reference to Marx, as just such an attempt to intervene in the conditional in the name of the unconditional suggested in *Of Hospitality*.

Derrida’s most obvious ‘complaint’ in *Specters of Marx* comes when he offers a list of ten plagues. It is not immediately obvious how we should read this list. Is it a list of the only ten? The most pressing ten? In which case,

on what criteria is it based? In selecting his list, Derrida acts, intervenes, chooses, prioritizes – all these are political acts. But he must do so on the basis of an impossible and irresponsible decision. So much so, that in *Politics of Friendship* he gives no examples (and draws attention to this fact) since to choose some rather than others could not be justified. In *Aporias*, Derrida offers us another way to read the ten plagues of *Specters of Marx*, which would account for its apparently arbitrary formulation. Writing specifically of *The Other Heading* – but we can easily apply this to *Specters of Marx* – Derrida comments of his examples:

they concerned the question of Europe, of European borders and of the border of the political, of *politeia* and of the State as European concepts. Nine or eleven times, they involved the same aporetic duty; they involved ten – plus or minus one – commandments considered as examples in an infinite series in which the ten could only count a series of examples.<sup>5</sup>

This series of examples must be infinite. Not only because the logic of exemplarity renames the infinite field of *différance* itself, but because for there to be any responsibility it must be by definition be infinite.

Of the examples given in *Specters of Marx* – unemployment, refugees and the homeless, economic war, the free market, the foreign debt, arms industry, nuclear proliferation, inter-ethnic wars, mafia and drug cartels – it is the tenth which stands out as the signal of a ‘plus or minus one’, as the extension of the list to infinity. What appears to be just one of Derrida’s examples might also be the example which governs all the others:

For above all, above all, one would have to analyze the present state of international law and of its institutions. Despite a fortunate perfectibility, despite an undeniable progress, these international institutions suffer from at least two limits. The first and most radical of the two stems from the fact that their norms, their charter, the definition of their mission depend on a certain historical culture. They cannot be dissociated from certain European philosophical concepts, and notably from a concept of State or national sovereignty whose genealogical closure is more and more evident, not only in a theoretico-juridico or speculative fashion, but concretely, practically, and practically quotidian. Another limit is strictly linked to the first: This supposedly universal international law remains, in its application, largely dominated by particular nation-States. Almost always their techno-economic and military power prepares and applies, in other words, *carries* the decision. As one says in English, it *makes the decision*. [SoM 83–4 / 138]

The value attributed to international law is not that of a good in itself, but of a necessary evil. Just as Derrida described the limits inscribed within the

very concept of democracy, so here he does the same with international law. The New International as a rethinking of international law is figured by the problem of the limited hospitality of the 'particular nation-States' who dominate it. For the law to develop, these states would have to cede their control rather than dictating the decision. Only in this event would the law have a chance of being more just. So if Derrida appears to be commending the kind of cosmopolitical and universalist framework of international law which he has worried about in Kant, this is not a capitulation to liberal geopolitics, but the outcome of the awkward attempt to find the best form for the intervention which is always urgently called for by the times. Whatever its philosophical legitimacy and faults, the power of such a framework is witnessed by the resistance of the most powerful states to legal obligations which would seek to restrain the free exercise of their power.

Marx himself comes to stand in for the stranger within the text: 'Marx remains an immigrant *chez nous*, a glorious, sacred, accursed but still a clandestine immigrant as he was all his life' [SOM 174 / 276]. We are to receive Marx's work as we would an immigrant. He has not yet been received, could not ever be completely received, but his work should be neither domesticated or appropriated; nor simply turned back at the border. (The same might be said of Heidegger, or of Derrida.) The impossibility of determining whether any problem, any thinker, any event is one event among others, or the event of events, problem of problems, text of texts, is paid tribute to in Derrida's thinking of exemplarity. Derrida's restless attempts to formulate these problems, from friendship to hospitality for example, from justice, to unconditional hospitality, to 'democracy-to-come' show this, as does his reticence in adding pathos to his text from using individual examples.

To read *Specters of Marx* as this kind of text rather than a philosophical or theoretical text can be confirmed from an interview given four years later, on the occasion of a play dealing with Marx and influenced by Derrida. The book is not a 'return to Marx' Derrida suggests; but an attempt to remain critical of all the dogmatism of the Marxist tradition, 'and to a certain *philosophy*, to a solely *philosophical* reading of Marx. One must also say that, since the *effondrement* of certain so-called communist States, Marxist studies have tended *most often* (not always but often) to a certain *académisme*'.<sup>6</sup> Deconstruction as a reading practice, and this is by definition a political practice, is also this work of hospitality, of hearing the text on which deconstruction is working. Not only is the key political issue of *Specters of Marx* that of hospitality, of reinventing the law in the name of the law, but its textual and performative mode is that of giving hospitality: but also therefore at risk of being an appropriation rather than a letting-come.

## DECONSTRUCTION AS HOSPITALITY

It seems appropriate to introduce one final example to the discussion at this point. I have argued that deconstruction in this phase of Derrida's work and, perhaps, throughout, might be considered as hospitality. The figures of hospitality in *Specters of Marx* suggest this several years before the seminar on hospitality and 'A Word of Welcome'. If hospitality is to be considered one of the political translations of 'deconstruction' – as I have suggested in the first part of this book we might consider Derrida's analysis of democracy and democracy-to-come – I think it reasonable to draw attention to some of Derrida's 'practical' political engagements of the same period. For example, in 'Pas de l'hospitalité', Derrida refers to the 'so-called Pasqua Laws and the "standardization" that now subjects Algerians to the same conditions as other foreigners for their coming to France'. This reversed the previous Evian agreements which had permitted Algerian citizens to enter France without a visa. Derrida comments: "The time of the Evian agreements has passed," a collaborator of M. Pasqua replied to us when we were protesting against the said standardization' [HOS 147 / 129]. 'Standardization' speaks the very language of 'equalization' and of hospitality against which Derrida has set his complaint, while his use of 'collaborator' raises once again the spectre of the Vichy French removal of citizenship from Jewish French Algerians, 'without the slightest intervention or demand on the part of the Germans' [HOS 143 / 127]. However, we might have referred also to Derrida's comments on the dispute of the wearing of the veil by Muslim children in French schools in a text for Hélène Cixous, that other exemplary Franco-Maghrebian [MON 93 n.9 / 114–15 n.], or his earlier statement in 'Kant, the Jew, and the German' of solidarity for Palestine [KJG 39–40]. Reversing Derrida's comment in 'The Ends of Man' which I cited in my Introduction, these political engagements must be considered as having a philosophical dimension.

One text in particular brings the theme of hospitality together with Derrida's own political engagements. It is the transcription of an improvised contribution to a meeting organized around the question of the 'sans-papiers'. This word names both general problem and specific pretext: the 'sans-papiers' being the name given to the 300 people evicted from the Church of Saint Bernard in Paris, an event to which Derrida refers twice in 'A Word of Welcome' [cf. ADI 20 / 46; 101 / 176]. (It is not insignificant that the hospitality seminar takes place against the backdrop of these events.) It is a polemical and angry work. Derrida objects that the 'sans-papiers' are being denied their human rights, under EU law and the Geneva Convention, that the legislation fails to distinguish between those without papers who have been living and working in France for up to fifteen years and illegal immigrants, and condemns the failure of leftist politicians to oppose the law. He also sets the legislation in a French context, referring back to earlier laws of 1938 and 1945, and highlighting the apparent contradiction between such

rules and France's self-image as the home of the rights of man and of the right to asylum. (Although, as we have seen, these are not incompatible, as the logic of exemplarism prescribes a direct correlation between patriotic pride and an allergic particularism.) More widely however, Derrida sees this as symptomatic of upheavals everywhere, of what in other contexts he refuses to call 'globalization' but 'mondialatinisation', to bring out the sense in which this is a Westernization and Christianization of the world.

Derrida's argument operates on several levels. First it is a contestation at the level of language, beyond its polemic inscription. Two phrases, '*délit de l'hospitalité*' and '*sans-papiers*', itself bear the brunt of this attack. The first, a crime of hospitality, Derrida calls shocking because it directly contradicts the imperative hospitality as law, rather than as crime: 'What becomes of a country, I ask myself, or a culture, or a language, when one can speak of a crime of hospitality, when hospitality can become, in the eyes of the law and its representatives, a crime?'<sup>8</sup> (This is understandably not the place for Derrida to bring out the sense in which any form of hospitality is also a crime of hospitality, a transgression of the law of absolute hospitality.) The second puzzles him – what are the *sans-papiers* lacking? – and he answers that it is their relation to the law (*droit*), they are without right (*droit*). Yet this is clearly only the case from within one determinate law. We might also add that, as we have seen in the seminar on hospitality, language is clearly not simply one problem among others at this point, given the difficulty of asking for hospitality in the name of the other. As soon as someone is a '*sans-papiers*' there is a problem within the terms of that definition: what do they lack? Contestation on every level – even that of vocabulary – is necessary and possible. We must fight against limited hospitality, Derrida argues, 'by analysis, protest, struggle'.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the question of language, Derrida argues, his intervention functions as an affirmation: he is speaking 'for the *sans-papiers*'. This is a delicate situation. Derrida speaks up for them, and on behalf of them, but without wishing to speak in place of them. He is speaking for their right to speak, their right to be recognized by the law, to be speaking citizen-subjects: or at least foreigners subject to the law of hospitality rather than those outside it altogether. Then we might also listen to them. In this we can see Derrida negotiating with his own role as a public intellectual. In a position to be heard, he seeks to speak, to make an intervention, in the name of the unconditional. But Derrida does not seek to represent or replace the *sans-papiers*, but rather to open a space in which their voices might be heard. He is also making a call for further action:

We should without doubt help our friends *sans-papiers* in an individual fashion, locally, day after day, with all the material or symbolic, financial, juridical or legal aid, wherever there is need. Many are doing so, in theatres,

churches, commissariats, or tribunals; we must thank them, but they are not numerous enough.

But then he also calls for ‘civil disobedience,’ the defiance of the law in the name of a higher law: ‘In the name of a more elevated law [the citizen] will not obey such and such a legislative proposition which he judges iniquitous and culpable, preferring thus delinquency to shame, and the *prétendu* crime to injustice.’<sup>10</sup>

Finally, however, this must be a fight to change the law – beyond the public declarations and demonstrations. Even while there is a higher law (absolute hospitality, ‘democracy-to-come’, justice) which will always be transgressed by an actual law, the law itself must be re-made, transgressed. As in *Specters of Marx*, what is called for is a remaking of the law, in the name of the law:

all the most urgent questions of our time, everywhere that – in Israel, in Rwanda, in Europe, in America, in Asia, and in all the churches of St Bernard in the world – millions of ‘undocumented immigrants’ [*sans papiers*], of ‘homeless’ [*sans domiciles fixes*], call out for another international law, another border politics, another humanitarian politics, indeed a humanitarian commitment that *effectively* operates beyond the interests of Nation-States. [ADI 101 / 176]

Deconstruction as hospitality would be not only the affirmation of the (higher) law, but the contestation of the (actual) law, struggle against the (actual) law: and, as I argue in the final part of this book, simply the invention of the law as such: the happening of *any* law.

Deconstruction must be read as political practice: as both the intervention in the law in the name of the law, but also as an attempt to perform, exhibit and thereby problematize the political decision which precedes the responses of the subject, even a deconstructive subject seeking to respond to the voice of the other. In one sense, then, these texts are all radically contingent. These are Derrida’s own responses, his own coming-to-terms with the responsibility which precedes and exceeds him. Their value for us can only be that of an example; if they were prescriptions our responses would be irresponsible, would conform to a rule. However they are also exemplary in pointing up both the prediction of decision and the chance or possibility of something else which constitutes experience for Derrida: at the borders of the *polis* the state is already expropriated, already exposed to its outside, already in question, de-naturalized. Politics is already in deconstruction, already caught between the unfolding of a rule and the impossibility of a decision. In other words, we are carried towards the rethinking of the very possibility of politics itself as nothing other than this economy of violence.

*Part 3*

*Politics against Ethics*



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## *Introduction*

The structure of deconstruction's difficult engagement with politics has struck many of Derrida's readers as bearing close similarities to the critique of politics in the name of the ethical made by Emmanuel Levinas. Indeed, both the work of Levinas and the question of ethics have become key references for political readings of Derrida. This has not always been the case. In an extended review article which was first published in 1988, Geoffrey Bennington is surprised to find little reference to ethical questions in the three books on which he is commenting, although that is where 'almost by definition, our real interest lies: Derrida's persistent location of "ethico-theoretical" decisions at the root of supposedly pure theoretical concerns [...] is proof enough of that'. A little later Bennington comments that 'freedom, quaintly enough, is nonetheless what Derrida is all about'.<sup>1</sup> While Bennington raises an ambiguity about the assumption that 'we' make that ethics 'comes first', he does locate a gap in the earliest book-length philosophical readings of Derrida's work and is only able to refer to one article by Robert Bernasconi on a possible ethics of deconstruction.<sup>2</sup> More than a decade later, this is probably the area in which Bennington's article most shows its age. For alongside the publication by Derrida of increasingly explicit work on political questions, there has been a great deal of discussion of the ethical dimension of his thought, mostly published in English, and including several more important articles by Bernasconi.

The publication of Simon Critchley's *The Ethics of Deconstruction* in 1992 underlined the question of Derrida's relationship to Levinas, but also brought the work of Levinas to a much wider audience. Indeed, it seems plausible that at least some of the recent growth of interest in Levinas's philosophy in English language work in the humanities is a by-product of Derrida's persistent engagement with Levinas. Given the polemical context of the reception of 'deconstruction' this has led to the paradoxical position that Levinas's work has been taken to offer not only an ethical alternative to deconstruction, but that deconstruction has been seen to be merely derivative of Levinas's work. In the Foreword to the first paperback edition of the English translation of Levinas's major text *Otherwise than Being* in 1998, Richard Cohen makes such a claim when he asserts that 'Heidegger's celebrated disciple in France, Jacques Derrida, staked out his own career by borrowing Levinas's notion of the trace of diachrony, and ethical structure. He nonetheless purported to bend it for Heideggerean purposes [...] [OB xv]. However, the insistence by Critchley and others that the politics of deconstruction depends on an 'ethical' dimension which ultimately derives from Levinas is misleading. Not only is it more accurate to characterize Derrida's criticisms of Levinas as specifically pitting politics against ethics: but, moreover, understanding deconstruction as a political practice entails a suspicion of ethics as such.

## *Economy of Violence: Derrida and Levinas*

The popular argument that Derrida's work is indebted to that of Levinas has had two consequences. It has encouraged consideration of the political and ethical dimensions of deconstruction, since Levinas is generally taken more seriously as a thinker of ethics and responsibility. But it has also led to a more profound obliteration of the specifically political dimensions of Derrida's work, which it is the concern of this book to draw out. If the politics of deconstruction can be deduced from its ethics, deconstruction can always be criticized for its neglect of politics in favour of ethics, for a retreat from concrete praxis to the high ground of principle. Derrida's interest in religious themes, more pronounced in recent work than in earlier essays, has been couched in concrete terms: it is at least in part an engagement with the violent contemporary confrontation between religious cultures, and an investigation of the links between fundamentalism, technology and the media. But read as an acolyte of Levinas, the concern for religion in Derrida's work must be more than merely a strategic political negotiation, and betray a drift towards, in McCarthy's phrase, 'the ineffable'.

In this chapter I will focus on this problem of the relation between ethics and politics through a discussion of the first of Levinas's major philosophical works, *Totality and Infinity*, and Derrida's response to that book in his early essay 'Violence and Metaphysics'. *Totality and Infinity* is the text to which Derrida formulates his most lengthy and complete reply: moreover, a response to the question of Levinas's influence on Derrida requires some assessment of the changes in the trajectory of both writers subsequent to this first exchange. With the common confusion between Derrida's and Levinas's work in mind, it is tempting simply to differentiate their work. Unfortunately, since deconstruction has been concerned to put the whole notion of propriety into question, there can be no possibility of rigorously distinguishing commentary from critique within Derrida's readings of other texts. As in his reading of Heidegger, Derrida cannot unequivocally demarcate his own thought from that of Levinas, without putting into practice the kind of policing characteristic of the tradition whose operation he wishes *not* to repeat. With the difference between Derrida's work and that of Levinas at stake, to distribute their work in terms of a fundamental opposition would be to regress to a pre-deconstructive methodology, and to risk closing down projects which themselves aspire to a virtuous heterogeneity and openness. In particular, I have been concerned to avoid reducing Levinas's work to one voice or one argument, against which Derrida's own work could be straight-

forwardly contrasted. This respects a strategy within Derrida's reading of Levinas in *Adieu* which will become more apparent in the next chapter.

### THE ETHICS OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS

How does Levinas understand ethics? This is not an easy question – particularly since, as Robert Bernasconi has argued, Levinas's use of the term itself changes as his work develops, and perhaps even in response to Derrida's criticisms.<sup>1</sup> To read *Totality and Infinity* alone we face the reconciliation of two apparently contradictory statements. In the preface to the work Levinas appears to indicate that he will be following a path broken by Husserl: 'Husserlian phenomenology has made possible this passage from ethics [*l'éthique*] to metaphysical exteriority' [TI 29 / 15]. Yet elsewhere Levinas insists that his rethinking of metaphysics is itself 'ethical [*éthique*]' [TI 43 / 33]. To make sense of what Levinas is arguing, it is necessary to consider his argument as operating with two very different ideas of ethics. The first meaning of ethics is conventional; the second, with which he is seeking to replace the first, is a specialized understanding of the term, within the context of his broader metaphysical claims. To go further it will be necessary to sketch briefly the major themes of *Totality and Infinity*.

Levinas argues that thought, action or intentionality in general are made possible by the prior presence of that which is other.<sup>2</sup> Each takes place as transcendence, as a movement outside the self. The tradition of metaphysics, Levinas claims, has precisely aimed at what is beyond the world, yet has consistently failed to appreciate the radicality of what is outside, choosing instead to understand the unfamiliar in terms of the familiar, the unknown in terms of what can be known, the other in terms of the same [TI 33 / 21]. Yet what makes possible the awareness of something else, whether beyond the senses, beyond the natural world, or beyond the self, is the absolutely other: 'this absolute exteriority of the metaphysical term, [...] is, if not demonstrated, claimed by the word transcendent. The metaphysical movement is transcendent' [TI 35 / 24]. The totality of the self-same is always already breached by the transcendence or infinity of the absolutely other. Levinas attempts the re-foundation of metaphysics in this relation to the other considered as absolutely other, rather than as an other modelled on the familiar; only this could provide a philosophy which would be adequate to the world itself in its strangeness.

This new form of metaphysics must be opposed to Hegelian philosophy as a dialectic of negativity since the relation between the same and the other is to be thought 'cutting across' the logic of contradiction or opposition [TI 40–2 / 30–2], and beyond the Hegelian reconciliation of difference in totality [TI 150 / 161]. It must also exceed all ontology, up to and including

the work of Heidegger [TI 27–8 / 13; 46 / 36; 89 / 88–9], which ‘presupposes metaphysics’ [TI 48 / 39]. To pursue philosophy as ontology ‘is to subordinate the relation to someone, who is an existent, (the ethical relation) to a relation with the Being of existents, which, impersonal, permits the apprehension, the domination of existents (a relationship of knowing)’ [TI 45 / 38]. This argument leads Levinas to specify that the relation with the other as absolute alterity [*Autre*] is the relationship with any particular other person [*Autrui*]. More specifically, it is in the face of the other person that the absoluteness of their difference from me is encountered.

The sense in which Levinas uses the term ‘ethics’ [*éthique*] positively is as a description of this face-to-face encounter with the Other. In the passage quoted above, the relationship to an existing being is ‘the ethical relation’ [TI 45 / 36]. More broadly, this is an ethical relation with the world in general. It thus makes possible a mode of thinking about the world which would respect the dimension of exteriority rather than, as Levinas claims all previous Western philosophy has done, reducing the other to an aspect of the same. Levinas sometimes describes this new way of thinking as metaphysics, sometimes as ‘theory’ and sometimes as a form of ‘critique’ which

does not reduce the other [*Autre*] to the same but calls into question the exercise of the same. A calling into question of the same – which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same – is brought about by the other [*Autre*]. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other [*Autrui*] ethics/ethical [*éthique*]. [TI 42–3 / 33]

There is however an ambiguity in this description. Ethics is here the name for the relation to the other, rather than for a theory of that relation: Levinas’s work is not in itself an ‘ethics’. In ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ Derrida emphasizes that ‘as this determination does not offer itself as a *theory* of ethics, in question then is an Ethics of Ethics’ [WD 111 / 164]. Yet the name itself returns us to the more conventional meaning of ‘ethics’ which would belong to Western philosophy, and which Levinas is trying to avoid. The sense of ‘ethics’ for Levinas is not that of the determination of a moral code: whether deduced from a theory of virtue; informed by observation of a moral sentiment within human nature; or abstracted from the ethical life of a particular community. Levinas claims that it is the work of Husserl which has enabled him to escape from the hold of the traditional understandings of ethics. But Levinas still calls the ‘metaphysical exteriority’ to which this ‘passage’ has led ‘ethical’. While we might hold apart these two meanings for the same word more or less successfully, many commentators on Levinas have suggested that the problem can be resolved (at least in translation) by distinguishing the nominal and adverbial aspects of the French *l’éthique*.<sup>3</sup> ‘Ethics’ would then continue to name the familiar dimension of moral philosophy, while

‘the ethical’ would be reserved for the more profound sense of ‘ethics’ as metaphysics or transcendence itself. While helpful, it should be noted that such a distinction is rarely rigorously observed by the translators of Levinas, since it has no basis within his language and must already depend on an interpretation of his work.

The bulk of *Totality and Infinity* consists of a series of analyses by which Levinas proposes to describe the nature of the ethical relation of the self to the world: for example, of Desire, of sensibility, of the face, of fecundity, of dwelling, of the erotic. The ethical relation cannot be described strictly ‘in terms of experience, for infinity overflows the thought that thinks it’ [TI 25 / 10]. It is also difficult to grasp it theoretically, for what Levinas refers to as ‘thematization and conceptualization’ are ‘not peace with the other, but suppression or possession of the other’ [TI 46 / 37]. The problem which Levinas faces in his work is that what he wishes to describe as ‘infinity’ and as ‘transcendence’ is irreducible to the order of theoretical explanation, yet is already at work in both theoretical and experiential relations to the world. So ‘metaphysics’ is not ‘a philosophy of transcendence that situates elsewhere the true life to which man, escaping from here, would gain access in the privileged moments of liturgical mystical elevation, or in dying’ [TI 52 / 44]. Yet nor is it ‘a philosophy of immanence’ – by which Levinas appears to mean Hegelianism – ‘in which we would truly come into possession of being when every “other” (cause for war), encompassed by the same, would vanish at the end of history’. The relationship with the other must be described ‘within the unfolding of terrestrial existence, of economic existence’ [TI 52 / 44]. Accordingly, Levinas’s analyses often seem to be suspended between the two poles of everyday experience and of theoretical description, both of which, pursued in isolation, would ultimately converge as the ‘totalization of history’ [TI 52 / 44].

To some extent these analyses complicate the rather bold and stark terms in which Levinas has set out his central argument – as the opposition between totality and infinity, or the ontological and the ethical – and which is apparently mapped over onto both the relation between transcendence and history, and that between the subject and the state. Totality is directly associated throughout the book with the state [TI 301 / 336; 305 / 341], as is ontology:

Ontology as first philosophy is a philosophy of power. It issues in the State and in the non-violence of the totality, without securing itself against the violence from which this non-violence lives, and which appears in the tyranny of the State. [TI 46 / 37]

Meanwhile the dimension of interiority (which, like Derrida’s use of the secret discussed in Chapter 2, is not a form of containment, but the principle of an irreducible singularity, of the being-called-into-question of my

self by the relation with the other other) is consistently opposed to history: psychic life ‘interrupts historical time’ [TI 57 / 51]. Set out in these terms, Levinas’s work would lend itself to being read as a crude anti-Hegelianism. In political terms it would seem to be either apolitical – a total rejection of and disengagement from the state and an alternative focus on the question of transcendence – or simply opposed to the state form as such.

These alternatives could perhaps be clarified if it could be established whether Levinas understands the state to be the name of the political entity as such, or as the legal apparatus and institutions which enforce the law within the state. However, a brief look at the use of labour in *Totality and Infinity* suggests that this first response will not do. Levinas is writing in a philosophical context which is dominated by the Marxist and existentialist reading of Hegel popularized in France by Kojève. So when Levinas argues that every labour ‘presupposes a primordial *hold* on the things, possessions, whose latent birth is marked by the home, at the frontier of interiority’ [TI 163 / 175] it seems reasonable to suppose that his argument is intended to complicate the post-Hegelian account of being in terms of work. Rather than defining man’s existence in terms of a dialectical operation performed *upon* or *against* the world, Levinas insists that man’s labour proceeds from an original dwelling which is a dwelling *with* the other. In doing so he seeks to break a path between the materialist analysis of existence as labour, and either the idealist account of man as intentional consciousness or the transcendental account in which meaning is to be found beyond the world. Labour itself attests to the ethical relationship with the world within which it takes place. Transferring this argument to the problem of the state, one would assume that if infinity can only be thought from within the finite (labour), which must bear some trace of what transcends it (dwelling), then presumably the state must also bear some trace of the ethical. This is an ambiguity to which we will return.

The ultimate figure of the ethical relation in *Totality and Infinity* is in the epiphany of the face. It is before the face of the other person [*Autrui*] who is absolutely other that the subject is called into question. The face of the Other [*Autrui*], writes Levinas, is a ‘moral summons’ [TI 196 / 213]. Freedom does not consist in the exercise of the free will of an individual, but in the experience of the contestation of my freedom by the other: ‘the other [*Autre*], absolutely other [*autre*] – the Other [*Autrui*] – does not limit the freedom of the same; calling it to responsibility, it finds it and justifies it’ [TI 197 / 214–15]. Responsibility is an effect of the ethical relation. From the metaphysical establishment of subjectivity in relation to the infinity of transcendence – both figured and experienced in the face of an other (‘it remains terrestrial’ [TI 203 / 222]) – Levinas deduces the conditions of responsibility. The relation with the other precedes the possibility of a struggle with the other: ‘War presupposes peace, the antecedent and non-allergic presence of the Other [*Autrui*]; it does not represent the first event of the encounter’

[TI 199 / 218]. If the relation with the other is perceived as struggle it is because such a perception remains within 'the idealism of a *consciousness* of struggle' [TI 199 / 218]. The peace of the ethical relation with the face of the Other comes before violence, although it remains unclear whether this is a temporal or a logical precedence. Responsibility is a question of the infinite response to this peaceful relationship. The absolute alterity expressed in the face of the other also conveys 'the presence of the third party, the whole of humanity' [TI 213 / 234]. (For Levinas this is a community 'instituted by' language which amounts to brotherhood between men [TI 213–14 / 234].) Before the face of the whole of humanity, as the Other [*Autrui*] who faces me and the other others who face me through his eyes, the subject is faced with 'the call to infinite responsibility' [TI 245 / 274]. Levinas calls for an assumption of responsibility, a turn from possession to generosity [TI 50 / 42]. 'To welcome the other', he writes, 'is to put in question my freedom' [TI 85 / 84].

It is this asymmetrical relationship between the subject and the infinite transcendence of the other which Levinas calls ethical. Only when this relation is taken into account is there any possibility of something like 'ethics' in the sense that we usually come across it. Yet this 'ethical' relation is founded neither in a neutral ground (a relationship between beings which would be mediated by the relationship of beings with Being) nor in a principle of finite responsibility (based on the equivalence of the same and the other) but on the asymmetry of the relation itself. This asymmetry summons the subject as responsibility. As Levinas puts it, 'to be judged does not consist in hearing a verdict set forth impersonally and implacably out of universal principles' [TI 244 / 273] for this would presume a relation with others set out in terms of reciprocity or universality. Instead, 'the exaltation of the singularity in judgement is produced precisely in the infinite responsibility of the will to which the judgement gives rise' [TI 244 / 273]. Levinas insists:

The summons exalts the singularity precisely because it is addressed to an infinite responsibility. *The infinity of responsibility denotes not its actual immensity, but a responsibility increasing in measure that it is assumed;* duties become greater in the measure that they are accomplished. The better I accomplish my duty the fewer rights I have; the more I am just, the more I am guilty. [TI 244 / 273–4]

As soon as I admit that I am responsible to the other, in whatever measure, it will never be enough: for there to be any responsibility, there must always be more responsibility. From the point of assumption of any responsibility onwards, the more I presume myself to be responsible, the less responsible I then become. This is the 'ethical' message of *Totality and Infinity*, which renders the common understanding of 'ethics', in the sense of an obligation I could fulfil or a life I could possibly lead, unable to account for the true dimensions of responsibility.



There is however a slightly more complex relationship between the ethical relation and justice. We might have already presumed this to be the case, on the basis of the argument that the transcendence of the infinite must not only be thought from within the finite, but must also be found to be traced within the finite. Levinas introduces a structure to mediate the passage between the ethical relation of the face to face encounter with one other person, which testifies to the relation with absolute alterity itself, and ‘terrestrial’ or ‘economic’ existence, in which there will always be more than one other person. This is the concept of ‘the third’ (*tiers*). ‘Everything’, Levinas argues, ‘that takes place here “between us” concerns everyone’ [TI 212 / 234]. The rest of the world is present for me in the eyes of the Other, and ‘the presence of the face, the infinity of the other [*Autre*], is a destituteness [*dénuement*], a presence of the third party (that is of the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding’ [TI 213 / 234]. I am commanded to command, because the third party is joined to me ‘for service’ [TI 213 / 235]. In commanding I fail to be responsible, just as no one exists in the pure state of the ethical relation; but I am commanded to command because there must be justice within the world, which Levinas associates with language [TI 213 / 234] or discourse: ‘Metaphysics is enacted where the social relation is enacted – in our relations with men’ [TI 78 / 77]. Far more so than in the case of the state, the mechanisms of justice, even though they must be based on a formal equality between men [TI 212–14 / 234–6] rather than on the dissymmetry of the relation to the absolute other, attest to the transcendent.

### ETHICS, METAPHYSICS AND VIOLENCE

Even from this brief summary it will be obvious that parallels can be drawn between Derrida’s arguments concerning responsibility, his concern to think democracy beyond equality, and some Levinasian themes. However, rather than attempt a tabulation of the similarities between Levinas and Derrida I turn instead to Derrida’s reply to *Totality and Infinity*, the essay ‘Violence and Metaphysics’. This will establish both the basic parameters of Derrida’s response to Levinas and the trajectory of the encounter between the two thinkers within which both Levinas’s second major text, *Otherwise than Being*, and Derrida’s own later texts, must be situated. Not only was ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ Derrida’s first essay on Levinas, it was also the first major consideration of Levinas’s thought to be published in France – indeed Jacques Rolland describes Derrida as ‘Levinas’s first reader in the sense in which Heidegger was Husserl’s first reader<sup>24</sup> – and ran in two consecutive issues of *La Revue de la Métaphysique et de la Morale*, before being collected in revised form in *Writing and Difference*.

The essay is broadly divided into two halves. In the first, Derrida gives a sympathetic account of Levinas’s work up to and including the publication

of *Totality and Infinity* while in the second, he formulates three criticisms of his work. However, the distinction between the two halves is not as clear as it might be. Derrida is asking similar questions of Levinas throughout, and when he does come to propose his objections, he comments ambiguously that ‘the route followed by Levinas’s thought is such that all our questions already belong to his own interior dialogue, are displaced into his discourse and only listen to it, from many vantage points and in many ways’ [WD 109 / 161]. What Derrida means by this will be crucial for an attempt to clarify his relationship with Levinas. If Derrida is being sincere, his statement could mean that he considers his own project to be a continuation of that of Levinas, even to the point where he formulates what are apparently criticisms of Levinas. However, as I will argue, not only do these criticisms seem substantial, but they never appear to be retracted in Derrida’s subsequent essays on Levinas. In which case Derrida might be read as expanding on a point which Levinas has only partly grasped, to the point where Levinas’s own work comes to seem inadequate to the possibilities it opens up – perhaps in the same way that Levinas considers the work of Husserl to have made the passage from ontology to ethical metaphysics possible. Alternatively, it is also important to consider the possibility that this is merely a rhetorical flourish. For it can be shown, I think, that what Derrida undertakes in this essay is entirely consistent with the other work he undertakes at the time, which would imply that there is no special relationship with Levinas – or that if there is, it must be internal to the logic of Derrida’s work, and not acknowledged explicitly within the argument of his essay. This is the assumption from which I will proceed.

All of the problems which Derrida locates in *Totality and Infinity* follow a similar pattern, which is a familiar one in Derrida’s early work and, in particular, throughout *Writing and Difference*. This similarity can be highlighted by a comparison of the original and the revised versions of the essay, which show that Derrida recasts his concerns to fit with issues raised in other essays in the book. As Geoffrey Bennington has argued, Derrida’s early work often takes the form of revealing transcendental or metaphysical presuppositions in discourses which claim to have somehow got beyond metaphysics.<sup>5</sup> So in *Writing and Difference*, texts by Freud, Foucault, Bataille and Lévi-Strauss, among others, are all debunked, and shown to presume metaphysical foundations. To take the essay on Foucault as an example, Derrida argues that the attempt to write a history of madness, understood in terms of an unreason defined by exclusion from reason itself, runs the risk of ‘confirming metaphysics in its fundamental operation’ by ‘construing the division [of reason and madness, which Foucault seeks to locate within history. AT] as an event or a structure subsequent to the unity of an original presence’ [WD 40 / 65], rather than as a ‘*dissension* [...] a self-dividing action, a cleavage and torment interior to meaning *in general*’ [WD 38 / 62]. Derrida proposes another project, which rather than thinking through either

the historicity of the concept of madness or the light that this might shed on the historicity of history (as the project of reason), would seek to think the grounds of what both makes possible and depends on the distinction between madness and reason, the very 'historicity of philosophy' in general: 'The historicity proper to philosophy is located and constituted in the transition, the dialogue between hyperbole [i.e. madness, which exceeds reason. AT] and the finite structure [i.e. a historically situated concept of reason. AT], between that which exceeds the totality and the closed totality, in the difference between history and historicity' [WD 60 / 94]. The first stage of the argument is derived from Husserl's criticism of naturalism as a self-refuting scepticism, while the second constitutes Derrida's more distinctive contribution, as I discussed in the first section of my second chapter. What is peculiar to *Writing and Difference* is the attempt to think this account of historicity in terms of 'economy', perhaps as a result of the inclusion of Derrida's essay on Bataille, 'From Restricted to General Economy'. So in the essay on Foucault Derrida comments that 'the relationship between reason, madness, and death is an economy' [WD 62 / 96] and in the revisions of 'Violence and Metaphysics' a number of references to economy are also added, several of which will be crucial for my reading.<sup>6</sup>

It is within this general structure that Derrida performs what might be considered to be a rather unfair preliminary situation of Levinas's work. For he recasts the project of *Totality and Infinity* in terms of an opposition between the Greek and the Judaic traditions. This is an argument which is nowhere evoked in *Totality and Infinity*, and Levinas's references to transcendence as God [TI 246–7 / 276–7; 293 / 326], and the ethical relation with the other as religion [TI 40 / 30; 80 / 79] draw precisely on the God of Descartes and the Good beyond being of Plato. Derrida insists however that Levinas's attempt to think beyond philosophy as ontology can be understood as the Greek discourse of philosophy being transcended by a Judaic other which it cannot account for. If Levinas's project can successfully be assimilated to that of Foucault or Lévi-Strauss as an attempt to get beyond metaphysics, then the apparent unfairness of this situation will be justified, and Derrida will have exposed a structure which is presupposed but not stated within *Totality and Infinity*. However, if the position is rather more complex, and we cannot simply compare the attempt to escape philosophy from the perspective of the human sciences with the attempt to refound philosophy within philosophy, then this gives us a clear entry point to Derrida's arguments against Levinas, which will depend on distorting Levinas's work in this way. Let us follow the second hypothesis for the moment and use it to help set out the basic questions which Derrida puts to Levinas, underlying all of which can be seen this presumed opposition between the Greek and Jewish traditions. These questions concern: 1. the problem of language in Levinas's work; 2. the relationship between totality and infinity itself; 3). Levinas's relation to Heideggerean ontology; 4. Levinas's relation to Husserl's phenomenology.

The question of language is the most pervasive in the essay and relates directly to the possibility of establishing a meaningful distinction between Greek and Jewish thought. As Derrida had argued in his Introduction to Husserl's *The Origin of Geometry*, the discourse of philosophy must have a finite origin; an origin which can neither be fully recovered nor fully disowned. Once philosophy has been born in Greece, it cannot think the non-Greek, or the non-philosophical, except by reference to itself. Or, to put this argument in Levinas's terms, philosophy can only think the other in terms of the same, thus reducing the other to the same. But the attempt to call philosophy itself into question runs into the difficulty of finding a language in which to do so. 'Will the other of the Greek', Derrida asks, 'be the non-Greek? Above all, can it be *named* the non-Greek?' [WD 82 / 122]. Further on in the essay he adds, 'will a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek [...] could not do, except by disguising himself as a Greek, by *speaking* Greek, by feigning to speak Greek [...]?' [WD 89 / 133]. Derrida does not answer this question directly, but in his conclusions he argues that Levinas's project is that of an empiricism, which 'always has been determined by philosophy, from Plato to Husserl, as *nonphilosophy*: as the philosophical pretention to nonphilosophy, the inability to justify oneself, to come to one's own aid as speech' [WD 152 / 226]. In other words, Derrida's claim is that Levinas cannot escape philosophy, and creates a philosophically incoherent discourse in trying to do so: but this would be something like an honourable failure, since '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' [WD 152 / 226].

At its most extreme this complaint against Levinas takes the form of suggesting a complicity or parallel between his work and that of Hegel: 'The other, for me [Derrida is glossing Levinas. AT], is an ego which I know to be in relation to me as to an other. Where have these movements been better described than in *The Phenomenology of the Mind*?' [WD 126 / 185]. In a long passage [WD 98–100 / 146–8; cf. VM 345] and a footnote [WD 320 n.91 / 227 n.1; cf. VM 472] added to the essay before its republication in *Writing and Difference* Derrida spells out what is almost a shocking challenge to a thinker whose work takes as its horizon the violence of philosophy as the thinking of totality: 'Levinas is very close to Hegel, much closer than he admits, and at the very moment when he is apparently opposed to Hegel in the most radical fashion'<sup>7</sup> [WD 99 / 147]. When he makes this comment Derrida has a specific similarity in mind, between Levinas's and Hegel's analyses of the face, yet he goes on to suggest that this is more than an incidental correlation: 'a situation he [Levinas] must share with all anti-Hegelian thinkers' [WD 99 / 147]. Later on in the essay Derrida compares Levinas to Kierkegaard and Feuerbach as fellow anti-Hegelian (and therefore, in retaining the logic of dialectical opposition, perhaps still too Hegelian) thinkers when he questions the return in *Totality and Infinity*

of terms proscribed in Levinas's earlier texts [WD 109 / 162]: the same and the other, interiority and exteriority. Derrida's intention here is consistent with his earlier concerns about speaking Greek, that of thinking through 'the necessity of lodging oneself within traditional conceptuality in order to destroy it' [WD 111 / 164–5].

The difficulty of escaping Hegel, who, as so often in Derrida's texts, stands for philosophy as such in its own claim to completion, leads us to the condensation of this general concern with the problem of escaping the language of metaphysics around the second of the four questions which I listed above, that of the relationship between totality and infinity itself. In a footnote appended to the conclusions of his essay before its revised publication Derrida refers to the *Science of Logic*: 'Pure difference is not absolutely different (from nondifference). Hegel's critique of the concept of pure difference is for us here, doubtless the most uncircumventable theme. Hegel thought absolute difference, and showed that it can be pure only by being impure' [WD 320 n.91 / 227 n.1]. The question which Derrida poses in the section of the essay 'Of the Original Polemic' may be read as a re-translation of precisely this problem. If Levinas makes use of the concept of exteriority in *Totality and Infinity*, having warned against this in *Time and the Other*, Derrida suggests, it is because while what he seeks to describe is non-spatial, it can only be understood on the basis of a spatial analogy. To think an exteriority beyond the philosophical space in which exteriority can only be thought as non-interiority, and thus recovered for the same, Levinas cannot not proceed within the terms of the tradition. In other words, and following the argument that there is no extra-philosophical language, 'it is necessary to state infinity's *excess* over totality *in* the language of totality; [...] it is necessary to state the other in the language of the Same; [...] it is necessary to think *true* exteriority as non-*exteriority*' [WD 112 / 165].

These comments lead us to what it is tempting to read as a description of Derrida's own project at this early stage of his career (the first version of this essay was published in 1964, his 'Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*' in 1962):

Philosophical language belongs to a system of language(s). Thereby its nonspeculative ancestry always brings a certain equivocality into speculation. Since this equivocality is original and irreducible, perhaps philosophy must adopt it, think it and be thought in it, must accommodate duplicity and difference within speculation, within the very purity of philosophical meaning. No one, it seems to us, has attempted this more profoundly than Hegel. [WD 113 / 167]

The reference to Hegel later in the essay confirms that just as Derrida does not think 'true' exteriority can be thought except as 'non'-exteriority, so he does not think that pure difference can be thought by any attempt at

a heterology.<sup>8</sup> Such a thought of pure dispersal would be the object of the empiricism he attributes to Levinas, and only possible as ‘a dream’ [WD 151 / 225]. Moreover, for the same reasons, we cannot think philosophically the absolute alterity which Levinas calls the Other, and with which the self can enter into an ethical relation. As pure difference can only be impure in Hegel, so Derrida claims, absolute alterity can only be finite or non-absolute alterity. The positive infinity invoked by Levinas remains a prisoner of the traditional opposition: ‘I cannot designate the (infinite) irreducible alterity of the Other [*autrui*] except through the negation of (finite) spatial exteriority’ [WD 114 / 168]. Alterity cannot be made present – or cannot be *named*, and the distinction is perhaps not as clear as it might seem – except as the ‘unthinkable-impossible-unutterable beyond (tradition’s) Being and Logos’ [WD 114 / 168]. Incapable of being brought to presence, alterity (if there is any) would appear as its own disappearance *within* totality.

This crucial distinction between what we might call finite alterity (inscribed within totality) and infinite alterity (as the excess over totality) is brought out by Derrida as a confrontation with Levinas over the name of God. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas invokes religion as a name for the transcendence of the relation to the other. Derrida argues in return that God can only be thought within philosophy as a positive infinity, and cannot then be opposed to history or totality as Levinas would wish it to be. If God is taken to be the name of alterity (exteriority, transcendence, infinity) would not God then be:

*nothing* (determined) [...] because he is *everything*? and therefore is at once All and Nothing, Life and Death. Which means that God is or appears, *is named*, within the difference between All or Nothing, Life and Death. Within difference, and at bottom as Difference itself. This difference is what is called *History*. God is *inscribed* in it. [WD 115–16 / 170]

Just as Jewish thought cannot be simply opposed to Greek thought, so God cannot be opposed to philosophy. However, there is a further displacement to be undergone. If Derrida insists that infinite alterity as the excess over totality can only be thought as finite alterity considered to be within totality, he does not understand totality in quite the same way as Levinas does. Absolute difference cannot be thought except within an infinite series of finite attempts to think difference, and would not escape its own inscription as a possibility within finitude, within language, and within the world; or, to borrow Derrida’s words:

*Within history* which the philosopher cannot escape, because it is not history in the sense given to it by Levinas (totality), but is the history of the departures from totality, history as the very movement of transcendence, of the excess over the totality without which no totality would appear as such. [WD 117 / 173]

There is an originary complication and co-implication of totality and infinity which cannot be reduced to any form of dialectical opposition, however sophisticated.

The third and fourth of the problems into which Derrida shapes his general concerns about language are established in parallel, in two sections entitled 'Of Transcendental Violence' and 'Of Ontological Violence'. The first concerns Levinas's reading of Husserl, and the second his relation to Heidegger. In both cases, Derrida is concerned to demonstrate the argument we have just discussed from its reverse side. Having argued for totality as itself the history of its own departures from totality, Derrida now goes on to bring to light these departures within the totality, and precisely within the phenomenology and fundamental ontology with which Levinas has sought to break. In the terms of the distinction between Jewish and Greek thought which I have been following, having shown that Levinas's 'Judaic' writing was more Greek than it claimed, Derrida goes on to argue that the 'Greek' writing of Husserl and Heidegger is already more 'Jewish' than Levinas would give them credit for. The material on Husserl largely repeats work published elsewhere: that the notion of horizon signalled by the place of the 'Idea in the Kantian sense' in phenomenology, of horizon as both an opening and a limit, makes phenomenology itself already the site of an opening to alterity [WD 120 / 177]; and that the notion of the living present, as the movement of temporalization, is 'the absolute form of the opening of time to the other in itself' [WD 133 / 195].<sup>9</sup> The section on Heidegger corrects Levinas's rather brutal reading of the ontic-ontological difference. Derrida argues that since the difference between Being and beings *is not*, Being cannot appear except as already dispersed, disseminated among beings, in difference. Heidegger cannot simply be said to have subsumed beings under being, or more precisely in Levinas's terms to have subsumed the relation with the other (ethics) to the Being of the other (ontology) [WD 135 / 198]. Without the 'dissimulation of Being by the existent there would be nothing, and there would be no history' [WD 144 / 213]. Derrida argues that the ontic-ontological difference which the thought of Being seeks to think is presumed by Levinas, even as he disowns it. The "'inversion of the terms" *ontology* and *metaphysics* that Levinas proposes' leaves the thought of Being 'forever out of reach'. Turning Levinas's argument on its head, Derrida claims that Levinas's text is the more traditional one: 'the question of Being cannot budge the metaphysical edifice of *Totality and Infinity* (for example)' [WD 143 / 211]. Ontology cannot be exchanged for ethics, the thought of Being for the thought of the relation to the other, because Being has nothing opposed to it: neither ethics, nor infinity, nor God. God can be an example of an existent – whether the most elevated or the most typical – because the name of God is written within the field opened by the question of Being.<sup>10</sup>

I suggested above that Derrida might have been somewhat impertinent in framing Levinas's text in terms of the distinction between Judaism and

Greek. Yet in reading ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ it is clear that the distinction is appropriate to describing the structure of *Totality and Infinity* as Derrida understands it. For Derrida, at least, the ethical relation to absolute alterity can only be thought of in terms of non-absolute alterity. The absolute other can only be thought of by a return to the same. Levinas’s attempt to refound metaphysics as ethics must fail, since ‘Jewish’ alterity cannot escape ‘Greek’ alterity. It is however unclear as to whether Levinas is not himself aware of this in writing *Totality and Infinity*. As I suggested briefly above, there is a way of looking at his analyses which already presupposes a more complex relationship between philosophy and the ethical relation, between transcendence and totality, than that of simple opposition. This in no way refutes or makes Derrida’s essay irrelevant. But it would mean that we would have to interpret his claim to be asking questions from within Levinas’s own trajectory quite carefully. For the question would then no longer be whether the problems to which Derrida draws attention are ones of which Levinas is aware and with which he is seeking to come to terms, or whether they are structural problems of which he is unaware. Nor would it be a case of deciding which of the two thinkers could most effectively claim to have solved the problems. Instead the question would be whether these are problems which can be solved or not: whether they are problems which Derrida claims to have dealt with, or whether his complex repetition and analysis of Levinas has only proposed a different way of dealing with problems which must necessarily occur within such attempts to exceed philosophy but which cannot be reconciled within them, and which it will be the virtue of Levinas (and Derrida in his turn) to have highlighted for us. The difference is perhaps that between a critical reading, which claims to have revealed previously unseen difficulties in a text, and a deconstructive reading which unsettles the possibility of saying in what sense the problems have been uncovered.<sup>11</sup> In any case, since the focus of my argument here is on how Derrida’s work differs from that of Levinas, I will develop his own understanding of those differences, rather than assessing whether his reading of Levinas is ‘correct’ or not: moreover to answer the latter question would require being able to attribute a stable meaning to *Totality and Infinity*.

## TWO CONCEPTS OF ECONOMY

Having considered Derrida’s four key criticisms of Levinas in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’, I now turn to their implications for the question I am pursuing in this chapter of ethics and politics. I have argued that the focus of Levinas’s argument in *Totality and Infinity* is on what he calls the ethical relation in terms of transcendence and infinity encountered in the face of the Other [*Autrui*]. Derrida’s questioning of Levinas’s concept of transcendence



can hardly leave the ethical relation unaffected. For a start, the ethical relation can no longer be simply opposed to totality, nor to the state, as Levinas appears to suggest it can be – although, as I have also tried to suggest above, this issue is complex. In which case, would Derrida's argument not imply the possibility of a re-evaluation of the state in parallel with his re-evaluation of totality? Does Derrida reject Levinas's ethical imperative out of hand on the basis of his criticisms of the ethical relation as transcendence? I will approach these complex questions through a consideration of the conclusions that Derrida draws for his own work, rather than those which concern that of Levinas, in 'Violence and Metaphysics'. By focusing on the way in which Derrida's use of the term 'economy' must be distinguished from the meaning which Levinas gives to it, and in keeping with Derrida's general aims in *Writing and Difference*, I will open the possibility of a broader comparison of their positions.

There is a key structural device in 'Violence and Metaphysics' which has been curiously effaced in the English translation. In both the final two sections of the essay, in which Derrida compares Levinas with Husserl and Heidegger, the argument takes a parallel turn, as is already perhaps suggested by the similarities between their titles: 'Of Transcendental Violence' and 'Of Ontological Violence'. This turn is signalled in each case by a similar sentence, each of which begins a paragraph and is further emphasized in the revised version of the text by being italicized. (The English translation, for no apparent reason, removes the paragraph break preceding the first of these sentences.) At both points in the text Derrida has been concerned to show that the thought of Husserl and Heidegger respectively, is not as violent as Levinas has claimed (as a form of respect, and as *Gelassenheit*, or letting-be, respectively), which makes Levinas's reading in its turn appear violent, forced and intrusive. However Derrida then specifies, of phenomenology and ontology:

*We do not say absolutely peaceful.* [WD 128 / 188; cf. VM 444]

*We do not say pure nonviolence.* [WD 146 / 218; cf. VM 466]

By this manoeuvre Derrida avoids returning to the argument which he is opposing in Levinas. For as I pointed out in my discussion of *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas specifies that the relation with the face of the other is one of a fundamental peacefulness. The transcendence of absolute alterity is peace. Just as Derrida does not believe absolute alterity can be thought, nor that difference can be considered absolute, so he will oppose the possibility of a pure peace. Philosophy as ontology cannot be opposed to metaphysics as ethics in the manner Levinas wishes, or even as violence to peace. Derrida's demonstration that Levinas's readings of Husserl and Heidegger are somewhat impatient appears to confirm that such an opposition can itself only be made violently.

Consequently, the subject of philosophy is situated in an economy of violence, and within 'the infinite passage through violence [which] is what we call history' [WD 130 / 191], providing that these terms are understood to be extended beyond the use Levinas makes of them in *Totality and Infinity*. The clearest statement of this situation and the possibility of response to it is worth quoting at length:

There is war only after the opening of discourse, and war dies out only at the end of discourse. Peace, like silence, is the strange vocation of a language called outside itself by itself. But since *finite* silence is also the medium of violence, language can only infinitely tend towards justice by acknowledging and practicing the violence within it. Violence against violence. *Economy* of violence. An economy irreducible to what Levinas envisions in the word. If light is the element of violence, one must combat light with a certain other light, in order to avoid the worst violence, the violence of the night which precedes or represses discourse. This *vigilance* is a violence chosen as the least violence by a philosophy which takes history, that is finitude, seriously; a philosophy aware of itself as historical in each of its aspects (in a sense which tolerates neither finite totality, nor positive infinity), and aware of itself, as Levinas says in another sense, as *economy*. But again, an economy which in being history, can be *at home* neither in the finite totality which Levinas calls the Same nor in the positive presence of the Infinite. [WD 117 / 172–3]

Derrida makes explicit at two points in this passage that his understanding of 'economy' is not one that he shares with Levinas [ll. 6–7; ll. 14–16]. By asking about the difference between their respective understandings of 'economy' we may be better able to understand what Derrida means by violence here, and its relation to the question of ethics and politics. For Levinas, 'economic existence' is thought alongside 'terrestrial existence' as the site of a 'relationship with the other that [...] is not a totalization of history but the idea of infinity' [TI 52 / 44]. Metaphysics would be given a place within economic existence, but would also be the transcendence of that existence. Similarly, when Levinas comes to discuss labour, which he claims depends on the metaphysical relation, labour 'remains economic; it comes from the home and returns to it, a movement of *Odyssey* where the adventure pursued in the world is but the accident of a return' [TI 176–7 / 192]. Economy for Levinas names the return to the same rather than exposure to the other, and he continues the reference to the *Odyssey* in his essay 'La trace de l'autre': 'To the myth of Ulysses returning to Ithaca, we would prefer to oppose the story of Abraham leaving his country forever'.<sup>12</sup> Derrida takes up the reference to the *Odyssey* in a footnote to his conclusion to 'Violence and Metaphysics'. 'Levinas', he writes, 'does not care for Ulysses, nor for the ruses of this excessively Hegelian hero, this man of *nostos* and the closed

circle, whose adventure is always summarized in its totality' [VM 320 n.92 / 228 n.1]. However, for Derrida, who quotes Joyce's 'Jewgreek is greekjew' as the final line of his essay, Joyce and Hegel are on his side, since they also acknowledge that there can be no pure opposition between the Greek and the Jew, between the return and the non-return, between the economic and the non-economic.

So in the long passage I have just quoted, 'economy' comes to stand for something like the principle of contamination which will prevent totality being opposed to infinity, and an ethical relation to absolute alterity being opposed to the temporal and terrestrial order of the state and of politics. This 'economy of violence' is being contrasted with Levinas's attempt to think metaphysics as pure peace. Derrida exaggerates the point when he comments later in the same paragraph that 'metaphysics is *economy*' [WD 117 / 173; cf. the original version: 'L'économie est métaphysique', VM 433]. This is either scandalous in ethical terms or unacceptable in philosophical terms from the point of view advanced in *Totality and Infinity* in which metaphysics is neither economy nor violence, but opposed to both. Derrida's aim is to reinscribe Levinas's philosophical strategies, which claim to describe the origin and ground of metaphysics, within the system which they seek to describe, as one strategy among others, as one form of violence in an economy of violence. In doing so Derrida need not necessarily be read as passing judgement on Levinas; either for the violence of his work (which is inevitable anyway on Derrida's account) or for naivety, since elsewhere, as we saw, Derrida acknowledges both the ruse necessary for Levinas to 'speak Greek' and that Levinas contradicts his own previous rejections of the language of ontology, suggesting that his own work operates on a strategic basis. Derrida's economy, then, is neither finite totality or infinite alterity, but the circulation between the two, which he names history. As he writes in his conclusion: 'we live in the difference between the Jew and the Greek, which is perhaps the unity of what is called history' [WD 153 / 227].

In restoring philosophy to its inscription in history Derrida insists that both philosophy and history must be thought differently and the use of terms such as economy, inscription and writing are all attempts to describe this situation. However, ethics and politics would also require re-working. In *Totality and Infinity*, as we have seen, Levinas makes use of the opposition between history (totality) and metaphysics (transcendence) in terms of the relation between politics and ethics. Within history, is the state, whose accomplices include ontology, the economic relation which returns the other to the same, and the violence of politics. Outside history, but 'reflected within' it [TI 23 / 7], is the ethical relation to the Other, which is peace itself, while justice is somewhere between. The existence of war does not refute these arguments because it 'presupposes peace' [TI 199 / 218]. Peace, and the ethical relation, come first. Politics, Levinas argues in his Preface, is 'the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means' and 'the very

exercise of reason' [TI 21 / 5]. So while Levinas cannot be straightforwardly accused of withdrawing from 'concrete' politics – as I have argued his work locates the evidence of transcendence in the finite totality – there is a sense in which this dynamic remains within his work. The priority granted to the ethical relation lends itself very easily to a prioritizing of 'ethics' over politics. For Derrida, this opposition cannot be sustained. Indeed, his argument can be read as a specific contestation of this point. By refusing to deduce politics (totality, violence) on the basis of ethics (the relation to the Other, transcendence) but by showing both gestures to be possibilities inscribed within the (non-finite) totality, Derrida insists instead on the irreducibility of violence. Meanwhile, for Levinas there is already a name for this violent contestation of the ethical relation to absolute alterity: politics.

Another way to phrase the question at issue would be to ask whether ethics or politics comes first? For Levinas, ethics can clearly be said to come first. Even if only reflected in, rather than present within, the finite totality, the infinity of the ethical comes first, whether that priority is understood as a logical dependence or an ethical value. For Derrida the situation is rather more complex. By seeking to think both politics and ethics – or totality and infinity – as inscribed within the same economy, Derrida refuses to prioritize one over the other. There is no 'first' place for Derrida in quite the same way as there is for Levinas. We might focus this by saying that any original will always come second for Derrida; or that what he is seeking to describe is a relation in which there are only secondary terms, rather than a first term and a second term or terms. Furthermore, when Derrida elaborates his own account of the trace, there is also a key difference from the trace as Levinas understands it. The trace within the totality for Levinas is of something which has come first, even if it is 'a past whose meaning could not be thought in the form of a (past) present' [WD 132 / 194]. Derrida takes up this notion of the trace, for example in 'Différance', but gives it no particular priority in relation to the other examples in that essay. The Levinasian formula of the trace as 'a past that has never been present' [MAR 21 / 22] is juxtaposed to the concepts of trace in the work of Freud [MAR 18–21 / 19–22] and Heidegger [MAR 23 / 24]. This is again unacceptable to Levinas, for whom the transcendence of the absolute Other has a metaphysical priority, indeed is metaphysics. For Derrida the trace is not a second term which alludes to a non-present first term. Instead, it needs to be thought of as a second term which alludes only to its own secondariness, and its relative equivalence with, or its *différance* from, an infinite number of other second terms. There is no 'first' term. Levinas, however, can be read two ways. Either he is simply proposing a transcendental term, which must be problematic from Derrida's point of view; or he is aware that this manoeuvre is unjustifiable, but chooses to reinscribe certain terms for strategic reasons. Whichever of these is the case – and it may not be possible to decide between the two interpretations – Derrida can be seen to be undertaking a distinctly different operation.

## *Against Community*

In *Adieu* Derrida returns to the work of Levinas to pose the question of the relationship between ‘an *ethics* of hospitality (an ethics *as* hospitality) and a *law* or a *politics* of hospitality’. Derrida’s challenge to Levinas is the same problem with which this book is concerned – ‘whether the ethics of hospitality that we will try to analyze in Levinas’s thought would be able to found a law and a politics, beyond the familial dwelling, within a society, nation, State, or Nation-State’ [ADI 19–20 / 45]. Can Levinas supply a way out of the economy of violence with which deconstruction claims to negotiate, a step beyond the economic return of politics to the same, beyond the exclusion of friendship by brotherhood?

The identification of Derrida with Levinas obscures the outline of this central question. For Simon Critchley, it generates ‘the impasse of the political in Derrida’s work’ which it purports to explain. Critchley asks:

in the rigorous, quasi-transcendental delineation of undecidability as the dimension of political responsibility, is there not an implicit refusal of the ontic, the factual, the empirical – that is to say of the space of *doxa*, where politics takes place in a field of antagonism, decision, dissension, and struggle? In this sense might one not speak of a refusal of politics in Derrida’s work? [ED 200]

Critchley’s later reading of Derrida is more subtle and nuanced yet maintains the same criticism, this time articulated in terms of a reconciliation with the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe:

The logics of deconstruction and hegemony need to be soldered at this point, I think, in a reciprocal relation of supplementarity. For if what deconstruction lacks in its thinking of the political is a thematization of democratization as hegemony, then what the theory of hegemony lacks is the kind of messianic, ethical injunction to infinite responsibility that prevents it collapsing into a voluntaristic decisionism. If ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind.<sup>1</sup>

By over-simplifying the relationship between Levinas and Derrida, Critchley is able to identify deconstruction with ‘ethics’ understood in opposition to ‘politics’ and then to condemn deconstruction for failing to supply the ‘politics’ which by his own definition of deconstruction it cannot. Yet neither

the relationship between Levinas and Derrida, nor the relationship between ethics and politics – in general, or in the work of either – can be so boldly stated.

### IS THERE AN ETHICS OF DECONSTRUCTION?

The key issue for assessing the relationship between Levinas and Derrida is whether the changes in Levinas's work between the publication of *Totality and Infinity* and of *Otherwise than Being*, arguably made with Derrida's criticisms of the early work in mind, successfully overcome the problems Derrida finds in it. If this is indeed the case, both the later Levinas and Derrida may be said to be following the same project, and turning to *Otherwise than Being* and Derrida's later book on Levinas, *Adieu*, in the following section will only be able to reveal political or strategic differences subsequent to a common (ethical) theoretical project. If this is not the case, then we should expect *Adieu* to bear out the same criticisms of Levinas that Derrida makes in 'Violence and Metaphysics'.

In his essay on Derrida, 'Wholly Otherwise', Levinas himself suggests one framework for approaching this question: of turning Derrida's arguments against him. Levinas comments that he is tempted to question Derrida's own recourse to logocentric language in resisting logocentrism, noting ambiguously that this 'is a course Derrida himself, perhaps, has not always disdained to follow in his polemics'.<sup>2</sup> It is hard not to interpret this as a comment on Derrida's treatment of Levinas's own work. It would appear from this that Levinas believes that he and Derrida share a common aim, but employ different strategies. We would then have to interpret the development of the concepts of 'the saying' and 'the said' between the publication of *Totality and Infinity* and of *Otherwise than Being* on this basis: as a refinement of Levinas's own strategy in response to Derrida, around the question of language. What Levinas refers to as the 'chiasmus' between his thought and Derrida's would involve a difference in strategy rather than in their fundamental aims. In which case, the only one of Derrida's complaints to which *Otherwise than Being* responds would be the problem of the language of ontology.

That this is certainly the major shift in his work is confirmed by Levinas's own comments on his career in an essay called 'Signatures' published in *Difficult Freedom*. There he notes that 'the ontological language which *Totality and Infinity* still uses in order to exclude the purely psychological significance of the proposed analysis is henceforth avoided'. Recognizing that *Totality and Infinity* was still structured around the experience of a subject, Levinas adds: 'the analyses themselves [in *Otherwise than Being*] refer not to the *experience* in which a subject always thematizes what he equals, but to the *transcendence* in which he answers for that which his

intentions have not encompassed'.<sup>3</sup> If Levinas thinks he has responded to Derrida by dealing with the question of language, we should be able to find no other significant change in the structure of his thought between *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*.

It is the new emphasis placed on the terms 'the saying' and 'the said' which constitutes the biggest change between the two books. (They first appear in the closing pages of *Totality and Infinity* [TI 260 / 291].) They orient the attempt to resolve the difficulty which Levinas perceives within the earlier book – that the language of metaphysics cannot simply be used against itself. Transcendence is no longer discussed in terms of 'exteriority' nor in terms of any experience given to a subject. Instead the subject is more emphatically located as an effect of transcendence, and transcendence itself is located beyond the reach of ontology. Rather than something which can be approached in language, but not in philosophical terms, the ethical relation to the infinite becomes something which escapes language as such. Anything which could be thematized within language would be inadequate to describe the transcendence which precedes the subject. To formalize this situation, Levinas uses 'the said' to refer to the ontological order of the world, including language, and 'the saying' to refer to the pre-ontological dimension. The problem of the '*il y a*' which Levinas formulates in his work prior to *Totality and Infinity*, that being cannot be opposed to non-being, because non-being would still be a modification of being, non-presence would be the presence of an absence, is reformulated in linguistic terms.<sup>4</sup>

The 'saying' of the utterance is never exhausted in the 'said': 'Is not the inescapable fate in which being immediately includes the statement of being's *other* not due to the hold the *said* has over the *saying*?' [OB 5 / 16]. This distinction can be seen to lie behind another major shift in vocabulary between the two books. Where previously Levinas had spoken of the face, now he tends to refer to the skin. The exposure of the self to the other doesn't begin in the situation of face to face communication, but in the very exposure of the skin to the world. This exposure is itself signification, the saying which testifies to the transcendence of the ethical relation. Responsibility begins not so much with 'the face which the Other turns to me' [TI 215 / 237] as in the experience of 'a passivity more passive than all passivity, an exposure to the other'. Saying as exposure is not 'dissimulating and protecting itself in the said, just giving out words in the face of the other, but saying uncovering itself, that is denuding itself of its skin, sensibility on the surface of the skin, at the edge of the nerves, offering itself in suffering' [OB 15 / 31].

However, despite a change in vocabulary and methodology, it is not immediately clear that the structure of Levinas's thought has changed significantly at all. While Adriaan Peperzak has claimed that this shift turns Levinas from an existentialist phenomenology to an approach not dissimilar to that of Derrida's, and Jacques Rolland interprets the break with *Totality and Infinity* as being so radical that in his *Parcours d'Autrement* he does not

discuss the earlier book at all,<sup>5</sup> it is worth pausing to consider the relationship between the two works. Nowhere does Levinas suggest, for all the change in his approach, that *Otherwise than Being* is intended to replace *Totality and Infinity*. Levinas in no way implies that the earlier work has been simply superseded, and that study is referred to by name three times in the notes [OB 191 n.42; 191 n.8; 199 n.23]. But since most of Levinas's other philosophical studies are also cited in this way, perhaps we could read *Otherwise than Being* as a finalization of his system, in which the place of all the other texts is accounted for; or perhaps just as further reflections on the developments which occur in the final stages of *Totality and Infinity*. While the relationship between being and that which is 'other than being' [OB 3 / 14] may substitute for the relationship between totality and infinity, the structure of this relationship remains the same, despite the increasing sophistication of the description of a relationship which by definition resists thematization. Levinas's object remains the thought of a beyond, an outside of being, which can be associated with the Platonic Good beyond being, with God, and with the ethical relation. His account of responsibility as substitution for the other, in which the subject is described as a hostage to the other, as well as his appreciation for the work of Husserl and Heidegger, is deepened in *Otherwise than Being*, but not fundamentally altered.

This claim can be confirmed by a reading of 'God and Philosophy', an essay in which Levinas responds explicitly to 'Violence and Metaphysics'. Without mentioning Derrida by name, he begins with a nod to one of Derrida's conclusions, that 'not to philosophize, is still to philosophize' [LR 167]. The reference is to Derrida's citation: 'It was a Greek who said, "If one has to philosophize, one has to philosophize, if one does not have to philosophize (to say it and think it). One always has to philosophize"' [WD 152 / 226]. Levinas argues that the opposition between faith and ontology does not hold. So while the God of the Bible can only signify something philosophically unverifiable within philosophy, and religion has to resort to the language of ontology (adverbs of height) to express the 'beyond' of ontology as the 'most high', Levinas asks: 'Over and beyond being does not a meaning whose priority, translated into ontological language, would have to be called antecedent to being, show itself?' [LR 168]. Alongside terms which are recognizably those of *Otherwise than Being* – disinterestedness, substitution – Levinas clearly restates the basic premises of *Totality and Infinity*. Infinity, he argues, is not subject to an oppositional dialectic:

not-being-able-to-comprehend-the-Infinite-by-thought would signify the condition – or the unconditionality – of thought, as though to speak of the non-comprehension of the Infinite by the finite did not amount to simply saying that the Infinite is not finite, and as though the affirmation of the difference between the Infinite and the finite had to remain a verbal abstraction, without consideration of the fact that through the non-comprehension



of the Infinite by thought, thought is posited as thought, as a posited subjectivity, that is, is posited as self-positing. [LR 176]

This passage becomes much clearer if it is read as a response to Derrida. The difference between the Infinite and the finite is not simply given in language ('a verbal abstraction') but is the difference between what conditions and makes possible, and what is made possible but is unable to think its own conditions of possibility. When Levinas continues to write of the Infinite, in the same terms as those of *Totality and Infinity*, as 'a desire beyond satisfaction' [LR 177] it seems clear that he considers Derrida's essay to be posing a question of language only, rather than querying the very basis of his thought, and that the frameworks of *Totality and Infinity* and of *Otherwise than Being* are roughly interchangeable.

Certainly Levinas's conclusion to 'God and Philosophy' would suggest that he believes himself to have refuted Derrida. Referring to Derrida's charge, from which he began, he comments that '*not to philosophize would not be "to philosophize still"*' [LR 186]. As I have argued, however, Derrida suggests that the differences between his thought and that of Levinas are more than merely linguistic or terminological. If he is hesitant in taking a definitively critical position it is not so much because he recognizes a kindred project to that of his own work in Levinas but because of the unusual nature of his own style; like so much of Derrida's work, his reading of Levinas seeks to affirm, with reservations, rather than simply oppose. Geoffrey Bennington gives a useful summary of the difficulties that have attended the attempt to distinguish the two thinkers:

[Derrida's] 'radicalisation' [of the concept of alterity] can always look (and to Levinasians has often looked) like just the opposite, a reduction of the radicality of Levinas's own thinking, insofar as it seems to protest against Levinas's absolutising of the other, and to that extent to make the other *less other* than is the case in Levinas. But in this paradoxical domain we should be wary of such a linear logic. Derrida's construal of alterity as always less than absolute in fact constitutes a thought of the other as *more other than the absolute other*.<sup>6</sup>

I can find little to disagree with in Bennington's account of the relationship. The specificity of Derrida's later work is not to be found in a *rapprochement* with Levinas, but in its explicit contestation of ethics in the name of politics.

This is to contradict the claim, put forward by Simon Critchley in his *Ethics of Deconstruction* and defended elsewhere, that Derrida's reading of Levinas cannot be like his other readings, because there is a privileged relationship between Derrida and Levinas which amounts to the uncovering of an ethical imperative in deconstruction. Critchley's influential reading

is largely based around Derrida's second essay on Levinas, 'At this very moment in this work here I am',<sup>7</sup> but the major authorization for Critchley's argument comes from Derrida's statement in a seminar discussion published in *Alterités*, that 'faced with a thought like that of Levinas, I never have an objection. I am ready to subscribe to everything that he says' [ALT 74, cited ED 10]. While Critchley acknowledges Derrida's qualification that 'that does not mean that I think the same thing in the same way' [ALT 74, ED 10] and the possibility that the 'differences of idiom, language or writing' [ALT 74, ED 11] Derrida refers to might be significant ones, he insists that these comments 'do make the point rather well that the privilege accorded to Levinas in the discussion of Derrida's work is not without foundation' [ED 11]. Without minimizing the differences between the two thinkers, Critchley's claim is broadly that something happens in both Levinas's and Derrida's texts which makes their relationship different to that between Derrida and the other writers on whom he works.

It is not, however, clear to me that Critchley is correct in deducing what he does from the comments he cites. The discussion is reasonably extensive, and Derrida is at great pains to distinguish his thought from that of Levinas, and he is particularly keen to emphasize his reservations with regard to the word 'ethics'. He begins by referring to Heidegger's 'Letter on Humanism', in which Heidegger argues that the question of being is prior to the question of ethics, and that an ethics can never radically put into question the meaning of being.<sup>8</sup> Derrida calls for a genealogical questioning of the history and meaning of the word 'ethics' in the name of a responsibility which comes before any determined 'ethics'. He acknowledges that Levinas, thinking of a similar responsibility, speaks of ethics in a wholly other manner, but, he reminds us, 'it is the same word' [ALT 71]. He imagines Levinas's response: 'this semantic transformation of the word 'ethics' reconstitutes or restitutes that which was the hidden condition of possibility of ethics, dissimulated in some way by Greek and German thought' [ALT 71]. While he has less difficulty with this use of 'ethics', he wishes instead to think the singularity of the coming of the other which would 'exceed the limits of ethics' [ALT 71]. He concludes that 'whatever the complexity of the relations between ethics and law, for example in Kant, the problem remains, as much for one as for the other, that one risks reinscribing the relation to the other within the general, within calculation. It is this worry before this generality that, without having anything against ethics, I have too much reticence to use the word easily' [ALT 72].

From the perspective of a reader of *Politics of Friendship* it is clear that this worry concerning ethics has not subsequently been displaced. When Derrida sets out what he seeks to do in the book, it seems highly significant that it is 'to think and live a friendship, a politics, a justice' [PoF 105 / 128]. Not, it would appear, an ethics. If for Derrida, Levinas's attempt to think the relation to the other risks remaining caught within a metaphysical

account of transcendence, so the word 'ethics' is also hazardous. Derrida's reservations about an 'ethics' of deconstruction are made more explicit in 'Passions'. There he warns against the 'remoralization of deconstruction, which naturally seems more attractive than that to which it is rightly opposed, but which at each moment risks reassuring itself in order to reassure the other and to promote the consensus of a new dogmatic slumber' [PAS 15 / 38].

In the face of criticism, in other words, deconstruction should not seek to present itself as moral or responsible, when to do so would be to disable the possibility of responsibility. Even to act out of a sense of duty would be to fail to act responsibly since it would be a response based on an obligation: 'it would be too easy, and precisely, natural, programmed by nature: it is hardly moral to be moral (responsible, etc.) because one has the *sense* of the moral' [PAS 16 / 39]. Instead Derrida is responding to that which 'still remains open, suspended, undecided, questionable even beyond the question, indeed to make use of another figure, absolutely aporetic. What is the ethicity of ethics? The morality of morality? What is responsibility?' [PAS 16 / 40]. There seems little in this that Levinas would disagree with, but Derrida makes their difference clear: 'let it not be said too precipitately that these questions or propositions are *already* inspired by a concern that could by right be called ethical, moral, responsible, etc.' [PAS 17 / 41]. In the situation in which we find ourselves, we should not presume to use the word 'ethics' any more than any other word.<sup>9</sup>

In Critchley's own response to this argument he takes the same tack that Levinas did in responding to Derrida, and argues that if it is a question of words, there are good reasons for returning to the word 'ethics', stressing in particular the polemical context of the book, in the debate over the value of deconstruction.<sup>10</sup> However, Critchley, following Levinas, continues to miss the other difference in Derrida's account of Levinas, which is not merely a matter of names, but of the structure of the attempt to think absolute infinity within the finite. That these questions remain at issue can be confirmed from Derrida's most recent book on Levinas, *Adieu*; as can my proposition that they make a critical political difference.

### ETHICS, POLITICS AND HOSPITALITY

*Adieu* contains both Derrida's funeral oration for Levinas, and a lengthy paper delivered a year later to a conference on Levinas, called 'A Word of Welcome'; the central question of which unites a number of concerns of this book so far. Derrida states:

I will be guided by a question that I will in the end leave in suspense, being content simply to situate some of its premises and points of refer-

ence. It would concern, on first view, the relationships between an *ethics* of hospitality (an ethics *as* hospitality) and a *law* or a *politics* of hospitality, for example, in the tradition of what Kant calls the conditions of universal hospitality in *cosmopolitical law*: ‘with a view to perpetual peace’. The classical form of this question would perhaps be found in the figure of a founding or legitimating foundation. It might be asked, for example, whether the ethics of hospitality that we will try to analyze in Levinas’s thought would be able to found a law and a politics, beyond the familial dwelling, within a society, nation, State or Nation-State. [ADI 19–20 / 44–5]

The essay can be roughly divided into two parts on the basis of this passage. Derrida will, on the one hand, ‘analyze’ what he calls ‘the ethics of hospitality’ in Levinas’s thought; and, on the other hand, he will pose some political questions to this ethics. In this section I focus on Derrida’s discussion of Levinas’s work in terms of hospitality, while in the next I turn to look in more detail at the question of politics: both at Levinas’s later essays on political problems, and at Derrida’s response to them. Once again it is necessary to try to disentangle Derrida’s commentary on Levinas from the points at which he objects or queries Levinas’s trajectory; however, in *Adieu* Derrida voices once more the concerns he first set out in ‘Violence and Metaphysics’. By pursuing the question of hospitality in Levinas’s work, Derrida is able not only to link *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*, but also to reiterate his challenge to Levinas.

*Totality and Infinity*, Derrida suggests, may be read as the description of a work of hospitality. Even if the word ‘hospitality’ itself rarely appears, the word ‘welcome’ does. Levinas, Derrida claims, re-describes intentionality as hospitality: as the welcome offered to the other, on the basis of the other’s welcome. The welcome of the other should be heard as a double genitive. It is both a welcome given to the other, and a welcome that has been made possible by the pre-original welcome by the other. Receptivity and reason themselves are both to be thought of in terms of a welcoming which precedes any reception (the play is on *accueil* and *recueil*). What appears to be simply a commentary on Levinas is in fact designed to bring out a critical difference. From the first chapter of ‘A Word of Welcome’, Derrida is asking whether we can speak of a pre-original welcome. Derrida states:

if it is the other alone who can say *yes*, the ‘first’ *yes*, the welcome is always the welcome *of* the other. One must now think the grammars and the genealogies of this genitive. If I put quotations marks around the ‘first’ of the ‘first’ *yes*, it was to accede to a scarcely thinkable hypothesis: there is no first *yes*, the *yes* is already a response. [ADI 24 / 53]

We could make Derrida’s point more dramatically by saying that the *accueil* of the other will always be a *recueil*. Now this is a fine distinction, but crucial

to understanding Derrida's argument. The difference between a first 'yes' and a 'yes' that is already a response would be of the same order as the difference between an absolute alterity, which precedes the economy of the same, and the alterity which Derrida is interested in, which is already inscribed into a different economy, of same and other. It is also a difference to which a long passage is devoted in the ninth chapter of *Politics of Friendship*, but which is central to both of the shorter versions published before the book as a whole [PoF 250–2 / 280–2; PoF(a) 638–41; PoF(b) 377–80]. Derrida links responsibility to the response to the other. He stresses that 'one *answers for* [...], *before*, by first responding *to*: this last modality thus appearing more originary, more fundamental and hence unconditional'. Accordingly, when discussing the question of 'answering *before*', he notes 'this expression seems first to modalize the "responding to". One answers *before* the other, because first of all one responds *to* the other.' This would accord with the usual reading of responsibility in Levinas, in which responsibility comes in my response to the face of the Other. However, Derrida appears to disagree, gently but critically:

But this modalization is more than and different from an exemplary specification. And it plays a decisive role whose effects we should register. The expression 'before' marks in general, right on the idiom, the passage to an institutional agency of alterity. It is no longer singular but universal in its principle. One responds *to* the other, who can always be singular, and must in one respect remain so, but one answers *before the law*, a court, a jury, an agency authorized to represent the other legitimately, in the institutional form of a moral, juridical, political community. [PoF 252 / 282]

By underlining the legal and institutional apparatus implied within the very structure of responsibility, Derrida stresses that the relation to the other is always mediated.

The consequences, as in 'Violence and Metaphysics', are that it would not be possible to think a pure peace outside the totality of what for Levinas is the realm of violence, the judicial system and the state. Turning to the question of justice, broached in *Totality and Infinity* and expanded in *Otherwise than Being*, Derrida makes precisely this point. Derrida notes the ambiguity in Levinas's account of justice. On the one hand the necessity of justice is dictated by the arrival of the third, who interrupts the ethical relation of the face-to-face. But on the other, this interruption is *necessary*. Infinity as pure peace cannot be thought except from within the conditions of violence. Derrida suggests that this apparent equivocation can be explained on the basis that the ethical relation is already violent. It is not the coming of the third that introduces violence, but which brings justice, and the possibility of negotiating with the violence of being face to face with the Other. When

Levinas approaches all these issues in another essay, 'Peace and Proximity', he still thinks of a responsibility which is 'in its *immediacy, anterior to every question*' and of a question of justice which is necessary, and immediate, but still somehow secondary [ADI 32 / 64–5]. For Derrida, justice has priority, since the third 'would protect against the vertigo of ethical violence itself'. This is a warning that pure peace is also already violence and that 'ethics could be doubly exposed to such violence: exposed to undergo it but also to exercise it' [ADI 33 / 66]. Derrida feels that Levinas 'would be tempted to appeal not *to* justice but *against* it' [ADI 30 / 62]. Where for Levinas peace can be opposed to violence, for Derrida pure peace is only thinkable as the worst violence. Derrida speaks here of perjury [*parjure*]:

Like the third who does not wait, the proceedings that open both ethics and justice are in the process of committing a quasi-transcendental or originary, indeed, pre-originary, perjury. One might even call it *ontological*, once ethics is joined to everything that exceeds and betrays it (ontology, precisely, synchrony, totality, the State, the political, etc.). [ADI 34 / 69]

Derrida is again pushing Levinas's thought to propositions which he might not accept. The reduction of the (pre-ontological) ethical relation to ontology, of infinity to totality, and to the state is the scandalous truth which Levinas wishes to forget. It is what we might describe, with reference to an earlier essay by Derrida on Levinas, 'At this very moment in this work here I am', the originary contamination of the ethical relation by ontology from which ethics cannot simply be abstracted. For my argument here what is most important to note is that the legal and political mediation of the relationship to the other is effaced by Levinas's prioritization of the relation with the singular Other [*Autrui*].

As in his earlier essay 'At this very moment in this work here I am', Derrida once again links his account of Levinas to the question of gender. Levinas's definition of alterity, the welcoming *par excellence* is the feminine: 'This absolute precedence of the welcome, of the welcoming, of the *welcoming* [*accueilance*], would be precisely the femininity of "Woman", interiority as femininity – and as "feminine alterity"' [ADI 43 / 81]. While referring to his earlier reading of Levinas, in which he had stressed 'the traditional and androcentric attribution of certain characteristics to woman (private interiority, apolitical domesticity, intimacy of a sociality that Levinas refers to as a "society without language", etc.)' [ADI 43 / 82], Derrida suggests a different approach this time. For it would be possible to argue that what Levinas does is not to obliterate sexual difference in the name of a neutrality before ontology or empirical sexual difference, but to mark the very opening of ethics itself ('even if silently' [ADI 44 / 84]) with sexual difference. Derrida's point is that sexual difference is 'indissociably linked' to 'the experience of

pervertibility [...], which at once calls for and excludes the third' [ADI 43 / 81].

Again this is a subtle rewriting of Levinas. Derrida comments in 'Choreographies' that

Levinas indeed senses the risk factor involved in the erasure of sexual difference. He therefore maintains sexual difference: the human in general remains a sexual being. But he can only do so it would seem, by placing (differentiated) sexuality beneath humanity which sustains itself at the level of the Spirit.<sup>11</sup>

In 'A Word of Welcome' Derrida appears not simply to be reversing the priority accorded to each – putting sexual difference before humanity – which would re-essentialize sexual difference, and make it potentially a founding discourse (of an ethics, a politics, an ontology), but to be dissolving the possibility of thinking a priority. He does this on the basis of the possibility opened up by Levinas's reinscription of sexual difference on absolute alterity, the ethical relation. Even if Levinas, as Derrida suspects, is wary of both justice and sexual difference, the indissoluble medium or matrix within which an argument for or against either could find its place would be the realm in which justice is calculation and humanity is sexually differentiated. Once again, the critical reading of gender, as of justice, in Levinas, shifts to a deconstructive mode, in which it is no longer possible to ascribe one interpretation either to Levinas or to Derrida. Derrida affirms a movement or a possibility which exceeds both his own text and that of Levinas.

It is the introduction of the terms Derrida has developed in his seminar on hospitality that most clearly marks out 'A Word of Welcome' from his earlier considerations of Levinas. Derrida uses the motif of hospitality for two purposes. First, he is able to link *Totality and Infinity* to *Otherwise than Being*, despite the reformulation of the situation of the subject between the books. The transition from the subject called upon to welcome the other to the subject considered as hostage to the other seems almost inevitable or predictable, on the basis of the ambiguity of the word *hôte* in French: 'The host [*hôte*] is a hostage in so far as he is a subject put into question, obsessed (and thus besieged), persecuted, in the very place where he takes place, [an] emigrant, exile, stranger, a guest [*hôte*] from the very beginning [...]' [ADI 56 / 103]. The reversibility of the relation between host and guest which is illuminated by the etymology of *hôte* is a prior function of the structure of hospitality. Secondly, however, the concept of hospitality will form the hinge on which Derrida will link his reading of the ethical relation in Levinas to the problem of Levinas's own messianic politics.

As I discussed in Chapter 6, Derrida's understanding of hospitality involves distinguishing an absolute hospitality from any actual customs, codes, ethics, laws or politics of hospitality, to which it must be heteroge-

neous. When Derrida describes Levinas's work as an ethics of hospitality he implies that it must by definition be a limited hospitality, and thus transgress unconditional hospitality: similarly, we saw that Kant's cosmopolitical hospitality between states could never be hospitable enough for Derrida. This suggests that Derrida's attribution of an 'ethics of hospitality' to Levinas is more than a neutral act of description, but the ascription of a failure to think hospitality responsibly enough. In a note which links *Adieu* to the concerns of *Politics of Friendship* Derrida implies as much. Derrida reminds us that in the earlier text he has tried to 'suggest that "the determination of *friendship* qua fraternity [...] tells us something essential about ethics"' [ADI 144–5 n.69 / 122–4 n.1].

While Derrida often refers to his own texts, it is unusual for him to have cited his own words here and implies an acknowledgement of the awkwardness of advancing a highly critical argument in an essay which is generally a gesture of approval. (Elsewhere Derrida comments on the appropriation of Levinas's thought on the right, and implies that his reading strategies in this text might be read as a political contestation of a moralizing oversimplification of Levinas's texts [PM 366].) In this footnote, Derrida proposes a reading of Levinas which would focus on the relationship between humanity as fraternity, the figure of the father of mankind and filiality as 'the father–son relationship' in his work [cf. PoF 304–5 / 338–9]. Given the similarities of vocabulary and interests between Levinas and Derrida, I read this as strong suggestion that one way of reading *Politics of Friendship* would be as a critical response to Levinas, above and beyond any of those thinkers who receive more explicit attention in the book. In which case, the important question within both *Adieu* and *Politics of Friendship* would become that of the distinction between the respective 'messianic' politics of the two thinkers: perhaps even that Derrida might be opposing his own politics of hospitality to Levinas's ethics of hospitality.

## TWO FORMS OF MESSIANIC POLITICS

Before looking at Derrida's comments on the subject, it is worth reviewing what Levinas himself has to say about politics. The basic framework is dictated by the ambiguity of the relationship between the infinite and the finite that is evident in *Totality and Infinity*. For Levinas the infinite precedes and makes possible philosophy as ontology, violence and the state. Yet the infinite can only be thought through the finite. In theory at least, the state itself, despite Levinas's violent attacks on it, should testify to the priority of, and bear the trace of, the Infinite peace of the ethical relation.

Levinas does indeed argue something very close to this in his essay 'Politics After', with reference to Israel. He suggests that there is a way to think the



state of Israel which does not on the one hand reduce it to politics – ‘recourse to unscrupulous methods whose model is furnished by Realpolitik’ – and on the other to ‘the irritating rhetoric of a careless idealism, lost in utopian dreams, but crumbling into dust on contact with reality or turning into a dangerous, impudent and facile frenzy which professes to be taking up the prophetic discourse’.<sup>12</sup> There is a path, in other words, between politics as an economy of violence (in Levinas’s sense) and the infinite peace of the ethical relation. Levinas insists that

beyond the State of Israel’s concern to provide a refuge for men without a homeland and its sometimes surprising, sometimes uncertain achievements, has it not, above all, been a question of creating on its land the concrete conditions for political invention?<sup>13</sup>

Politics in Israel, we are to understand, may not have always been guided by ethical principles, but Israel itself marks the possibility of an ethical invention of politics, or the invention of an ethical politics. What suggests this for Levinas is the visit in 1977 of President Sadat of Egypt to Jerusalem, which signifies something which neither Israel’s enemies in the Middle East nor Israel’s friends in the West can see. This would be something like the suspension of the choice to be made between ethics and politics in favour of some wholly other logic, the possibility of peace as such. Sadat’s visit could be compared, one imagines, to a trace of infinite peace, a Messianic intimation of God beyond being, peace beyond war. As is clear from this one example, Levinas’s messianic politics is inextricably tangled with his own Zionism. It cannot fail to pass through this one example, the state of Israel. The important issue here is how far Levinas’s politics might be said to pass *through* this example, or whether the politics of ethics as first philosophy begins and ends in Zionism.

It is Levinas’s own political engagements that seem to cause Derrida the greatest difficulty in *Adieu* and in a number of places he records his own disagreement with specific statements made by Levinas. With reference to the passage from Levinas I have just discussed, Derrida asks: ‘Has this *political invention* in Israel ever come to pass? Ever come to pass in Israel?’ and continues, ‘I am among those who await this “political invention” in Israel, among those who call for it in hope, today more than ever because of the despair that recent events, to mention only them, have not attenuated’ [ADI 81 / 147].<sup>14</sup> Derrida plainly does not agree with Levinas that Israel can be taken as a privileged place of political invention. Elsewhere, Derrida also objects to Levinas’s characterization of Christianity in terms of a “political indifference” which would explain why it “has so often become a State religion”. This thesis, Derrida notes, is ‘rather confidently advanced, if I may say so, and rather quickly asserted’ and in particular rules out any examination of a State religion in Islamic lands or in Israel itself [ADI 75 / 137]. In

general, however, Derrida's reading maintains the same form as that of the first part of his essay, and consists in advancing two readings of Levinas's messianic politics, one of which seems more satisfying to Derrida than the other, but neither of which can be quickly or easily attributed to Levinas himself.

Derrida is generally sympathetic to that dimension of Levinas's thought which seeks to think a messianic politics – or to think beyond politics – which is attested to within the everyday political realm. Just as Derrida was keen to revalue the notion of justice in Levinas, which rather than coming second to (but alongside) the face-to-face ethical relation might be seen as in some sense primary, so he is keen to revalue politics, taking up all those elements of Levinas's writing which emphasize that we start within politics, and that ethics is not simply exterior to that order. For example, Derrida approves strongly of the title of one of Levinas's Talmudic readings: 'beyond the state in the state': '*Beyond-in*: transcendence in immanence, *beyond* the political, but *in* the political' [ADI 76 / 138]. The difficulties for Derrida begin when Levinas turns to a specific state.

The general form of this objection may be imagined if I quote a further line from the first example of this section, on the messianic politics of Israel which are attested by the visit of Sadat: 'That is the ultimate culmination of Zionism, and therefore probably one of the great events in human history'.<sup>15</sup> Levinas here inscribes a messianic potential within an exceptional political moment, and the possibility of going beyond-the-state-in-the-state within the borders of a particular state. He makes Israel an exception to the general rule. Derrida interrupts a quotation from another essay of Levinas, following the claim that 'Israel is no less isolated in its struggle to complete its extraordinary task than was Abraham, who began it four thousand years ago' to comment that 'this passing remark on the isolation of Israel can be disputed, indeed it is to my mind disputable' [ADI 78 / 141]. It is the election of Israel within Levinas's political thought about which Derrida is most concerned; and which we would have to link to what he says of election in general in Levinas's thought: that 'illeity' designates '*sometimes* the interruption of the face to face, *sometimes* the very transcendence of the face to face' [ADI 60 / 110]. Sometimes, in other words, illeity is the mediation of the election of absolute responsibility by the question of justice and the intervention of the third, sometimes it is absolute responsibility, or election itself in the face to face.

Derrida is sketching out the politics of exemplarity at work in Levinas's ethical thought and political texts. Levinas may be using a particular engagement with the political situation of Israel and of Judaism generally to open up the possibility of thinking beyond the politics of the nation-state as such. By making Israel the exemplary site of this transformation of politics, however, Levinas risks taking the path of greater violence within the economy of violence, of returning a messianic politics beyond politics

to a violent particularism. This ambiguity can be found within Levinas's Talmudic readings and in particular Derrida refers to Levinas's phrase 'a recognition of the Torah before Sinai':

It is not a question, for Levinas, of calling into question the election of Israel, its unicity or its universal exemplarity, but, quite to the contrary, a question of recognizing a universal message for which it has responsibility before or independently of the place and the event of the gift of the law. [ADI 66 / 119–20]

When Levinas explains his own work, Israel always takes on a universal significance. The state or person on whom Levinas is writing is always a figure of a universal state or person, of any state or person. As John Llewelyn puts it: "Israel" refers both to the particularity of a people and the particularity of a person, no matter to what people that person does or does not belong.<sup>16</sup> Yet this cannot erase the fact that the name of Sinai is 'a metonymy for the border or frontier between Israel and the other nations, a front and a frontier between war and peace' [ADI 64 / 117]. In which case what would it mean for there to be a 'recognition of the Torah by the peoples or the nations for whom the name, the place, the event *Sinai* would mean nothing?' [ADI 65 / 119]. There is an undeniable oscillation in Levinas's writing between this universalist appeal and the particularism of his Zionism.

The contradiction here derives from the very structure of Levinas's thought: the announcement of the Infinite in some finite place. However, within the economy of violence which Derrida calls *différance*, there is a political danger which comes from attaching a priority to one element, even as a figure for all the others, whether this be a figure of absolute responsibility, or of ethics – or even the ethicity of ethics. This danger is one which thought as such is always subject to. I have argued that Derrida is expressly concerned with the discursive enactment of the politics of brotherhood rather than the politics of friendship: of the impossibility of evading political decision which prefers the same rather than the other, if only by speaking in one language, one idiom, rather than another. Derrida is thus somewhat less sanguine about the possibility of assigning a political irresponsibility to Levinas than those, like Richard Beardsworth, who have condemned his Zionism as a nationalist particularism: '[in] his ethical justification of the politics of Israel, Levinas reproduces the same "logic" as Heidegger's attempt to ground National Socialism on fundamental ontology'.<sup>17</sup> As I have shown in the preceding chapters, the burden of deconstruction is to demonstrate that any political thought will of necessity have this form. No politics will not collapse the decision into a programmed rule.

So from Derrida's point of view the important question becomes how this is handled: is it by privileging one state or one language as the authentic site of a repoliticization, or is it by seeking to describe this problem as the very

basis of politics? Rather than simply condemning Levinas, Derrida works to emphasize a double movement within his work, one path of which leads to a determined messianism, the other of which encounters something else sheltered within that thought. If the law (the Torah) can be unbound from the moment of its revelation (made available before Sinai), 'this *thinking of* substitution leads us towards a logic that is hardly thinkable, almost unsayable, that of the possible-impossible, the iterability and replaceability of the unique in the very experience of unicity itself' [ADI 70 / 128]:

What announces itself here might be called a structural or *a priori* messianicity. Not an ahistorical messianicity, but one that belongs to a historicity without a particular and empirically determinable incarnation. Without revelation or without the dating of a given revelation. The hypothesis I am venturing here is obviously not Levinas's, at least not in this form, but it seeks to move in his direction – perhaps to cross his path once more. 'At the heart of a chiasm,' as he said one day. [ADI 67 / 121–2]

What is the difference between these two messianisms? Perhaps that where for Levinas the promise of another politics can be found in one place rather than another, for Derrida the promise shows up nowhere and everywhere, but absolutely not ever here, in just this one place.

By a strange kind of logic the absolute difference of Levinas seems to turn into a particular finite politics whereas the non-absolute difference of Derrida turns into a non-finite politics, a politics of non-place rather than a politics of place. Yet the form of Derrida's reading is such that we cannot simply separate the two. For by the logic of deconstruction as itself hospitality, Derrida both affirms this difference, but effaces his own place. There is no possible return to good conscience, in which Derrida's choice is good and Levinas's is bad.

So when considering an essay in which Levinas opposes the state of Caesar to the state of David, Derrida maintains both the force of his objection to such oppositions in 'Violence and Metaphysics' and the sophistication of a reading strategy which refuses to assign such an opposition to Levinas. At first sight, Levinas appears in this essay to be opposing Judaic and Greek thought as Derrida claimed he did in *Totality and Infinity*. So much so, in fact, that Derrida asks:

If one took it as a rule to speak of 'politics' as soon as the word 'State' appears, in a more or less rigorous translation of *Polis*, then one would have to ask if this rule applies in the expression 'State of David', or if the alternative between the State of Caesar and the State of David is an alternative between a politics and a beyond of the political, or an alternative between two politics, or, finally, *an* alternative among *others*, where one

could not exclude the hypothesis of a State that would be neither Caesar's or David's, neither Rome nor Israel nor Athens. [ADI 74 / 136]

If the politics of the 'State of David' is entirely heterogeneous to that of the 'State of Caesar', is it still a concept which we would recognize as political? The choice, Derrida suggests, might be that between two politics, both of which would transgress the pure ethical relation, but one of which would be less violent than the other. Or it might be between politics and ethics as such, in the senses in which Levinas understands the terms, and which we have seen to be relatively consistently opposed in his work. Or it might be between two alternatives 'among others', and in which the choice between a Roman or Jewish politics would not be absolute and nor, one presumes, would the opposition between them.

It is essential, in other words, that when Derrida writes of two forms of messianic politics, we do not rush to assign one to him and the other to Levinas. The relationship is more complex. The messianism without any determinable messiah opens up the possibility of any determined messianism. Derrida writes of a difference that he wishes to 'sharpen [*aiguïser*]' [ADI 101 / 175] between what he calls in his introduction 'two very close, but perhaps heterogeneous, paths' [ADI 21 / 47]. This difference does not necessarily pass between Levinas and Derrida, but between a messianic politics and the politics of a messianism without messianism:

a structural messianicity, an irrecusable and threatening promise, an eschatology without teleology, [dissociated] from every determinate messianism: a messianicity before or without any messianism incorporated by some revelation in a determined place that goes by the name of Sinai or Mount Horeb. [ADI 118–19 / 204]

It seems to me that these arguments in *Adieu* belong with those Derrida advances elsewhere. Without assigning a definite position to Levinas – but not without making his own judgement on some of Levinas's particular engagements – Derrida poses one key distinction to be made when discussing either Levinas or his own work. The distinction is that between a messianism in which something is presumed, or known to be coming, or at the very least that what is coming will be recognized as such when it arrives, and a way of thinking a messianic arrival which could be totally unexpected, a complete surprise. What kind of messianic coming would it be if the Messiah were only recognized some time later – or not at all?

This would also be the distinction which Derrida has already considered in *Politics of Friendship*, in terms which recall unmistakably his queries about Levinas's thought elsewhere. Derrida comments on the concept of revelation that 'the event of revelation would reveal not only this or that – God, for example – but revealability itself' [POF 18 / 36]. The phrase is borrowed

from 'Violence and Metaphysics' and the implied argument is that of all three of Derrida's major essays on Levinas. Derrida continues by asking 'Is there an alternative here? Must one choose between these two orders? [...] Must one choose between the priority of *revelation* (*Offenbarung*) and that of *revealability* (*Offenbarkeit*), the priority of manifestation and that of manifestability, of theology and theology, of the science of God and the science of the divine, of the divinity of God?' [PoF 18–19 / 36]. Derrida adds a note which includes the comment:

What I called elsewhere *iterability* might not dissolve this alternative but might at least give access to a structure of experience in which the two poles of the alternative cease to oppose one another to form another node, another 'logic', another 'chronology', another history, another relation to the order of orders. [PoF 25 n.29 / 36 n.1]

Since to claim to choose revealability over revelation would be to turn revealability into a revelation, there can be no question of choosing. Instead the problem must be approached in terms of a double logic, which recognizes this paradox, and seeks to enact and acknowledge that to name revealability returns it to revelation. Both Derrida and the later Levinas can be seen to be operating within the grip of this paradox. Derrida's implication, however, is that not only does he dispute the fact that Levinas names the revelation of revealability in traditional terms, as God, but that he maintains a priority for one or the other, rather than attempting to think beyond the possibility of attributing priority. Or to put it in the terms I used in the previous chapter, that Levinas still thinks of ethics as coming first, and certainly before politics, when Derrida is concerned to show that both politics and ethics come second. This is what makes Derrida's own political thought a messianism without messiah.

#### AGAINST ETH(N)ICS

I conclude this chapter with a short illustration of the kind of political problems which attend Levinas's work. Without presuming to judge Levinas's own response, it is possible to see that Derrida's work avoids this particular difficulty. Following the Israeli intervention in Lebanon and the massacres of an unknown number of Muslim Palestinian refugees in the camps of Sabra and Shatila in Beirut by Christian Phalangist militia men who had been ordered into the camps by the Israel Defence Forces, Levinas and Alain Finkielkraut gave a radio interview in France. Certain of Levinas's comments betray the complexity of the problems here, and in particular of the relationship between ethics and politics. These comments betray those problems in both senses of the word, however; they mark them out in the

starkest terms, but they also fail to do the questions justice. While Levinas argues that there are no limits to responsibility, he also notes that ‘there is certainly a place for defence, for it is not always a question of “me”, but of those close to me, who are also my neighbours’ [LR 292]. In other words, there must always be a calculation of responsibility, and there must therefore be instances in which the (primary) ethical imperative be transgressed in the name of (secondary) political imperatives. Levinas specifies ‘I’d call such a defence a politics but a politics that’s ethically necessary. Alongside *ethics*, there is a place for *politics*.’ All the problems I have discussed in this chapter are present here in miniature.

Although Levinas recognizes ‘a direct contradiction between ethics and politics, if both these demands are taken to an extreme, their co-existence is more ambiguous’ [LR 292]. On the one hand ethics transcends politics, ‘there is also an ethical limit to this ethically necessary political existence’ [LR 293]; but on the other hand, as soon as there is ethics there must also be politics ‘*alongside*’ [my emphasis] – this relationship is ‘necessary’. While ethics and politics *must* co-exist, politics must still be judged against ethical criteria. Levinas appeals to ‘the old ethical idea which commands us precisely to defend our neighbours. My people and my kin are still my neighbours. When you defend the Jewish people, you defend your neighbour.’ The political problematization of the ‘old ethical idea’ (and politics occurs *alongside* ethics) begins when there are no longer reliable grounds on which to decide who my neighbour is. As Levinas writes: ‘The other is my neighbour, who is not necessarily my kin, but who can be. But if your neighbour attacks another neighbour or treats him unjustly, what can you do?’ While Levinas is clearly not condoning the events in the Beirut camps, he does seem to ascribe a priority to ‘my people and my kin’ who happen to be ‘my neighbours’. Richard Beardsworth has argued that, in doing so, ‘the unjustifiable sacrifice of one other against an other has become a justifiable defence of the “Other” of the Jewish neighbour against the homeless Palestinian’.<sup>18</sup>

What is at stake in this problem is precisely that which Derrida raises: the possibility of either founding a politics on an ethical basis or of questioning politics from an ethical standpoint. Levinas appears to give priority to the ‘old *ethical* idea which commands us precisely to defend our neighbours’ [LR 292] [my emphasis]. Yet he gives no indication of how we are to decide when our neighbours are our kin, and when they are just our neighbours. It seems to me that this bears out the ambiguity of the ethical structure of Levinas’s thought. If the ‘ethical’ is given a priority over juridical and political laws, there is a danger that ethics – even an ethics of hospitality – will dictate the priority of the same over the other, of the family over the stranger, of my nation over another nation. This seems to me to reinforce both Derrida’s concerns over the structure of Levinas’s philosophy and his reservations about the name of ethics. On the basis of a reading of ‘Violence

and Metaphysics' I have shown that there is a consistent objection in Derrida to the priority given by Levinas to the ethical relation as the beyond of being, which goes beyond the question of names. There can be no question for Derrida of putting ethics first, and politics second: for Derrida there is only the mediated regime of justice, of politics, and of ethics as code, within which a 'pure' peace, God, or an 'ethics beyond ethics' will appear as a calculated possibility, rather than being what precedes, surpasses and makes possible any calculation. It is clear that, as I have argued throughout this thesis, Derrida is interested in a structure for which ultimately no name can be given, since every possible name is already implicated within the structure – a principle of relationality, not some secret thing which could be revealed. But does this mean that 'ethics' and 'politics' are equally good names for this situation? My suggestion is that it does not. If the reinscription of a name is strategic, we would be looking for names which play to the emancipatory moment of 'democracy-to-come' rather than the naturalizing moment of fraternization. Politics is already the name of dissensus and dispute – ethics is rooted in a community, or a presumed consensus of some sort, even if not in a thinking of blood or race.

There is a precedent for this strategic reinscription of politics against ethics within Derrida's work itself. His famous early analyses sought to demonstrate a consistent priority given to speech over writing in the history of philosophy. This priority is never absolute, but appears recurrently. Writing, as the sign of a sign, is seen as secondary compared with speech, which in turn is often seen as an enfeebled representation of some interior sign. When Derrida seeks to rethink this system, he only has the words of metaphysics with which to do it. The idea of a generalized textuality which he is interested in is one in which there would be no unique self-presence, no first term from which another term would be derived. No first place in other words, only second places. But rather than invent another term to describe this peculiar economy, Derrida returns to the word which he already has available, the word which already names a secondary sign, and which he generalizes to encompass signs in general. That word is of course writing. In *Of Grammatology*, where Rousseau condemns writing as 'representative, fallen, secondary, instituted' [GRA 17 / 29] Derrida takes writing, as the 'signifier of a signifier' to describe 'the movement of all language' [GRA 7 / 16].<sup>19</sup> I believe that the same argument could be made about the relation between ethics and politics. If the word ethics comes naturally to Levinas at the point where he tries to think the 'Good' 'beyond' 'being' is this not in itself the return of a metaphysical value? We are perhaps not even so very far from a particular trajectory within Levinas's own thought here. Robert Bernasconi has argued that Levinas himself comes to realize this, at Derrida's prompting, and begins to suggest other words for the ethical relation, even after he has stripped away the language of ontology in *Otherwise than Being*.<sup>20</sup> But if there is a traditional priority ascribed to ethics over politics, and if not



throughout the tradition, at least in the work of Levinas, is there not already a 'second' term to describe the general economy of violence which Levinas has tried to save ethics from? And would that word not be politics?

However, the point goes beyond a simple linguistic quibble. Everything I have been concerned to argue in this book has led to the conclusion that not only is Derrida's work political, and perhaps 'first' and foremost political, but that it must also lead us to a reevaluation of politics itself. In the final part of the book I will argue that Derrida's account of the decision affirms *every* decision as the potential site of an opening to the other, of something else happening. Every decision, whether it leads to 'better' or to 'worse', whether it is emancipatory or not, testifies to the possibility of that 'better', in attesting to the possibility of something else – even those decisions regularly dismissed as 'merely' political. I don't think it is an oversight on Derrida's part that, throughout the texts I have been considering, he regularly discusses law, politics and justice, but only rarely does he mention ethics.

This is also a question of the polemical context in which I have been concerned to argue against Simon Critchley's understanding of the ethics of deconstruction. By equating Levinas and Derrida, Critchley's reading not only blurs the important difference to be thought between them (if not assigned to either one of them) but reduces the strangeness of the pre-original response in Derrida's work by treating it as ethical and personal rather than political and inter-subjective. In doing so, Critchley avoids acknowledging the necessary complicity and irresponsibility which Derrida has been trying to bring into focus. Derrida takes an austere path towards the possibility of the political. As I argued in my second chapter, this also involves a rigorous self-interrogation in order to try and acknowledge the necessary violence of any discursive utterance, for example the national exemplarism of philosophy. However, Critchley fails to appreciate this point. Reading *Specters of Marx*, and Derrida's call for a New International, Critchley allows himself this criticism, in parenthesis (paradoxically, set in the body of a commentary on Derrida, such an aside gains far more weight than it could have done as an argued point):

[...] who would be the enemy of such a New International? The logic of Derrida's argument would seem to entail that the enemy would be any form of nationalism, whether French, Israeli, British or whatever. [...] An open question for me would be as to the sufficiency of this notion of 'the enemy'. Namely, that nationalists are fairly easy enemies to have [...]<sup>21</sup>

On this basis, Critchley finds Derrida guilty of providing only the infelicitous politics that Critchley himself has extracted from his work. As I have argued, there can be no possibility of simply opposing nationalism for Derrida. Critchley's incomprehension is not surprising if we bear in

mind both Derrida's remark that a national idiom will always come as 'a scandal' to 'the self-styled philosopher' [ONH 3] and Critchley's appeal in the closing pages of *The Ethics of Deconstruction* to the 'properly Socratic moment' in which politics is put into question by the philosopher: 'There is, I believe, an urgent need to re-establish the political link between philosophy [...] and citizenship' [ED 237–8]. For Derrida, the philosopher is always already on the side of their own city, and it is that which must come into question. If there is an ethical imperative in deconstruction, Derrida's concern is to show that this imperative will always already have been broken, betrayed, transgressed, as soon as I have begun to speak, or remain silent, in one language rather than another. But by recognizing and beginning to negotiate with this necessary political transgression of the ethical, Derrida affirms the opening to something else which would be neither ethics nor politics. 'Democracy-to-come' is not the name of a political project to be initiated, nor of a regulative ethical ideal against which our democracies are to be measured – although it is perhaps both of these to some extent. Rather, 'democracy-to-come' is a name for a combination of both a politics of waiting without expectation, and an incessant and impatient negotiation.

Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, would not the de-naturalization of decision that I discussed in my first chapter lead us to question ethics as an ethnics. I coin the neologism in order to suggest that any appeal to eth(n)ics repeats the naturalization of the political decision. The understanding of politics with which Derrida is concerned in *Politics of Friendship* would be an attempt to keep the brother apart from the friend and from this perspective would appear to be exactly directed against something like Levinas's own thought. What Levinas's tendency to find the messianic revealed in an actual place, in the homeland of one people rather than another, warns us is not that we should simply turn against all nationalisms or particularisms. For there is no way we could do that without installing a more naive nationalism in their place, in thinking we have become cosmopolitan or universalist philosophers. Instead it is to think this inevitability through to its limit, to the point where it opens to another politics, a new thought of friendship, a new thought of democracy; while seeking to intervene, to the best of our ability, in the here and now. But this intervention must not follow a rule, and will therefore not be susceptible to the kind of theorization that Critchley demands. No analysis of the world will adequately prepare us for a decision as to what to do, will be able to remove the chance and the risk that is a decision, here and now, in 'this political practice that history is' [PoF 114 / 134], this 'infinite passage through violence' [WD 130 / 191].

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*Part 4*

*Deconstruction and Depoliticization*

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## *Introduction*

In *Specters of Marx* Derrida suggest that his project may be understood in terms of a paradoxical fidelity to 'a certain spirit' of Marx. On the one hand deconstruction operates as a critique of the 'gap between an empirical reality and a regulating ideal' in order to attempt to make 'reality' correspond to the 'ideal' as closely as possible [SOM 86 /143]. On the other hand, deconstruction involves putting the concept of that regulative ideal into question [SOM 87 /143]: it is a '*radical* critique, namely a procedure ready to undertake its self-critique' [SOM 88 /145]. For example, Derrida is not only able to criticize the treatment of the *sans-papiers* in the name of the laws of hospitality; but he can also demonstrate the limits of the laws of hospitality themselves in the name of a hyperbolic or absolute hospitality in which we can recognize the contours of 'democracy-to-come' and 'undeconstructible' justice.

As a political practice in its own right, deconstruction requires the performative problematization of its own political interventions in an attempt to negotiate as responsibly as possible with the impossibility of absolute responsibility. Such a political practice cannot be circumvented by the appeal to 'ethics', and locates us within the economy of violence which is both history and politics. So to understand deconstruction as a political practice leads us inevitably towards some understanding or definition of politics. After all, in its concern for 'what happens' deconstruction must also be an account, if not perhaps quite a theory, of politics. In this final part of the book, I will argue that Derrida's work yields an account of politics in terms of depoliticization and repoliticization which opens the way not only for further critique, however *radical*, but also for the construction of a practice of political analysis. What distinguishes this mode of analysis from that of other radical theorists is its refusal to identify the forces of repoliticization, or more accurately, its negotiation with the insight that every political identification is a depoliticization, a prediction of decision and a foreclosure of responsibility.

## *The Spectrality of Politics*

In order to evaluate Derrida's claim in *Specters of Marx* that 'there will be no repoliticization, there will be no politics' [SoM 87 / 144] without the combination of strategies he has suggested – in effect, that there will be no democracy without deconstruction – in this chapter I turn my attention to the theory of politics implied by deconstruction as a political practice. In order to give the discussion a focus I will consider Derrida's work as a contribution to the current debate within political theory as to the very specificity, nature and limits of politics. Several strands within contemporary political thought may be said to constitute such an investigation.<sup>1</sup> Their shared concern is with the possibility of acting politically at all; to repoliticize in the face of a perceived depoliticization. This depoliticization is not simply evident at the level of socio-historical observation, but within political theory itself. In her *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Bonnie Honig argues that a distinction can be drawn between theories of politics which aim at reducing 'dissensus, resistance, conflict, struggle' and those theories which affirm this political realm. On one side Kant; on the other Nietzsche: 'Kant soothes and seals the ruptures Nietzsche celebrates and aggravates'.<sup>2</sup> Jacques Rancière has argued in a similar vein that there is a fundamental conflict between philosophy and politics. Philosophy can only ever function as a rational policing of the inequality which founds politics:

what is called 'political philosophy' might well be the set of reflective operations whereby philosophy tries to rid itself of politics, to suppress a scandal in thinking proper to the exercise of politics. This theoretical scandal is none other than the rationality of disagreement.<sup>3</sup>

At stake is not only the possibility of acting politically, but of thinking politics at all, let alone thinking politics politically.

Derrida nowhere proposes an explicit definition of politics. However, as we have seen, beyond the question of democracy, *Politics of Friendship* may be read as a meditation on the concept and the practice of politics. Similarly, the development of deconstruction as political practice can be considered as a process of coming to terms with 'the implicit politics' of not only language but any form of action [POF 305 / 339]. Rather than attempting to violently abstract or deduce a theory of politics from those aspects of Derrida's work with which I have already dealt, I propose that the problem may be usefully approached by collating a number of scattered references to 'depoliticiza-

tion' and 'repoliticization'. For example in 'Marx and Sons', a response to criticisms of *Specters of Marx*, Derrida draws attention to a distortion of his words by Gayatri Spivak, who glosses the passage I have referred to above ('there will be no repoliticization otherwise' [SoM 87 / 144]) as 'we won't politicize'. Derrida's own account is that he 'was insisting on the fact that, in the absence of the conditions I define in this context, we will not succeed in repoliticizing, something I obviously desire and which it plainly seems to me desirable to do'.

Derrida has rarely been this explicit about his political aim; but the question is immediately made more complex: 'But, of course, a repoliticization always involves a relative depoliticization, an awareness that an old concept of the political has, in itself, been depoliticized or is depoliticizing.'<sup>4</sup> This complex relationship between repoliticization and depoliticization is the object of this chapter. I begin by giving an account of the influential contribution made to the debate on the nature of politics by Carl Schmitt, before considering Derrida's response to it in *Politics of Friendship*.<sup>5</sup> What Derrida calls a 'spectrality' of the political not only renders Schmitt's attempt at a pure definition of politics impossible but opens up an alternative account cast in terms of depoliticization and repoliticization on which the remaining chapters will focus.

## DERRIDA AND SCHMITT

The place of Carl Schmitt in the schematic genealogy set out in *Politics of Friendship* is ambiguous. On the one hand, Schmitt can clearly be situated as just another example within the larger framework of political thought from Aristotle to Nancy; but on the other hand, since Schmitt makes the friend-enemy distinction the foundation of the concept of politics itself, his work must inevitably receive some kind of privilege in a book concerned with precisely the same question – even if Derrida's aim is to problematize rather than to confirm it. Derrida emphasizes Schmitt's relationship to the Nietzschean reversal in the tradition, given the centrality of the figure of the enemy in his writing. One reading of Nietzsche, Derrida writes, 'would lead back to a tradition of modernity which, in a naturally differentiated and complicated fashion, goes back at least to Hegel', a tradition which 'takes on systematic form in the work of Carl Schmitt' [PoF 83 / 101]. He also remarks on the Hegelian features of Schmitt's theory; the general importance of negation, antagonism and opposition [PoF 139–40 / 160–2; 162 / 187; 164 / 190] and his Hegelian doctrine of the State [PoF 120 / 140]. Yet the importance of the concepts of friend and enemy to Schmitt, and for the definition of the political with which Derrida is concerned in the book – even if not throughout the work, or in his other texts – suggests that the two and a half chapters devoted to *The Concept of the Political* is an exemplary point from which to tackle Derrida's own understanding of politics.



The central statement of Carl Schmitt's *The Concept of the Political*, is that 'the specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy'. Schmitt immediately explains that this is a 'definition in the sense of a criterion and not [...] an exhaustive definition or one indicative of substantial content' [CP 26]. His intention is to define the essence of politics and ground political thought in a fundamental distinction analogous to those made in aesthetics, between the beautiful and the ugly, and in moral philosophy, between good and evil. This distinction between friend and enemy, Schmitt argues, is autonomous: it exists independently of any other criteria. Utility, beauty or goodness do not necessarily define the friend in the political sense, just as the harmful, ugly or evil are not necessarily the enemy [CP 27]. This distinction is more profound than the association of politics with the state: the state is political, but the state is not a sufficient definition of the political [CP 19–20]. 'Friend' and 'enemy' in their political sense must also be understood without reference to psychological factors; these terms are not the expression of any feeling of enmity or affection:

an enemy exists only when, at least potentially, one fighting collectivity of people confronts a similar collectivity. The enemy is solely the public enemy, because everything that has a relationship to such a collectivity of men, particularly to a whole nation, becomes public by means of such a relationship. [CP 28]

The identity of the enemy is established and authorized by the state; conversely, for the state to be a political entity, it must establish enemies. Even if the political entity is not actually engaged in a violent struggle or combat with its enemy, the relationship is predicated on the possibility of killing, of war, and of the state's mobilization of the lives of its subjects [CP 33]. The possibility of war with the enemy is the final determinant of the politicality of the state:

in the orientation toward the possible extreme case of an actual battle against a real enemy, the political entity is essential, and it is the decisive entity for the friend-or-enemy grouping; and in this (and not in any kind of absolutist sense) it is sovereign. Otherwise the political entity is nonexistent. [CP 39; cf. 45–6]

It should be clear from this that Schmitt's definition of the political can provide criteria against which a state or a political situation might be judged to determine something like a degree of politicality; the extent to which it is properly political. However, in doing so Schmitt has also introduced the possibility of the relative or total disappearance of politics. Accordingly, much of *The Concept of the Political* reads like a complaint against the

various possible threats to politics discussed by Schmitt. So, for example, a world without war, 'a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction of friend and enemy and hence a world without politics' [CP 35; cf. 53–7]. However, the threat of depoliticization also takes less extreme and more diverse forms in *The Concept of the Political*. Too great an emphasis on party politics rather than on 'the political attitude of the state' leads to 'banal', 'parasite- and caricature-like' forms of politics. These forms only retain a reference to the ultimate criterion of the political through both 'some sort of antagonistic moment' and 'everyday language, even when the awareness of the extreme case has been entirely lost' [CP 30]. The equation of politics with party politics which is possible 'whenever antagonisms among domestic political parties succeed in weakening the all-embracing political unity, the state' would be a further symptom of depoliticization [CP 31]. The surrender of sovereignty – the right of the state to determine its own enemies for itself [CP 38–9] – to an international body would also be depoliticizing [CP 50]. Moreover, in political theory, not only the pluralism of Cole and Laski [CP 40–45] and liberalism [CP 61; 69–72] but any philosophy based on an 'anthropological optimism' [CP 64] will threaten the possibility of politics itself by ignoring the decisive category of the political distinction between friend and enemy.

Schmitt claims that his analysis is a neutral and objective deduction of the distinction required to define the political – that it 'favours neither war nor militarism, neither imperialism or pacifism' [CP 33] and could be described as neither optimistic nor pessimistic [CP 63]. 'It is irrelevant here', Schmitt writes, 'whether one rejects, accepts or perhaps finds it an atavistic remnant of barbaric times that nations continue to group themselves according to friend and enemy.' His concern 'is neither with abstractions nor with normative ideals, but with inherent reality and the real possibility of such a distinction' [CP 28]. However, this claim is undermined by his own admission that:

all political concepts, images and terms have a polemical meaning. They are focused on a specific conflict and are bound to a concrete situation; the result (which manifests itself in war or revolution) is a friend–enemy grouping, and they turn into empty and ghostlike abstractions when this situation disappears. [CP 30]

Schmitt has in mind 'words such as state, republic, society, class, as well as sovereignty, constitutional state, absolutism, dictatorship, economic planning, neutral or total state' but 'above all [...] the use of the word political' [CP 30–2]. He specifies that this must be the case even when the use of the term is portrayed as 'nonpolitical (in the sense of purely scientific, purely moral, purely juristic, purely aesthetic, purely economic, or on the basis of similar purities)' [CP 32]. So there can be no purely analytic or neutral

definition of the political, since the use of the word will always be inscribed in a polemical context.

Schmitt's understanding of the context of his own polemical definition of the political is usefully summarized in a conference paper entitled 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations'. Although written in 1929, two years after the first publication of *The Concept of the Political*, the paper was included in the third edition of that book (1932) so we can presume that Schmitt considered them to be thematically linked. Schmitt's broad purpose in it is to undertake a general diagnosis of the state of depoliticization of Europe following the 1914–18 war. He undertakes three specific tasks. The first is to provide a general account of the historical circumstances which have led to what Schmitt perceives to be the depoliticization of Europe. Schmitt describes this in terms of successive cultural shifts. The second is to give a specific characterization of the current era, the technological age, as the climax of this process. The third task, which follows logically from the previous two but precedes them in the rhetorical arrangement of the argument, is to open the path for a repoliticization by identifying a new enemy for Europe. In doing so Schmitt conforms to the thesis of the earlier essay that the essence of politics depends on the distinction between the friend and the enemy. In this case Schmitt argues that the new enemy for Europe is Russia, which epitomizes the 'anti-religion of technicity' [ND 131] and by effecting 'a union of Socialism and Slavism' has seized 'our knowledge and technology as weapons' [ND 130].

Like his 1922 text *Political Theology*, in which he argued that 'all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts',<sup>6</sup> Schmitt's genealogy of the depoliticization of Europe in 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations' rests on a secularization thesis. What Schmitt here calls 'depoliticization' is not merely a conceptual possibility but a historical event, a consequence of certain identifiable developments in European culture and history subsequent to the demise of theology as a foundational discourse. Schmitt makes clear, however, that what he describes is not to be taken as either a necessary or a universal process: it is not a theory of 'cultural *dominance*' or a 'universal historico-philosophical *law*'; it is not to be understood as either a continuous line, or in terms of progress or decline; nor does it rule out the possibility of different stages co-existing within the same country, or even the same family [ND 132]. These precautions notwithstanding, Schmitt's account is somewhat reductive. He interprets the last four hundred years of European history on the basis of a reaction to the theological and political turmoil of the sixteenth century. Cultural developments, he argues, are driven by the search for a neutral sphere on which to ground cultural practice in which agreement can be reached through debate rather than conflict. However, 'in each new sphere, at first considered neutral, the antitheses of men and interests unfold with a new intensity and become increasingly sharper' [ND 138] ensuring that

the process is continuous. Theology is succeeded by a metaphysics based on natural science in the seventeenth century, to be followed in turn by a humanitarian morality in the eighteenth, economics in the nineteenth, and technology in the twentieth century. In the terms established by *The Concept of the Political*, a succession of depoliticizing tendencies have dominated European politics and thought, seeking to subsume the properly political in the name of a rational resolution of conflict in a higher set of values. This depoliticization is most intensive in the development of nineteenth-century liberalism as an accompaniment to the dominance of the economic models, since in the liberal doctrine of the neutral state 'the process of neutralization finds its classical formula because it has also grasped what is most decisive: political power'[ND 138; cf. CP 69–73].

However, in the triumph of technology, the process of neutralization enters a new phase. This is a result of what Schmitt considers to be the instrumental nature of technology: it is 'refreshingly factual' and 'serves everyone'; since progress is now understood not in religious, moral, or even economic terms, but in technological terms, technology becomes an 'absolute and ultimate neutral ground' [ND 138]. Technology appears to offer no criterion for evaluation of the ends to which it is put:

Technology itself remains culturally blind. Consequently, no conclusions which usually can be drawn from the central spheres can be derived from technology as such and nothing but technology – neither a concept of cultural progress, nor a type of cleric or intellectual leader, nor a specific political system. [ND 139]

The paradoxical result is that the age of greatest neutralization also holds the greatest potential for a repoliticization. The very neutrality of technology, which makes it available to 'every strong politics' might also be the end to neutralization: 'The present century can only be provisionally understood as the century of technology. How ultimately it should be understood will be revealed only when it is known which type of politics is strong enough to master the new technology and which type of genuine friend–enemy groupings can develop on this new ground' [ND 141]. It is in this context that Schmitt proposes his own analysis of politics as a contribution to the repoliticization of both political thought and politics as such.

To summarize: on the basis of a historical depoliticization Schmitt proposes a repoliticization of political thought. Only by grasping the properly political distinction between friend and enemy as the basis of politics can political theory adequately think a practical repoliticization. This political distinction between friend and enemy is in turn defined by the possibility of war, 'armed combat between organized political entities' [CP 32], and in particular on 'the real possibility of physical killing' [CP 33]. The state's political authority resides in 'the real possibility of deciding in a concrete

situation upon the enemy and the ability to fight him with the power emanating from the entity' [CP 45] and the concomitant power of life or death over its own citizens [CP 46–8]. Even if it does not actually declare war, a state remains political to the extent that the possibility of such a decision on the enemy is left open: 'when it no longer possesses the capacity or the will to make this distinction, it ceases to exist politically' [CP 49]. It is the curious nature of this decision, whose presence, even if only virtual – as a possibility rather than a fact – is the necessary condition of politics as such, on which Derrida's response to Schmitt in *Politics of Friendship* centres.

### THE SPECTRALITY OF THE POLITICAL

The importance here of Derrida's reading of Schmitt in the central chapters of *Politics of Friendship* is that in *The Concept of the Political* and its subsequent supplement, *Theory of the Partisan*, Derrida finds a 'spectrality' of the political. Schmitt's attempt to define a pure concept of the political, which Derrida suggests is almost phenomenological in rigour and intent [PoF 87 / 106], is destined to failure: the 'concretion of the concrete, this ultimate determination to which Schmitt ceaselessly appeals, is always exceeded, overtaken – let us say haunted – by the abstraction of its spectre' [PoF 117 / 137]. Not only does this 'spectre' ruin Schmitt's repoliticization of the concept of politics, but Derrida concludes that it is 'lodged within the political itself; the antithesis of the political dwells within, and politicizes, the political' [PoF 138 / 160]. The spectre comes before the political, and is not only the ruin of politics, but also its possibility – it 'politicizes' the political. Schmitt's attempt at a pure definition of the political 'capitalize[s] "*en abyme*"' [PoF 115 / 135] all the difficulties of any similar project; but in doing so they open up another reading of politics, a deconstructive reading, or what we might call, following *Specters of Marx*, a political hauntology. This phantasmatic political theory might be read as the quasi-foundation of the politics of deconstruction. Foundational, since this is the text in which the concept of the political itself comes under the most intense scrutiny; but only quasi-foundational since what is uncovered is an effect which 'ruins in advance and *from within*' [PoF 144 / 166] such oppositions as that between politics and the political; between political theory and political practice; between foundation and superstructure. Derrida's reading of Schmitt cannot provide a firm basis from which to deduce the politics of deconstruction, but may be read as a particularly condensed example of the political dimensions of his work in general. Derrida's discussion resists easy summary, since it is discursive rather than systematic, often repetitive and punctuated with a number of lengthy digressions. At the risk of over-formalizing Derrida's approach, I have summarized his argument around three moments where the 'spectrality' of the political interrupts Schmitt's attempt to define politics.

1. One of the key distinctions on which Schmitt's account depends is that between the public enemy and the private enemy. The political enemy is not 'merely any competitor or just any partner of a conflict in general. He is also not the private adversary whom one hates' [CP 28]. The importance of this clarification is that it removes the definition of the political from the psychological or merely personal realm. Here, as elsewhere, Schmitt would like to appeal to 'daily speech' [CP 30] for the sense of his definitions, but 'German and other languages do not distinguish between the private and the political enemy' [CP 29]. So instead Schmitt appeals to classical sources, referring to the difference between *hostis* and *inimicus* in Latin, and between *polémios* and *ekthrós* in Greek, and in particular to Plato's contrast in the *Republic* 'between the public enemy (*polémios*) and the private one (*ekthrós*)' in the context of the 'antithesis of war (*pólemos*) and insurrection, upheaval, rebellion, civil war (*stásis*)' [CP 28–9 n.9].<sup>7</sup> Derrida does not disagree that such a distinction is made in *Republic*, but suggests that Schmitt does not specify 'what type of relationship or connection this is' [PoF 89–90 / 110]. He notes that Schmitt's gloss on Plato – 'the dominant idea here is that a people cannot wage war on itself and that a "civil war" is never but a rending of self but would perhaps not signify the formation of a new State, or even of a new people' [CP 29 n.9] – seems 'hardly Platonic' [PoF 90 / 112]. Derrida argues that the difference between *pólemos* and *stásis* is not directly equivalent to the distinction between domestic politics or civil war and inter-state war, but signifies two different orders of conflict. Both depend on a natural order: Greeks are naturally the enemies of Barbarians, and naturally the friends of other Greeks. Civil war would then be a sickness or disease of friendship, which could not be explained in terms of enmity [PoF 92 / 113]; which would then suggest that the distinction has little bearing on Schmitt's attempt to ground politics in the polarity of friend/enemy.

Derrida argues that the 'prevailing determination of civil war' [PoF 121 / 142] in Schmitt's theory is the consequence of Schmitt's need to map the structure of inter-state relations within the state. The possibility of civil war, of a war within the state confirms the inter-state war as the paradigmatic case of the political. It is the potential 'armed combat' to which it could give rise which makes the internal politics of a state political at all [CP 32]. This would also account for Schmitt's insistence on the definition of an enemy of the state in Greek and Roman law [CP 46–7]. Schmitt's haste in reading Plato seems to be occasioned by a disinclination to complicate this structure, and Derrida is able to draw on Plato to suggest that this structure cannot be so simple. Furthermore, Derrida reminds us that in *Republic* Plato is concerned with an ideal state, and that 'as long as this unity [of justice and power] remains out of reach – that is for ever – the conceptual unities that depend on it [...] remain ideal entities' [PoF 91 / 112]. For Plato, 'the purity of the distinction between *stásis* and *pólemos* remains in the *Republic* a "paradigm", accessible only to discourse' [PoF 114 / 133]. In practice, they

cannot be distinguished. Derrida refers to the following passage: ‘is it possible for anything actual to match a theory? Isn’t any actual thing bound to have less contact with a truth than a theory, however much people deny it?’<sup>8</sup> So for Schmitt, drawing on Plato is a highly ambiguous move, since rather than grounding his concept of the political in the concrete, in everyday language, it removes politics itself to the realm of ideal entities, while in the world itself there will never be a clear distinction between a public enemy and a private enemy, between inter-state war and civil war, and perhaps even between friend and enemy.

This points to a further problem. As I discussed in my first chapter, for Derrida there can be no question of simply opposing the public and private. Yet for Schmitt, the possibility of making this distinction founds his definition of the political. If the public enemy and the private enemy cannot be rigorously discriminated, the purity of the political must be interminably suspended. Derrida suggests that Schmitt’s attempt to refound politics by policing the boundary between public and private is symptomatic of the impossibility of establishing such limits:

at every point when this border is threatened, fragile, porous, contestable (we thus designate so many possibilities that ‘our time’ is accentuating and accelerating in countless ways) the Schmittian discourse collapses. It is against the threat of this ruin that his discourse takes form. [PoF 88 / 107]

Elsewhere Derrida asks: ‘Why does Schmitt take no account of the fact that the police and spy network – precisely the police *qua* spy network [...] – points to what, precisely in the service of the State, ruins in advance and *from within* the possibility of the political, the distinction between public and private?’ [PoF 144 / 166]. Derrida’s intention is not to dismiss Schmitt’s theory out of hand, despite this apparent incoherence at its centre. His interest in Schmitt is as much in the ‘heritage’ of his work [PoF 84 / 102] as in the work itself. The spectrality which ruins Schmitt’s attempt to secure the definition of the political is one which will haunt any attempt to define the political. If it is felt more strongly in *The Concept of the Political* than in other similar theories, it is perhaps testimony to the rigour of that text.

2. It is perhaps owing to this rigour that Schmitt accepts at least one sense in which the concept of the political cannot be ‘pure’. I have already referred to Schmitt’s insistence that ‘the use of the word political’ will always be polemical [CP 30]. On the one hand this would seem to place Schmitt beside Plato: accepting the inaccessibility of the ideal entities he is describing. There could never be a ‘purely political’ state – or a purely political state, indeed – because the political as a concept is only an ideal. On the other hand, however, Schmitt appears to rehabilitate the purity of the concept from another direction: in the concrete and polemical distribu-

tion of the use of the concept. Schmitt, Derrida claims, ‘would like to be able to count on the pure impurity, on the impure purity of the political as such, of the properly political’ [PoF 116 / 136]. This purity cannot be found in theoretical terms, precisely because of the nature of politics:

The concept of the political undoubtedly corresponds, as concept, to what the ideal discourse can *want* to state most rigorously on the ideality of the political. But no politics has ever been adequate to its concept. No political event can be correctly described or defined with recourse to these concepts. And this inadequation is not accidental, since politics is essentially a *praxis*, as Schmitt himself always implies in his ever-so-insistent reliance on the concept of *real, present possibility* or *eventuality* in his analyses of the formal structures of the political. [PoF 114 / 134]

But if the purity of politics cannot be given in conceptual terms, Schmitt turns to an equivalent idealization of political praxis to ground his argument, and to a form of knowing which ‘is not in the mode of theoretical knowledge, but in one of a *practical identification*: knowing consists here in knowing how to identify the friend and the enemy’ [PoF 116 / 136]. However, as Derrida argues throughout *Politics of Friendship*, and as I discussed extensively in my first chapter, this possibility is available neither in theory, nor in practice. Schmitt’s hyperbolic insistence that ‘one can and must know – first of all practically, politically, polemically – *who* is the friend and *who* is the enemy’ [PoF 116 / 136] suggests to Derrida that ‘perhaps [...] the concrete finally remains, in its purity, out of reach, inaccessible, unbreachable, indefinitely deferred, thereby inconceivable to the concept (*Begriff*); consequently as “spectral” (*gespenstisch*) as the ghost on its periphery, which one opposes to it and which could never be set apart’ [PoF 117 / 136–7]. Schmitt’s insistence on the concrete, Derrida argues, is an equally illusory or problematic basis for a definition of politics as the attempt to define politics in conceptual terms.

3. Derrida’s main piece of evidence for the remarking of this failure within Schmitt’s text, and thus for the irreducibility of the spectral to the political, is the contortions of Schmitt’s argument when attempting to define the ‘real possibility’ of war without which ‘the political entity is nonexistent’ [CP 39]. War is the most extreme manifestation of political enmity. If there is no possibility of war with another state, or within the state, there is no real enemy – either because the state is failing in its duty to determine friends and enemies, or because it is too weak to wage war – and politics itself is threatened. Schmitt takes some care not to suggest that war is in and of itself desirable. War ‘does not have to be common, normal, something ideal, or desirable. But it must nevertheless remain a real possibility for as long as the concept of the enemy remains valid’ [CP 33]. Derrida argues that this ‘real possibility’ of war does not belong to the ‘conventionally Aristotelian



opposition of potentiality and act' but is 'something altogether different: the radicalization of a possible *reality* or a *real* possibility' [PoF 124 / 147]. Referring to the German text, Derrida insists on a word which is missed from the English translation of the passage I have just quoted. War must remain '*als reale Möglichkeit vorhanden bleiben*': as Derrida translates it, '*présente comme possibilité réelle*', or in English, '*present as a real possibility*' [PoF 124 / 147]. Beyond the opposition of a possible war to an actual war, Schmitt seems to require that war is not merely a possibility but somehow already 'present'. According to Derrida, this serves to separate two lines of argument: war can be the transcendental condition of possibility for politics, but without becoming its telos, 'the aim, the finality or even the content of politics' [PoF 126 / 149]. The 'presence' of this 'real possibility of war' also becomes the criterion against which the degree of politicization of a state, a situation, or indeed the world in general, is to be judged. The important question for Schmitt is always that of knowing 'whether such a friend/enemy grouping is really at hand' [CP 36], or in Derrida's translation, 'is or is not present as possibility or as real actuality/effectivity (*als reale Möglichkeit oder Wirklichkeit vorhanden ist oder nicht*)' [PoF 131 / 155]. Where the English translation addresses the problem as one of verification, of the real friend-enemy rather than a false friend-enemy, Derrida stresses an ambiguity in the logic of the original text:

The syntax of this question, which we have already cited, does not admit of a decision on whether the double alternative (*oder ... oder*) is of the order of presence (*vorhanden ist oder nicht*) or of the order of modalities of this presence (real *or* effective/actual possibility, *real* possibility or *real* effectivity/actuality: *reale Möglichkeit oder Wirklichkeit*). In the first case the grouping of the political (friend/enemy) would always be present, in one mode or the other; in the other, it could be present or not. [PoF 131–2 / 155]

The question would be not whether the apparent friend-enemy grouping is a true or false grouping but either: a) whether the grouping is present or not; or b) in what mode the grouping is present. Derrida stresses that there can be no decision between these alternatives; yet he suspects that by 'relying on a logic of inference, of proof, of indication and of testimony', Schmitt decides 'for the presence of the political' [PoF 133 / 157]. To hold in mind both questions would be to allow for a spectrality of the political; never to claim to be absolutely sure if there is or is not any politics. But Schmitt 'decides [...] either in terms of *positive and univocal* signs of the presence of the political, or in terms of what the *disappearance* of these signs witnesses of their *possible and permanent* presence' [PoF 133 / 157]. For Schmitt, depoliticization, which as I suggested in my discussion of 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations', is a historical rather than a theoretical or conceptual

possibility, and can be attested to in historical terms, merely testifies to the permanent presence of politics.

### SPECTRALITY AND DEPOLITICIZATION

Derrida's demonstration that Schmitt's discourse is 'ruined in advance' by a spectrality of the political might be construed to be in itself depoliticizing, or symptomatic of a depoliticization of philosophy or of political thought. There can never be a pure concept of the political. Does this mean there is no possibility of a repoliticization? No: this argument could only be made if we retain a similar understanding of depoliticization to that operated by Schmitt. Depoliticization would be the name or the symptom of something historical. But Derrida's work undermines that possibility. The spectrality of the concept is not a historical decline which comes to affect the concept from outside, but its very condition of possibility. If spectrality is in some sense a depoliticization, the announcement of the impossibility of a total politicization or of the absolute presence of the political, this condition does not accompany or follow a pre-given concept of the political, but precedes it. Politics itself would be an effect of depoliticization. This understanding of politics would not supply an end to politics, but the necessary basis for any attempt to think radically about politics, or even to think politically at all. In a passage which echoes the lines in *Specters of Marx* which describe deconstruction as a repoliticization, Derrida proposes:

two types of rejoinder to the Schmittian project [...], two distinct sides of the same answer to *The Concept of the Political*, that is, to the reconstruction of the political. On the one hand, we seem to be confirming – but not by way of deploring the fact, as Schmitt does – an essential and necessary depoliticization. This depoliticization would no longer necessarily be the neuter or negative indifference to all forms of the social bond, of community, of friendship. On the other hand, through this depoliticization [...] one would seek to think, interpret and implement another politics, another democracy. [PoF 104 / 127–8]

The repoliticizing potential of deconstruction, which Derrida claims is the only potential path for a successful repoliticization – 'there will be no repoliticization, there will be no politics otherwise' [SoM 87 / 144] – depends on a prior depoliticization. This depoliticization is not, as it is for Schmitt, the diagnosis of a historical depoliticization 'out there'. It is the discovery of a depoliticization already at work within both the concept of the political and the practice of politics. On this at least, Schmitt is correct:

the inadequation to the concept happens to belong to the concept itself. This inadequation of the concept to itself manifests itself pre-eminently

in the order of the political or political practice, unless this order – or rather, its possibility – would situate the very place, the phenomenon or the ‘reason’ of an inadequation of any concept to itself: the concept of disjunction *qua* the conceptual being of the concept. [PoF 114–15 / 134]

If, as Derrida argues, the concept of politics cannot be secured by theoretical discrimination, nor even, as Schmitt hopes, by appeal to the ‘concrete’, within ‘this political practice that history is’ [PoF 114 / 134] any concept or practice of politics should manifest the limits of this problem. We are here at the heart of the claim which Derrida makes for the unique importance of deconstruction. It is the ‘spectrality’ of the political which must be addressed by any political thought which hopes to be in any way adequate to its object. Moreover, the ‘spectrality’ of the *political* means that there can only ever be *politics*: there is no essence or spirit which can secure or recover any properly political activity or event, no purity of politics.

It is this configuration which I will explore for the remainder of this book. However, rather than focus explicitly on the notion of ‘spectrality’, I will pose the problem in terms of depoliticization and repoliticization. The difference between these approaches may be thought of as two ways of asking the same question. The first might ask ‘What is the *spectrality* of politics?’ The second, with a change of emphasis, would be ‘What is the *spectrality of politics*?’ The first question would lead us back to Derrida’s work, even if it was to elaborate those places where the principle of ‘spectrality’ had imposed itself upon him. Rather than returning the question to one set of texts, the second question, whose impetus I will follow here, opens politics itself to the principle of spectrality. The initial question would lend itself to a more exclusive reading of Derrida’s claim that deconstructive questioning is the necessary condition of a repoliticization, in which he appears to be claiming a unique priority for his own texts, or those of his followers. The other question, almost a democratization of deconstruction itself, would seek to direct attention to the ways in which deconstruction can be said to be already at work, and not just in certain texts, but in ‘this political practice that history is’ [PoF 114 / 134]. The radical question of politics, of democracy, would not be found exclusively within deconstruction understood to mean the work of Jacques Derrida but within deconstruction understood to mean the very substance and texture of politics itself. It is this radical potential which I propose to analyse in terms of depoliticization and repoliticization.

## *Depoliticization and Repoliticization*

Deconstruction cannot provide a definition of the political. Any such attempt is ruined from within by the principle of spectrality which belongs to the concept simply by virtue of its being a concept. This is not, however, to say that there is no such thing as politics, nor that there can be no philosophical reflection on politics. For Schmitt, reflection on the concept of the political is an essential preliminary to a successful politicization. For Derrida, it seems, the opposite is true: reflection on the impossibility of the concept in general must accompany either the study of any specific concept, or of the reality that that concept seeks to describe and determine. In this chapter I will begin to outline what such a deconstructive reflection on politics might look like, drawing not so much on what we can learn from those points at which Derrida himself relates deconstruction to world events, but on his account of the decision and the undecidable. Derrida's own specific local and contingent strategic negotiations of political responsibility can hold no legislative significance for anyone concerned to think responsibly in their turn: deconstruction's claim to political interest is predicated on the refusal to elaborate a political programme. Passing through this conceptual work on the decision will clarify the distinction between depoliticization in Derrida's work and Schmitt's use of the term, and enable me to formulate an account of deconstruction in terms of effects of depoliticization and repoliticization. Comparing Derrida's work on Benjamin with his analysis of Schmitt I will be able to suggest that Derrida is concerned with the possibility of a quasi-revolutionary politics which bypasses the moment of the sovereign and exceptional decision – war or revolutionary violence – in order to think something like a revolutionary politics of the everyday.

### DECISION AND UNDECIDABILITY

Derrida has written extensively on the concept of decision, but without proposing a single or unified theory. In this section I will attempt to summarize some of this work without systematizing it. On this basis, in the next section I elaborate an understanding of politics in terms of depoliticization and repoliticization.

Derrida's account of the decision claims to draw on both a traditional philosophical concept of the decision as well as on an appeal to our everyday experience of the decision. We can helpfully distinguish between these

traditional or common-sense propositions which serve to define a decision, and Derrida's complication of the discussion. So, a first and reasonably uncontroversial proposal might be that a decision arises in a situation where there is a choice between two or more alternatives. There must also be an element of hesitation between the choices. If I knew in advance what my choice would be, there would not be a decision; or rather, a decision is only necessary to the extent that my choice is not certain or predictable in advance. A decision must thus be distinguished from a situation in which I follow a rule or a programme: 'A decision that didn't go through the ordeal of the undecidable would not be a free decision, it would only be the programmable application or unfolding of a calculable process' [FoL 24 / 53].

It also seems fairly incontestable that there is some relationship between the decision and the singularity of an event – a decision happens once and once only. A new set of circumstances requires a new decision. To ask whether a decision can be repeated is to test this proposition. Derrida's answer is 'no'. In a discussion of his work, he gives the example of marriage:

If you think when you get married it's enough to make the decision once and not the day after, then it's not a promise, it's not a decision. And the second decision is as new as the first. The content is the same – and it is different.<sup>1</sup>

Giving my beloved a present on Valentine's Day will never excuse me from seeking to demonstrate my love every other day of the year. To follow a decision made earlier would be to follow the rule set by that earlier decision: to repeat the decision, like reaffirming a vow, is to make it again, in different circumstances. Only if there is the possibility of a different outcome is this still a decision. All of this seems to correspond to everyday experience and to what we generally mean by the word 'decision'.

Derrida complicates this picture by drawing some rigorous conclusions from the propositions I have set out. For example: if a decision does not follow a rule, then a decision can never be predicted or determined on the basis of any amount of knowledge. We can certainly prepare for a decision, and may try and take into account as many factors as possible, may try and predict as many of the outcomes which might follow from it as we are capable of, but if this ever meant being certain of the outcome, we would no longer be faced with a decision:

The instant of decision must remain heterogeneous to all knowledge as such, to all theoretical or reportive determination, even if it may and must be preceded by all possible science and conscience. The latter are unable to determine the leap of decision without transforming it into the irresponsible application of a programme, hence without depriving it of what

makes it into a sovereign and free decision – in a word, of what makes it a decision, if there is one. [PoF 219 / 247]

Equally, because the instant of decision is ‘heterogeneous to all knowledge’ we can never be sure if a decision has been taken. This is what requires Derrida to qualify his argument here with ‘if there is one’. We might always look back at what we thought should have been a decision and see it as the unfolding of a plan, the carrying out of a conscious or unconscious programme.

From this follows a second conclusion. If the instant of decision is heterogeneous to knowledge, not only can we never be certain if there is a decision or not, or if there has *ever* been a decision worthy of the name, but no conceptualization of decisions in general will ever be able to account for any particular decision. This is not to claim that no one ever has an *experience* of what we generally call a decision; but that no *concept* of that decision could be strictly and rigorously delineated. If the undecidable is a necessary and constitutive element of the decision, a theory of the decision would also have to be a theory of the undecidable. In the language of transcendental philosophy, undecidability is a necessary condition of possibility of a decision. ‘The undecidable’, Derrida notes in *Politics of Friendship*, ‘– that is to say, the condition of decision’ [PoF 219 / 247].

The concept of the decision would not be sufficient to tell apart the decision and the undecidable: ‘the ordeal of the undecidable’ is ‘never past or passed, it is not a surmounted or sublated moment in the decision’ [FoL 24 / 54]. Here another flaw is inscribed in the concept of the decision, and Derrida draws a further consequence. A decision cannot be fully conscious. When Derrida speaks of a passive decision [PoF 68–9 / 87–8], or of the decision of the other in me, he does not mean to disprove that anyone has ever made a decision, but that anything which could be called a decision could not be accounted for on the basis of the intentions of the person making it. In fact, no concept of decision can account for the making of decisions. It can describe what we think of as a decision, but can never explain or dictate a single decision [PoF 68 / 87]. To try and translate Derrida’s account into more everyday terms, we might say that the experience of not being quite in control of what you are doing at the point where you make your mind up might be the symptom of a decision. The fact that you could reconstruct your motives afterwards might not be enough to cancel the constitutive moment at which something unaccountable enters into your calculation of what to do.

Bearing in mind Derrida’s conclusion from his reading of Carl Schmitt, that the inadequation of a concept to itself is a necessary function of its being a concept, we should not perhaps be too surprised that his conclusions here apparently devastate the concept of the decision. This may be the case, but at the same time Derrida is confirming not only the possibility of attempting

to think about the decision, but also the importance of doing so. The difficulties of a conceptual analysis of the decision call both for a new way of thinking about what we call the decision, and an attempt to think both the concept of the decision and the concept of the concept differently.

Derrida's essay 'Force of Law: the "Mystical Foundation of Authority"' may be read as an attempt to do just that. Derrida's discussion of the relationship between law and justice focuses heavily on the moment of decision in which the law is applied to a particular case. As I have just suggested, for Derrida the experience of judgement is that of an impossible moment of decision, while justice is constituted by the contradiction between the universality of law and the singularity of the subject before the law. There is only a chance of justice being done if the law is interpreted according to the individual case, but in so far as the law is not tailored to the singularity of this case, it is also violence. To the extent that the law accommodates the individual, justice can be seen to be done; and the decision will be a decision rather than the unfolding of a law without regard to the specificity of the case at hand:

Each case is other, each decision is different and requires an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely. At least, if the rule guarantees it in no uncertain terms, so that the judge is a calculating machine; which happens, and [which will always happen in part, according to an irreducible mechanical or technical parasitism which introduces a necessary iterability of judgements; but to that extent] we will not say that he is just, free and responsible. But we also won't say it if he doesn't refer to any law, to any rule or if [...] he [...] leaves aside all rules, all principles.<sup>2</sup> [FoL 23 / 51]

The instant of the decision, of the undecidable choice, is what Derrida calls an aporetic or paradoxical situation. If there is a moment of decision, it is the moment of the suspension of the rules – in a legal judgement, the moment in which the law is invented, reinterpreted, confirmed or modified by its passage through a single case. Yet at this moment the decision is not yet a decision, while as soon as it is a decision, the law has been restabilized, re-fixed, or the decision has set a new precedent, invented a new rule, against which the next case must be judged.

There is apparently no moment in which a decision can be called presently and fully just: either it has not yet been taken according to a rule, and nothing allows us to call it just, or it has already followed a rule – whether received, confirmed, conserved or reinvented – which in its turn is not absolutely guaranteed by anything; if it *were* guaranteed, the decision would be reduced to calculation and we couldn't call it just [FoL 24 / 54]. This moment is not only irreducible to the order of justice, but is a moment of violent and transgressive illegality. For in the moment of decision there is no

law; moreover the law is itself unstable and is constantly being re-made. This can only happen through a violent and illegitimate action which cannot be justified by any law in its turn. For this reason Derrida suggests that the 'very moment of foundation or institution' of the law,

the operation that amounts to founding, inaugurating, justifying law (*droit*), making law, would consist of a *coup de force*, of a performative and therefore interpretative violence that in itself is neither just nor unjust and that no justice and no previous law with its founding anterior moment could guarantee or contradict or invalidate. [FoL 13 / 32–3].

The law is made only in a moment of illegality. This is what Derrida refers to as the 'mystical foundation' of authority or law, and as 'a violence without ground' [FoL 14 / 34].

The moment of decision belongs to neither the order of knowledge nor that of the decidable. But, equally, the temporality of the undecidable remains unable to include the decision. It is worth clarifying slightly that the 'instant of decision' has no ontological status. It is not of the order of being present. As in the case of Schmitt's analysis of the political, we might think of the passage through the undecidable as an account of the spectrality which haunts any decision. What Derrida describes in *Politics of Friendship* as thinking in the mode of 'the perhaps' is a way of thinking about this elusive concept:

the crucial experience of the *perhaps* imposed by the undecidable [...] is not a moment to be exceeded, forgotten or suppressed. It continues to constitute the decision as such; it can never again be separated from it, it produces it *qua* decision *in and through* the undecidable. [PoF 219 / 247]

We can recognize here another approach to hauntology, to suspending the suppositions of ontology that existence is determinable, or can answer questions of the form 'is it?' 'By specifying recurrently,' Derrida writes, "if there is one", by suspending the thesis of existence wherever, between a concept and an event, the law of an aporia, an undecidability, a double bind occurs in interposition, and must in truth impose itself to be endured there' [PoF 38–9 / 59]:

Thus we regularly say – but we could multiply the examples – the gift, *if there is one*; invention, *if there is any such thing*, and so forth. This does not amount to conceding a hypothetical or conditional dimension ('if, supposing that, etc.') but to marking a difference between 'there is' and 'is' or 'exists' – that is to say the words of presence. What there is, if there is one or any, *is* not necessarily. It perhaps does not *exist* nor *ever* present



itself; nevertheless, there is one, or some; there is a chance of there being one, of there being some. [PoF 39 / 59]

## DECISION AND DEPOLITICIZATION

Having set out the basics of Derrida's account of decision, I will draw on that model to give an account of what deconstruction has to say about politics. The similarities are perhaps already apparent. The concept of decision embodies many of the problems we saw exemplified in the failure of Schmitt's attempt to define the purely political. Where, for Schmitt, a spectrality of the political preceded and ruined a pure politics, so 'the undecidable', Derrida comments, 'remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost – but an essential ghost – in every decision, in every event of decision' [FOL 24 / 54]. Just as we can never say for sure that there has been a decision, or what a decision is, so we can never say for certain what would constitute a pure politics, since anything, event or decision or concept, which we wished to call political is inhabited by its opposite, a principle which disrupts its politicality from within. It is this which I call 'depoliticization' and we can understand it by analogy with the undecidable.

Any political decision must pass through the undecidable, and will never be present to itself as a result, but always inhabited by this undecidability. A political decision, like any decision, must have something of the undecidable lodged within it. Equally, it is not a decision, as I argued in Chapter 1, where it follows a rule, for example – and this is the burden of Derrida's argument in *Politics of Friendship* – nowhere that political choices are restricted or predetermined on the basis of the 'natural' value attributed to a family, a people, a homeland, a nation or a state. If the political decision is structured like a decision in general, above and beyond any programming of the decision by the natural values of politics – let us say where it is governed by a politics-to-come – it must necessarily set a rule, as soon as it is made. In other words, there would no longer be a decision, as soon as there is a decision. There is no politics – no decision – where a rule is unfolded/unfolds, and a rule unfolds/is unfolded by every decision. The political decision is divided against itself. The undecidable would become the very name for the political – 'what dwells within, and politicizes, the political': yet at the same time, the political would then become the impossible, that which remains to come, the trace, *différance*. As we have seen, the undecidable is not simply the suspension or refusal of decision. It is the condition of decision, and if it rules out any final conceptualization of the decision, it also prompts a necessary deconstructive questioning which would seek new ways of thinking about a decision. My hypothesis here is that the same can be said for politics.

The impossibility of defining the political for Derrida suggests that we should not seek to give a deconstructive theory of the political any content.

As soon as politics has been defined depoliticization has taken place, and a law established, which will subsequently require further politicization to challenge or expand the definition of the political. Instead of trying to think of politics in terms of a concept or a content, a set of practices or descriptions, we should think instead of a grammar or syntax of politics, in which any attempt to give a definition to politics would participate. Moreover, any political 'event' or 'decision' would also be part of this grammar. Since there is never any fully present politics (concept or event) this must be a grammar of politicization and depoliticization. The decision is politicizing, it challenges and suspends the political status quo, but it is also depoliticizing, as it sets new political precedents.

This structure can be illustrated with reference to the notion of political friendship at the heart of *Politics of Friendship*. I showed in the first chapter that Derrida was concerned to separate two logics at work within the concept of friendship, and of democracy: *aimance* as the thought of a non-determinate ground of friendship from an active, discriminating and exclusive befriending. The decision which determines friends proves to be the naturalization of the decision itself. The figure of the brother, inseparable from the philosophical definition of the friend, represents this inevitable prediction of the rule.

If the friend–enemy choice were to be taken as the definition of politics, we could describe *aimance* as the politicization of the decision, and brotherhood – what Derrida calls fraternization – as its inexorable and inevitable depoliticization. *Aimance*, as we know, can appear only as a trace within the naturalized decision in which friends and enemies have been determined: no decision without depoliticization, the re-establishment of norms. If there is a moment of politicization, it is the point at which political identity is cast into doubt, and when established models are open to revision or alteration. It is that moment in which the state is faced with a choice which will define its laws and its political actions. The event of politicization is the point where a decision has to be made without any criteria. But this moment is never available as such. It is impossible. There can be no politics of the moment of politicization, since it has no content, nothing that can be acted upon – it is the suspension of all decision. (It is also the suspension of both security and sovereignty.) Politicization itself cannot become the subject of any political movement, or the promise made to the electorate of any political party. Any political decision, any political event must be an experience of depoliticization by definition; it sets a rule. This may be setting a precedent, demanding one policy not another; but it can never be asking for the undecidable or the suspension of decision. Politicization cannot be the object of a political demand; what complicates this structure is that every political demand, while depoliticizing, will attest to the possibility of a repoliticization.

However, if politicization would then be the rarest thing, the name of the impossible itself, another effect would also make it perhaps the most

commonplace thing. I emphasize again: if there is a decision, there is a decision wherever there is an event. There is no law without the event of its application, and its own reinvention, and no political event without politicization. Even if politicization cannot be the object of any formulation of policy, or something which we can demand without a simultaneous betrayal, it is irreducible in the moment of the formulation of policy. This is certainly the most ambiguous and difficult point to be grasped in mapping Derrida's account of the decision onto politics considered in terms of depoliticization and repoliticization. In *Politics of Friendship* Derrida explains that 'without the opening of an absolutely undetermined possible, without the radical abeyance and suspense marking a *perhaps*, there would never be either event or decision' [PoF 67 / 86]. This is what I have called the moment of politicization, a moment which is not a present moment, which is heterogeneous to the time of politics or history. Derrida continues: 'But nothing takes place and nothing is ever decided without suspending the *perhaps* while keeping its living possibility in living memory.' This suspension of the perhaps makes possible 'rules and laws, contracts and institutions' in 'the order of law, politics or morality' but is also 'violence done to the *perhaps*, to the possible that makes them possible' [PoF 67 / 86]. Politics is depoliticization, but is made possible by an irreducible, but indeterminate, prior politicization.

What Derrida is trying to invent is a way of thinking about the world, in its spatiality and temporality, which would be adequate to describe it in its happening; that is in the coming of the unknown which characterizes it as the place of a time which is out-of-joint, which must remain heterogeneous to any history, any physical or temporal science, even to imaginative recreation:

deconstruction is not, in the last analysis, a methodical or theoretical procedure. In its possibility as in the experience of the impossibility that will always have constituted it, it is never a stranger to the event, that is, very simply, to the coming of that which happens. Certain Soviet philosophers told me in Moscow a few years ago: the best translation of *perestroika* was still 'deconstruction'. [SoM 88–9 / 146]

Derrida never ceases to insist on this in the texts of this period: 'I have often had occasion to define deconstruction as that which is – far from a theory, a school, a method, even a discourse, still less a technique that can be appropriated – at bottom what happens or comes to pass [*ce qui arrive*]'<sup>3</sup>. Once we accept that this is the case, that 'deconstruction happens', we can begin to appreciate deconstruction as both 'the maximum intensification of a transformation in progress, in the name of neither a simple symptom nor a simple cause' [FoL 9 / 24], but also, again, hospitality not only to the other, or to the passive decision within [PoF 69 / 87], but to that which happens. To claim that the experience of politics is the experience of the impossible, is

not to claim that politics *is* impossible; or that politics *is not*, since we are no longer able to oppose being and not being, possibility and impossibility, happening and not happening. Deconstruction as a theory of politics would not be the same as claiming that politics is at an end. If there is any politics at all, then politics must already have begun. Politics as a name for what might be – what happens, if it happens – would at the same time be the name for its own disappearance. But this disappearance is not a historical possibility, it is not of the order of an event, although it is the necessary accompaniment of the event. While the virtuality and spectrality, the undecidability at the heart of the decision must frustrate any attempt such as that of Schmitt's to tie down, to reconstitute the political in its essence, to make politics present, to actualize and effect a repoliticization, a repoliticization is not alien to the experience of politics either. Without the suspension of certainty in the political decision there *would* be nothing that we could call politics.

The experience of 'what happens', of 'this political practice which history is' [POF 114 / 134] would be that of the complex combination of politicization as the experience of the impossible itself and politics as an effect of depoliticization, as the programming of its own decisions. Where Schmitt offers a historical analysis of depoliticization, as something which has happened to Europe, but which a sovereign decision might displace, I argue that Derrida opens up a structural diagnosis of politics as depoliticization, and one which, with no relation to history as narrative, will prove much harder to recuperate, to recover from, or to repoliticize. However, to see the importance for Derrida of thinking this way, we need to turn again to Schmitt, but also to the correspondence between Schmitt, Benjamin and Heidegger to which Derrida refers obliquely in 'Force of Law'.

### RETHINKING THE REVOLUTIONARY

Derrida's sense of the danger of Schmitt's account of depoliticization as a historical category becomes quite plain in his reading of *The Concept of the Political*. Referring to Schmitt's insistence that politics depends on 'actual/effective conflict' as its 'most extreme possibility' [CP 35], Derrida goes on to draw 'the extreme consequence of these propositions, the one which would seem to us as unavoidable as it is properly disastrous' but which Schmitt does not grasp:

If it is true [...] that the rarer or the more improbable the situation of exception or of decision (war, hostility, the political event as such, etc.), the more decisive, intense and revealing it is, and in the end the more it politicizes [...] then one must conclude that rarefaction intensifies the tension and the revealing power (the 'truth' of the political): the less war there is, the more the hostility, etc. This is less a default of 'common sense'

than it would appear, to be sure, but it does inevitably lead to a change in all the signs, *and therefore to having to measure politicization in terms of the degree of depoliticization*. [PoF 129 / 152–3]

Once this equation has been made clear, it becomes apparent that the depoliticization of the technological age for Schmitt is ‘in truth an over- or hyperpoliticization’ [PoF 129 / 153]. Depoliticization would be ‘but the supplementary and inverted symptom, the abyssal hyperbole, of a hyperpoliticization’ [PoF 133 / 157]. In Schmitt’s later work, *The Theory of the Partisan*, the figure of absolute hostility, of the force of the greatest potential for a repoliticization, is that of the revolutionary war. The blurring of legal and conceptual boundaries represented by the guerrilla or the partisan testifies to both the depoliticization of the world – no longer can we distinguish between the violence licensed by law, and violence against the law, or between regular troops and irregulars; the properly political is less apparent than ever – and the possibility of the most violent repoliticization. The exemplary political figures of the age for Schmitt are Stalin and Mao.

Not only does Derrida think this a dangerous proposition, but he shows it to be a consequence of any attempt to define politics in terms of determinable friends and enemies. The figure of the revolutionary war for Schmitt is that of fratricide, the moment when the brother becomes an enemy.<sup>4</sup> Yet, as I discussed in my first chapter, for Derrida there can never be a natural brother – the absolute friend is an ideal, a legal fiction, a spectre – or an absolute enemy. The concept of friendship is always contaminated by the potential of enmity, exposed in Nietzsche’s reversal of the Aristotelian formula, and can never be secured except by an idealization, such as the analogy with brotherhood, itself the naturalization of a non-natural bond. The spectrality of the concept of the political, as of the concept of friendship, which means that neither can ever be established in any degree of purity, suggests that a theory such as Schmitt’s risks conferring philosophical legitimation on revolutionary violence as such without any concern for its aims, means or objectives, and is not only dangerous but incoherent. A brother is never wholly a brother, a friend is never a friend for certain, politics may always be just the playing out of programmed choices. For Derrida this suggests that we can only think friendship or politics in terms of an economy of friendship and enmity, politicization and depoliticization, but from which the poles of the opposition have been removed. There can be no absolute politicization, and no absolute depoliticization – no end to politics, no pure politics – but only an economy of relative violence. Derrida’s rethinking of the decision in terms of undecidability, and the rethinking of politics in terms of depoliticization opened up by it, are concerned, at least in part, to question the political theory of the exceptional moment of revolutionary violence which follows any theory which attempts to think the possibility of a fully present politics; and of absolute repoliticization.

This impulse lies behind not only Derrida's reading of Schmitt, but his discussion of Benjamin's essay 'Critique of Violence' in the second part of 'Force of Law'. One subtext to the essay is the literal and figural correspondence between Benjamin and Schmitt, with Heidegger forming a third party to the debate [FoL 48 / 114; 66 n.6 / 72].<sup>5</sup> Derrida comments on Benjamin's diagnosis of the "degeneracy" of a parliamentarism powerless to control the police violence that substitutes itself for it that it: 'is very much a critique of violence on the basis of a "philosophy of history": a putting into archeo-teleological, indeed archeo-eschatological perspective that deciphers the history of *droit* as a decay (*Verfall*) since its origin'; moreover 'the analogy with Schmittian or Heideggerean schemas does not need to be spelled out'.<sup>6</sup> 'And', Derrida adds, 'it is still a question of spirit and revolution' [FoL 46 / 111]. Derrida's concern is that all three thinkers base their premises on a narrative of loss, of the fall from an origin of some form of purity. But in diagnosing this loss, each prepares the way, within quite distinct political allegiances, to the possibility of some form of revolutionary violence. Derrida is not against revolution as such, but he is very much against a traditional way of thinking revolution. Commenting on Benjamin again, Derrida calls it '*revolutionary*, even *marxisant*, but in the two senses of the word "revolutionary", which also includes the sense "reactionary", that is, the sense of a return to the past of a purer origin' [FoL 46 / 111]. Concluding the postscript to the essay, Derrida confirms this: 'This text, like many others by Benjamin, is still too Heideggerean, too messianico-Marxist or archeo-eschatological for me' [FoL 62 / 146]. By disavowing the inevitability of contamination, in their desire to return to the conditions of a pure origin, whether of a certain form of violence (Benjamin), or mode of being (Heidegger), or of politics (Schmitt), all three thinkers are unable to think critically and responsibly about their own position. Each threatens to unleash the worst violence in the name of a 'purer violence' and loses the sense in which Derrida wishes to reinstate calculation, to rethink politics and law as interminable negotiation, a negotiation which must seek to negotiate without a determined horizon of expectation or a particular goal in mind.

What Derrida proposes is not the end of revolution, however, but an extension and revision of the concept:

What I am saying is anything but conservative and anti-revolutionary. For beyond Benjamin's explicit purpose I shall propose the interpretation according to which the very violence of the foundation or position of law must envelop the violence of conservation and cannot break with it. It belongs to the structure of fundamental violence that it calls for the repetition of itself and founds what ought to be conserved, conservable, promised to heritage and tradition, to be shared. [FoL 38 / 93-4]

Benjamin's opposition of a 'law-making' to a 'law-conserving' violence depends on the revolutionary situation – his example is the general strike – in which a new founding of the law is at stake [FoL 34–5 / 84–5]. However, for Derrida, we cannot know whether or not we are in the middle of a law-founding moment; precisely because such a moment can never be said to be 'present'. The event and the effects of a decision can only be revealed in retrospect: 'those who say "our time", while thinking "our present" in light of a future anterior present do not know very well, by definition, what they are saying'. Instead, as I have shown in relation to the decision, for Derrida 'the whole history of law' is that of its continual refoundation and reformulation: but crucially, '*This moment always takes place and never takes place in a presence*' [FoL 36 / 89]. Like the decision, which calls for its own reaffirmation, for another decision, but which becomes law as soon as it has been done, so the violent foundation of the law calls for confirmation and conservation which is also violence. On the one hand, the violence of the suspension of all laws, on the other hand the violent suspension of that suspension in the rule of law: 'Deconstruction is also the idea of – and the idea adopted by necessity of – this *différentielle* contamination' [FoL 39 / 95]. Politics is the mixture of these two forms of decision, two forms of violence which cannot be opposed in the manner Benjamin wishes (rigorously) or in terms of Greek and Judaic origins. This suggests a complete revision of the concept of revolution. By analogy with Schmitt, we might say that the moment of revolution or of violent overthrow is the possibility of a pure and present politicization. The danger of such an analysis is that it will tend to a glorification of violence for its own sake. But for Derrida there can be no question of such a politics. His own overturning of the logic of the revolutionary could in some ways be considered more radical, if it didn't subvert the traditional concept of the 'radical' as well. Instead of the moment of revolution becoming the defining moment of the political, every moment, every decision is to be considered revolutionary. The revolutionary moment of the exception, the suspension of all rules, can no longer be imagined to be something that could or would take place, and therefore no longer something to call for or aim at. Revolutionary politicization can no longer be thought of as something that could be made present, it is not of the order of possibility. Instead the revolutionary is the order of the perhaps. But this 'perhaps' is not found in the exceptional moment, but makes an exception of every moment and every decision.

If there is a politics of Derrida's work it lies here, in his insistence on the revolutionary act of interpretation, of foundation of the law, of negotiation and calculation. This is where we must work most patiently to show that his messianism without messiah, which he is at pains to distinguish from that of Benjamin, is a messianism without content, without expectation of any thing coming: no revolution, no God, nothing.<sup>7</sup> But by relocating the messianic to the structure of event-hood itself, to the everyday negotiation with

the law, with responsibility and duty, Derrida radicalizes the possibility of thinking politically. If the political is the moment of absolute uncertainty, but such uncertainty that we do not know where it is to be found, then the political is both the most common and the least common experience. The possibility of change, of something else happening, of justice, of more equal distribution of wealth or power is witnessed to and attested to by every event; although this possibility is indissociable from the threat of less justice, less equality, less democracy. The challenge of deconstruction is to find ways of thinking and acting which are adequate to this not-knowing, to the radical condition of the perhaps. Alexander Garcia Düttmann suggests to Derrida that this is the case: 'on the one hand, we could be talking in the name of reformism, because each decision calls for another one. We face an ongoing process of reform after reform after reform. But at the same time we could radicalise that thought into something like a permanent revolution.' Derrida confirms his proposal, echoing the passage from 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other' with which I concluded my introduction: 'When I referred a moment ago to messianicity without messianism, I was describing a revolutionary experience. [...] But when I insisted on the fact that we must nevertheless prepare the revolution, it was because we must not simply be open to whatever comes. The revolution, however unpredictable it may be, can and must be prepared for in the most cautious slow and labourious [*sic*] way.'<sup>8</sup>

Such a thought of depoliticization will always be open to two accusations. The first is that it is too theological, too messianic, too abstract, or not concrete enough. Yet clearly from Derrida's point of view, any theory which presumes to label, identify or name a present politics, a determinate concept of the political, is being more messianic, in seeking to make some particular future arrive, to make something in particular happen. The other potential accusation would be that this is not radical at all, since it is not radical according to traditional political paths and codes. Certainly, if the degree of radicality of a theory were to be measured in term of the incomprehension and misunderstanding that have accrued to it then we would quite easily be able to prove that Derrida's revolutionary politics is more radical than traditional concepts of revolution. As Geoffrey Bennington comments: 'the need to compromise, negotiate, with the most concrete detail of current arrangements of right: this is what defines deconstruction as radically political.'<sup>9</sup> Deconstruction is an affirmation of what happens, and of the revolutionary reinvention at work in every political decision, and so clearly cannot be simply opposed to politics as it already exists. As I argued in the discussion of radical democracy in Chapter 3, this means thinking politics within the state as much as against the state;<sup>10</sup> and as I emphasized in Chapter 6, deconstruction demands an intensive engagement with the law, both within and beyond the state.



## *The Politics of Spectrality*

It will not have escaped the notice of anyone reasonably familiar with the work of Derrida that what I have been describing as a structure of depoliticization and repoliticization is homologous, not only to the relationship between the decision and the undecidable, but also to what Derrida terms 'the *retrait*'. Such an analogy offers more than just clarification, since understanding the relationship between deconstruction, depoliticization and *retrait* will enable us to contrast Derrida's work with that of his friends Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy. In a group of texts associated with their Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe offer some preliminary reflections on a post-deconstructive rethinking of the political. These texts are of interest not only for themselves and for the critical responses they have provoked but because Derrida mentions in a note to his discussion of Schmitt that *Politics of Friendship* might be read as a 'modest and belated contribution' to the work of the Centre, which 'was important for my own' [PoF 137 n.25]. His contribution may be 'modest and belated', but I will argue here that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's account of the political repeats the structure we saw in Schmitt and Benjamin in which politics is thought of the order of something which could come to presence. Derrida's criticisms of the latter are also pertinent to the work of his friends.

### HEIDEGGER, BEING AND TECHNOLOGY

Heidegger's essay 'The Question Concerning Technology' provides a helpful starting point from which to approach the thought of Being. Heidegger is concerned to elucidate man's relationship with modern technology, and characterize it as a particular mode of historical existence. For Heidegger, 'the essence of all history [*Geschichte*] is determined' from a 'destining [*Geschick*]' [QT 306]. This destining is a determined mode of concealment of the fundamental truth as *alētheia*, unconcealment. The history of being for Heidegger is the history of this concealment, and can only be uncovered through a destructive enquiry into the origins of Being in its concealment. Only through listening to the essence of the mode of destining, can we understand man's predicament, which is one of 'danger' but also of the possibility of 'a freeing claim' [QT 307]. This much could be said of any epoch of Being's destining. However, 'when destining reigns in the mode

of enframing, it is the supreme danger' [QT 308]. Enframing [*Gestell*] is what Heidegger has called the essence of modern technology, which he says is nothing technological. Modern technology's characteristics are of drawing energy from Nature and of storing it. There is a fundamental difference, Heidegger suggests, between 'the work of the peasant' which 'does not challenge the soil of the field' and agriculture as a 'mechanized food industry' [QT 296]. Similarly, a windmill 'does not unlock energy from the air currents in order to store it'; by contrast the hydroelectric plant across the Rhine turns the river itself into a water-power supplier [QT 296–7]. It is not technology itself which threatens man – 'the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology' – but 'the actual threat has already affected man in his essence. The rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth' [QT 309]. However, Heidegger turns the logic around. 'The extreme danger, not only for man's coming to presence, but for all revealing as such' is still a granting; a saving power [QT 313]. Ultimately, 'the closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become' [QT 317].

This clearly fits into the general structure of Heidegger's account of Being as concealment and unconcealment. The object of the destructive (or deconstructive?) coming to terms with the tradition of Western thought is to recover the original character of Being, which has been forgotten or covered over. We cannot think the ontic-ontological difference, the difference between Being as sending and Being as its beings or sendings, as such. This difference will only appear as its own non-appearance, as its withdrawal or concealment behind the various epochs of being. Joseph Kockelmans glosses this aspect of Heidegger's thought:

History of Being, therefore, means the sending of Being. And in the various ways of sending, the sending itself, as well as that mysterious 'it' which sends, holds itself back in the various manifestations in which Being 'shows' itself'. Modern technology is the last of these 'manifestations' or epochs: 'To hold back means in Greek *epochē*. That is why we speak of epochs in Being's sending. Epoch does not mean primarily a certain period of time in the coming-to-pass of Being's truth; it means the basic characteristic of the sending itself, that is to say, this holding-itself-back in favour of the various manifestations of the gift, namely, Being with respect to the discovery of beings.'<sup>1</sup>

Metaphysics has been the history of the forgetting of what makes it possible, of the concealment of being. This is why metaphysics is nihilism for Heidegger. The important point to grasp here, as Miguel de Beistegui makes clear, is that modern technology represents the final stage of nihilism:

Metaphysics is the way in which the abandonment of being happens in the forgottenness of being. *Seinsverlassenheit* is *Seinsvergessenheit*. Yet this forgetting is not simply a form of absence or an effacement: it rules or reigns over the whole of being in such a way that the truth of being becomes unattainable. In its completed form, nihilism in the form of technology, it rules as will to power, the most disastrous unleashing of power amidst beings as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

But according to the logic set out in 'The Question Concerning Technology' the epoch of modern technology holds not only the greatest danger, but also the greatest and most powerful potential for the 'saving power'.

The form of Heidegger's argument here strongly recalls both Schmitt's argument in 'The Age of Neutralizations and Depoliticizations' and Derrida's criticisms of *The Concept of the Political*. For Schmitt too the modern era is the age of technology. While Schmitt's account of the technological era sees its roots in the 'apparently hybrid and impossible combination of aesthetic-romantic and economic-technical tendencies in the nineteenth century' [ND 133] rather than an original sending of Being given form in a determined constellation of presencing, there is a structural similarity between the two accounts. For both Heidegger and Schmitt the age of technology is the age of the most extreme neutralization and danger of the forgetting of being, respectively. Conversely, this also makes the age of technology the age with the greatest potential for the restoration of politics or of an originary relationship to Being. Derrida finds in *The Concept of the Political* a logic by which the possibility of the total disappearance of the political acts instead as a hyper-politicization, and it would seem that the same might be said of the closure of metaphysics as technology for Heidegger. In 'Force of Law' Derrida compared his reservations about Benjamin's thought to his concerns about that of Heidegger: both are too archeo-eschatological. In other words, both think history in a circle, and are interested in the coming to presence of something which has been lost or concealed but which was originally present.

This problem is in fact tackled at length in Derrida's work on Heidegger, and especially in *The Post Card*. In 'Envois', the long first essay of *The Post Card*, Derrida sends up the notion of sending, and in particular the 'decisive' elements of Heidegger's thought – the sense that *now* is the destined moment for the revelation of Being. What he calls the postal principle, or destinerrance is an attempt to displace the sense of truth as *alētheia*, predicated upon the possibility of its own reception, of its possible being brought into presence. This is elaborated at some length in the more theoretical essay 'The Factor of Truth' in which he famously argues that truth is determined by the necessary possibility of it not being revealed; that a communication must always, to some extent, go astray, and that a letter never arrives at its destination. In 'Envois' Derrida puts the whole problem more playfully:

It's the end of an epoch. [...] The postal principle *does not happen to différance*, and even less to 'Being', it destines them to itself from the very 'first' *envoi*. [...] The post is always *en reste*, and always *restante*. It awaits the addressee who might always, *by chance*, not arrive.

And the postal principle is no longer a principle, not a transcendental category; that which announces itself or sends itself under this heading [...] no longer sufficiently belongs to the epoch of Being to submit itself to some transcendentalism. [PC 190–2 / 205–6]

While from this passage Derrida does not appear to distinguish *différance* from Being, the key emphasis is on *chance* and on the possibility of the non-arrival of the postal principle. This is an attempt to think an indeterminacy of destination; that is the possibility that Being will *not* arrive at its 'destination' or that this arrival is controlled by chance; or is beyond the opposition between chance and necessity. A few lines later however, another distinction is introduced:

*Tekhnē* (and doubtless he would have considered the postal structure [...] a metaphysical and technical determination of the *envoi* or of the destinality (*Geschick*, etc.) of Being; [...]); now *tekhne*, this is the entire – infinitesimal and decisive – *différance*, *does not arrive*. [...] *Tekhnē* does not happen to language or to the poem [...]: this can mean simultaneously that it does not succeed in touching them, getting into them, it leaves them virgin, not happening to arrive up to them, and yet it has to happen to them like an accident or an event because it inhabits them and occasions them. [PC 192 / 207]

Technics cannot be thought apart from Being, or from *différance*. In insisting on this Derrida opposes a reading in which technics comes second, in which the technical is a blight which befalls being or *différance*; and in which some form of purification might still be possible. The 'infinitesimal and decisive' difference may be taken in part as a difference between Heidegger and Derrida. Turning now to another of Derrida's essays on Heidegger, we will see how this decisive difference will help reiterate the difference between deconstruction as depoliticization and the *retrait* of politics.

#### DERRIDA'S *RETRAIT*

Derrida's own account of the *retrait* is most decisively set out in his essay 'The *Retrait* of Metaphor'. A companion piece of sorts to 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy', in this essay Derrida gathers his thoughts on Heidegger and the question of metaphor. It is perhaps worth recalling at this point the argument of the earlier essay. In

‘White Mythology’ Derrida argues that since metaphor is a philosophical concept, it cannot be used to explain away philosophy; for example to demonstrate that philosophy is nothing but an effect of language, or that in Nietzsche’s words, ‘truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions’ [MAR 217 / 258]. ‘Metaphor’, Derrida writes, ‘remains in all its essential characteristics, a classical philosopheme, a metaphysical concept. It is therefore enveloped in the field that a general metaphorology of philosophy would seek to dominate’ [MAR 219 / 261]. Even if all the other concepts of philosophy could be accounted for as the metaphorical usage of language, the concept of metaphor itself would remain to be accounted for: ‘the metaphor of metaphor. This extra metaphor, remaining outside the field that it allows to be circumscribed, extracts or abstracts itself from this field, thus subtracting itself as a metaphor less’ [MAR 220 / 261] and disabling its own claim to be able to dominate the field of philosophy. The structural principle of what Derrida elsewhere calls *différance*, and much else, returns: ‘The field is never saturated’ [MAR 220 / 261]. Yet since philosophy can only ever describe this ‘field’ metaphorically, via the non-absolute coincidence of sign and meaning, we could also formulate a claim such as: there are only metaphors, there are only non-proper meanings, out beyond the coherence of an opposition between proper and improper meaning, the true and the metaphorical use of language. This situation, which Derrida describes as one of ‘supplementarity (between the concept and the field)’ [MAR 229 / 273] we have already encountered as *différance*.

In ‘The *Retrait* of Metaphor’, having first answered a series of criticisms put to ‘White Mythology’ by Paul Ricouer, Derrida establishes some of the connections between his work and that of Heidegger, referring not so much to Heidegger’s brief comments on metaphor as such, but to the general structure of his work. Derrida proposes under the name of the *retrait* in which we are interested, to approach a group of problems: not only the question of *Übersetzung* and *Übertragung*, of translation/transfer and metaphorical transfer; but also the question of *Ereignis* – of proper, appropriation, de-proportion – as a question of event, and of metaphor; and the question of the home, of economy as the law of the house. The word *retrait* appears ‘to be the most proper to capture the greatest quantity of energy and information in the Heideggerian text’ [RM 114 / 77]. Derrida proposes ‘*retrait*’ as an idiomatic French expression which can condense three motifs of Heidegger’s later work, bringing out the linguistic and theoretical relationship between these moments, which I summarize in my turn.

1. Derrida suggests that we might understand the ontic-ontological difference in terms of metaphor. Metaphor belongs to metaphysics, considered as a ‘suspensive withdrawal of Being’: both ‘being hidden’ and ‘dissimulation or veiling’. Metaphysics would itself then become a metaphorical system, a veiling of Being:

as a tropical system and singularly as a metaphorical detour [metaphysics] would correspond to an essential *withdrawal* of Being: unable to reveal itself, to present itself except in dissimulating itself under the 'species' of an epochal determination [...]. Being would only allow itself to be named in a metaphoric-metonymical divergence. [RM 116 / 79]

But since metaphor would remain a metaphysical concept it could not be an accurate name for the relation between Being and being, which could not be of the order of the distinction literal-metaphorical. 'Consequently', Derrida writes, 'if we cannot speak metaphorically on its subject, neither can we speak properly or literally. We will speak of being only quasi-metaphorically, according to a metaphor of metaphor' [RM 117 / 80]. In other words, the same quasi-transcendental status which Derrida accorded to metaphor in 'White Mythology' and which renders radically indeterminate the possibility of distinguishing metaphorical from proper use of language, might be read as a translation – or a metaphor – for Being in its withdrawal. From this point of view, *retrait* would be both a translation and not a translation from Heidegger; an approximation to *Entziehung* and *Sich-Entziehen* of Being. The withdrawal of Being gives place to a discourse which cannot name it, except abusively, quasi-metaphorically.

2. Secondly Derrida, draws attention to Heidegger's own concern to show that his language cannot be read as metaphorical (understood in its metaphysical determination as the familiar detour which illuminates the unknown) in such passages as:

*Discourse about the house of Being is not a metaphor, transporting the image of the 'house' toward Being, but it is by way of appropriating thinking the essence of Being, that we will one day be able to think what 'house' and 'to inhabit' are.* [RM 119 / 83]

But this is not to imply that the relation between the terms has been simply inverted: we do not know Being, as a fixed point from which we can understand 'dwelling'. The relation between 'Being' and 'house' would again not be of the order of the proper or the improper; and the statement of this would itself not be metaphorical or literal, but a withdrawal of the possibility of understanding the relation in those terms.

3. Derrida finally returns to '*trait*' as a translation. He discusses the overlapping of two semantic chains in Heidegger's German: one based around *Ziehen* (relation) and the other around *Reissen* (cut, mark). *Riss*, which Derrida translates as '*trait*', names definitional relation itself. It is a cutting, a division, the separation of elements, which neither belongs to the elements thereby separated, but is nothing other than their relation. It thus *is* not. In

being traced, it is withdrawn. But it is also more originary than the elements it divides, since they *are* not until they have been distinguished:

It does not precede the two properties which it causes to come to their propriety, for it is nothing without them. In this sense it is not an autonomous, originary, instance, itself proper in relation to the two which it incises and allies. Being nothing, it does not appear itself, it has no proper and independent phenomenality, and in not disclosing itself, it withdraws, it is structurally in withdrawal, as a divergence (*écart*: splitting aside), opening, differentiability, trace, border, traction, effraction, etc. From the moment that it withdraws in drawing itself out, the trait is *a priori* withdrawal, unappearance, and effacement of its mark in its incision [RM 124–5 / 88]

There is thus an analogy between the re- of the *re-trait*, and the Heideggerean *Ent-Ziehung* (with-drawal), and *Ent-fernung* (dis-tancing), and ‘the *Ereignen* of the *Es gibt* which focuses all of Heidegger’s late thinking, in precisely this trait where the movement of the *Enteignen* (disappropriation, retraction of propriety) happens to empty out all *Ereignis*’ [RM 125 / 89]. ‘*Retrait*’ also translates the *Aufriss*, the ‘totality of traits’, which Heidegger names as the incision which names language: ‘the trait of the incision is therefore veiled, withdrawn, but it is also the trait that brings together and separates at once the veiling *and* the unveiling, the *withdrawal* and the *withdrawal of the withdrawal*’ [RM 126–7 / 90]. This transport or translation is not all one way however – ‘the deal *works*, it is already *at work* in the other’s language. I would say in the other’s languages’ – for *re-trait* comes to mean the retracing (re-treating) as well as withdrawal [RM 126 / 90–1].

Derrida’s re-inscription of these developments in Heidegger’s thought in another language, and by way of a quasi-metaphoricity which cannot be effaced, sets his own work against Heidegger’s insistence on the original rooting of his language in the Greek origin of Being, and in Gasché’s words, ‘although it still repeats the question of Being, inscribes it, and thus remains altogether extraneous to this still-philosophical question.’<sup>3</sup> Heidegger has claimed that his words are not metaphorical. Following Derrida’s arguments in ‘White Mythology’ we know he disagrees.<sup>4</sup> The detour of metaphor does not happen to an originally pure language, since the possibility of translation and of metaphorical transfer is an original possibility. In fact the *re-trait* can be mapped onto the quasi-concept of depoliticization that I have been sketching out. Depoliticization for Derrida is not an accidental or contingent possibility in an originally political context, but is a necessary condition of the political. Just as the *re-trait* rewrites the withdrawal of being in terms of metaphor as permanent detour rather than truth, so Derrida’s version of depoliticization removes the possibility of a recovery of an authentic politics.

There is no originary politicization; hence we should only speak of a re-politicization. There are only relative depoliticizations and repoliticizations. Like the *trait*, which *is* only as *re-trait*, as disappearance and re-tracing, so politics *is* only as depoliticization and re-politicization.

#### THE POLITICS OF THE *RE-TRAIT* AND THE *RE-TRAIT* OF THE POLITICAL

We are now in a position to turn to the thesis of the ‘re-trait’ of the political proposed by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy in the context of the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political. In their opening address to the centre, they give two senses for the phrase:

withdrawing the political in the sense of its being the ‘well-known’ and in the sense of the obviousness (the blinding obviousness) of politics, the ‘everything is political’ which can be used to qualify our enclosure in the closure of the political; but also as re-tracing the political, re-marking it, by raising the question in a new way which, for us, is to raise it as the question of its essence.<sup>5</sup>

What is clear from this somewhat obscure definition is that its authors are proposing both a historical argument and a philosophical argument. A thesis about the state of the world today accompanies a philosophical understanding of both the ‘closure’ of the political and the potential for a new understanding of politics. In a programmatic paper given at the end of the Centre’s second year, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy clarify their understanding of the phrase, in the light of the papers delivered to the Centre. Here they recognize three ways of understanding the *retrait* of the political: in terms of a Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the political as the absorption and sublimation of the political by the state; the subordination of the political, along Marxist lines, to an ontology of the individual; and their own understanding, derived from Heidegger via Derrida. Their explanation confirms the dual nature of their diagnosis. On the one hand, they state, ‘Our retreat accompanies, in reality, a retreat of the political *itself* within and from the epoch of its world domination.’ On the other hand,

our retreat operates in relation to the political in general and absolutely, and that is to say in relation to the intrinsic political determination of the onto-theology of *Realpolitik* as it appears through the theoretical face of the Hegelian state or through the empirical face of the calculation of forces.<sup>6</sup>

In particular, we should note the Heideggerean thesis that this is the ‘era of the world domination’ of politics, which Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy admit



is largely inspired by Heidegger's work on technology. There are two sides to this claim: one philosophical, that this is the age of 'the actualisation or the installation of the philosophical *as* the political, the generalisation (the globalisation) of the philosophical *as* the political – and by the same token, the absolute reign, or domination of the political'<sup>7</sup> – and the other that this thesis is confirmed historically in the determination of the horizon of the age by totalitarianism.

The equivocation between the historical and the philosophical dimension of their argument persists in the details of Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's diagnosis of the *retrait* of the political in the modern age. They are concerned by the disappearance of the specificity of the political (which is to be distinguished in particular from the economic); the reduction of politics to 'banal management';<sup>8</sup> and what, drawing on Hannah Arendt, they class as the triumph of a definition of man as worker and producer, the occupation of public space by the social rather than the political, and a loss of political authority in the world. It is in this context that they propose to extend Claude Lefort's work on the totalitarian to show that the loss of sovereignty which makes available a reincarnation and reimagination of the social body to fill the empty place of power is not just a characteristic of specifically totalitarian societies. They define a 'soft totalitarianism' within liberal democracy.<sup>9</sup> While they draw the apparently pessimistic conclusion that there is no possibility of recovering the political from its withdrawal, the *retrait* of the political is also the setting free of a new possibility. This 'something' is a way of thinking politics which no longer depends on the notion of a political subject; which replaces any question of ground, subject or class with a notion of finitude; and which raises the central questions of 'relation' and of the constitution of social identity.<sup>10</sup> The later work of both writers, but particularly that of Nancy, can be read as an attempt to develop such a mode of thought.<sup>11</sup>

A lot seems to hang on Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's assertion, echoing Sartre, that totalitarianism is 'the unsurpassable horizon of our times'.<sup>12</sup> I argued in Chapter 3 while discussing the work of Claude Lefort, from whom Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy derive much of their definition of totalitarianism, that the opposition between the totalitarian and the democratic needs to be rethought. Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy clearly begin to rethink this opposition, but solely in terms of revealing an unthought totalitarianism within the democratic. I suggested that in thinking politics after Derrida's work, we would need to make the reverse claim, and find democratic resources within the totalitarian. The politicization of civil society in Eastern Europe in the years following the cessation of the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political seems to bear out this thesis. To deduce that the social has excluded the political is to foreclose on its potential politicization. In Simon Critchley's words, 'the thesis of the withdrawal cannot be a partial withdrawal, it *must* be total. The analysis of the dual

closure of the philosophical and the political *must* see totalitarianism as the final figure in the development of political forms.<sup>13</sup> While Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy cannot be said to share the political views of either Heidegger or Schmitt, their work also seems to repeat the same structure. The hypothesis of a total closure, like that of a final neutralization or the most extreme danger, serves to announce or herald the potential for something new. This has the apparently paradoxical effect of both postponing that arrival (since it cannot be seen to be already at work) and predicting its content or form.

Depoliticization, understood in the sense I have been suggesting Derrida's work makes available, would be constructed to avoid precisely this problem. No politics, no politics to come or new way of thinking politically will avoid being a depoliticization; conversely no form of politics as depoliticization will not attest to the possibility of a repoliticization. By thinking these two possibilities together in the same moment, in the same concept, a deconstructive thought of the politics of the *retrait* would both revalue politics itself, even in its most apparent triviality – as 'banal management', as interminable negotiation and calculation – while maintaining the possibility of an equally necessary critique of the limits of any actual politics. This complex of depoliticization and repoliticization operates at the level of the concept; no way of thinking about the world which does not pass through it will be able to avoid the far more banal thesis of a historical depoliticization. This does not rule out the possibility of speaking about the world, although it might suggest a certain hesitancy about totalizing hypotheses. In *Politics of Friendship* Derrida insists that what Schmitt cannot acknowledge, having posited the technological as a secondary, and inauthentic neutralization of the purely political, is that the 'delocalization' of the territorial drive in modern warfare is not a displacement of an original politics of autochthony, but that 'telluric autochthony is *already a reactive response to a delocalization and to a form of tele-technology*' [PoF 142 / 164].

What is at stake in Schmitt's work, but more so in Derrida's commentary, are 'the relations between the history of the political and the structure of theoretical concepts which one claims to articulate upon it' [PoF 143 / 164]. What distinguishes Derrida's own work is the rigour with which it refuses to leave the order of the conceptual to make a claim upon the world. The 'inscription' of the *retrait*, Derrida writes, 'as I have attempted to describe it in the trace or in difference, *succeeds only in being effaced (n'arrive qu'à s'effacer)*' [RM 125 / 88]. Taken as the structure of repoliticization which *is* only as depoliticization, this would also then bear a fundamental similarity to the time of friendship as *aimance* through which Derrida thinks the essence of the political, an essence which is only in its own contamination, its not being essential: 'such a time gives itself in its withdrawal. *It occurs only through self-effacement [Il n'arrive qu'à s'effacer, also: 'It succeeds only in effacing itself']*' [PoF 14 / 31]. As I have insisted, deconstruction is not just an attempt to think through the concept of depoliticization; it must have

the form or the effect of a depoliticization as well. But as an attempt at repoliticization, might not its most distinctive feature be its own self-effacement? Not only a modest withdrawal before the texts on which Derrida writes, but also before politics itself? This would in turn prevent the attempt to think of the *retrait* of politics as depoliticization from becoming a reduction of politics or the necessity of political calculation in the name of an essence of the political, however subtly thought out.

## *Deconstruction and Depoliticization*

Despite Derrida's increasingly explicit political understanding of his project, deconstruction remains politically suspect from the left. What seems particularly to distinguish Derrida's work from other projects of radical political reinvention is his apparent reticence regarding the invocation of positive signs, his reluctance to announce the arrival of new political possibilities. The caution with which Derrida approaches the re-programming of politics attests to his concern to think an open politics, a politics open to that which comes. Such an attention to the future means refusing to predict or identify it, or in the terms of Derrida's discussion of hospitality, refusing to colonize the stranger by asking their name in my language rather than theirs. What I have sought to show in the preceding chapters is that this project is not a matter of resignation or passivity, but of an active struggle and engagement with politics. Derrida's refusal to advance a positive politics is not a failure of nerve subsequent to an otherwise valid political project. It lies at the core of deconstruction's concern with the future. Deconstruction is not a form of critique which can be corrected or supplemented by adding on a new political logic or ontology. To insist on thinking the politics of deconstruction in terms of depoliticization is to try to maintain a sense of this difference. This may make deconstruction seem austere, but on such reserve depends the possibility of allowing politics rather than a programmed prediction of decision.

### DECONSTRUCTION AND HAUNTOLOGY

Slavoj Žižek is typical of the response from the self-proclaimed radical left when he complains that 'Derrida's "radicalization of Marx" is in fact 'its exact opposite: the renunciation of any truly radical political measures'.<sup>1</sup> He continues: 'all Derrida's political interventions, from his admiration of Nelson Mandela and his engagement on behalf of the dissident philosophers in Communist Czechoslovakia, to his conditional support of the bombing of Iraq in the Gulf War, perfectly fit the moderate leftist stance'.<sup>2</sup> Derrida's suspicion that 'the more radical these determinate economic and political measures are [. . .], the less they are effectively radical, the more they remain caught in the metaphysical ethico-political horizon' forms an effective bulwark and point of resistance against the totalitarian attempt to bring politics to an end: 'the moment democracy is no longer to come but pretends

to be actual – fully actualized – we enter totalitarianism'.<sup>3</sup> Yet by insisting on the permanent and necessary failure to realize the 'spectral experience of the messianic call of justice' in 'a set of positive legal, political and so forth measures',<sup>4</sup> Derrida's work is in its turn depoliticizing by subordinating the realm of politics to the ethical domain. For Žižek, this failure typifies 'a certain kind of Derridean appropriation of Levinas' as 'melancholic, postsecular thought'.<sup>5</sup> While this misconstrues the supposed dependence of Derrida's arguments on those of Levinas, Žižek's concern with the problematic status of Derrida's notions of the 'spectral' and 'the messianic' does identify the source of a common discomfort with deconstruction.

Žižek's worry is shared, at least in part, by Antonio Negri. For Negri, Derrida is to be congratulated on his analysis of the 'new spectral ontology' which testifies to what Negri describes as 'a deep and irreversible transformation in which all traits of the Marxian critiques of value [...] stop short'. Deconstruction, the claim goes, 'produces a new theory of spectrality which corresponds with common experience: an experience of the everyday, and/or the masses; the experience of a mobile, computerized, immaterialized and spectral labor'. 'The new spectrality is there', Negri claims, 'and we're entirely within this real illusion'.<sup>6</sup> Yet Negri's praise is only partial. Negri ascribes to Derrida the view that Marx's 'theory of specters [...] falls short', and in turn makes the same claim against Derrida:

Why does deconstruction accompany the efficacy of this critical move with a regressive pause (the immersion in the 'work of mourning'). Why does deconstruction want an aura of nostalgia which renders the ontological consistency of the new spectral dimension elusive and frankly ungraspable?<sup>7</sup>

What Derrida should do, according to Negri, is to describe 'the phenomenology of a new productive reality, a social one – of a lifeworld that fully meshed with the new spectral reality'.<sup>8</sup> Deconstruction is held back by the influence of Blanchot's negative theology and of Bataille's Nietzsche; 'deconstruction remains the prisoner of an ineffectual and exhausted definition of ontology': ultimately falling prey to 'mysticism'.<sup>9</sup> Deconstruction gets 'stuck in subordinating the new phenomenology of the specter (which nevertheless has a productive and singular ontological base) to the oldest of reactionary ontologies: the theological one'.<sup>10</sup> In essence, Negri's criticism is that deconstruction fails to turn interpretative theory into revolutionary *practice*. Deconstruction remains mired in the nostalgic demonstration of the inadequacy of the old ontology to the new spectralized conditions of production, rather than proceeding to the construction of new ontological and theoretical paradigms. Readers of *Empire* will recognise that this is how Negri and Hardt describe their own subsequent project.<sup>11</sup>

To borrow the terms in which Derrida described his own project in the passage from *Specters of Marx*, which I cited in the introduction to this final

part of the book, Negri is happy to think of deconstruction as critique. But where Derrida insists on moving beyond this to an instance of 'radical critique', what he insists elsewhere in *Specters* must be more than 'the critique of critique', in which the regulative ideal against which reality is measured must also be put into question, Negri sees only that deconstruction provides us with no practical tools in the struggle against exploitation. These are by now familiar claims against Derrida's work. They can be detected behind Rorty's complaint that 'the prevalence in recent political philosophy (particularly in the works of my friends Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau) of the word "impossibility"' amounts to 'a gesture of despair'.<sup>12</sup> Even Lyotard has complained of a certain Derridean nostalgia.<sup>13</sup> Where once Derrida was regularly and misleadingly castigated for his supposed irresponsible and apolitical celebration of *jouissance*, his recent work has been criticized for precisely the opposite: all work (of mourning) and no play makes Jacques a dull boy.

Derrida's response is entirely consistent with the political dimension of deconstruction I have outlined. Not only is deconstruction not a nostalgic or passive project, it is the call for a new ontology, for a repoliticization, which runs the risk of cancelling political possibilities. Derrida insists that the deconstruction of ontology, whose defence he says would touch on everything he has written in thirty years, 'is neither a critique nor a delegitimization' and 'anything but a negative moment of nostalgia and melancholy'.<sup>14</sup> Instead, it is Negri's call for a new 'post-deconstructive' ontology which does appear to Derrida:

to bear the marks of mourning, nostalgia, and, indeed, melancholy. Ontology involves, indeed *is*, on my view, mourning work [...] – carried out with a view to reconstituting, saving, redeeming a full presence of the present-being, where that present-being, in accordance with what is not merely a lack or flaw, but also an opportunity, appears to be lacking: *différance*.<sup>15</sup>

When Derrida proposes that deconstruction is a political hauntology, he does not mean that it can simply be something other than ontology. But the desire to elude ontological determination for as long as possible, to stabilize the object of analysis in terms of presence and absence, is what constitutes deconstruction's singularity, certainly vis-à-vis contemporary radical political ontologies. The homonymy of ontology and hauntology in French serves to remind us that deconstruction will always end up by repeating ontological gestures, however much it strives not to: but that in its concern with the possibility of *not* doing so (and this of not programming, predicting or determining politics) will distinguish it from simply being another ontology. This is why deconstruction deals in an economy of depoliticizations, and must never propose to move hastily towards an alleged repoliticization.

## DECONSTRUCTION AS DEPOLITICIZATION

Having insisted on the importance of the concept of depoliticization, I am now in a position to sketch out a fairly programmatic account of deconstruction as depoliticization. In doing so I hope to link the different senses in which Derrida has used the word deconstruction to the different layers and modes of depoliticization, predictions and programmings of the political decision which, as we have seen, betray the democratic promise. This is to circle again the provocation of Derrida's identification of deconstruction and democracy. I will draw on Derrida's account of deconstruction in his paper 'Some statements and truisms about neologisms, newisms, postisms, parasitisms, and other small seisms' which was given to a conference entitled 'The States of Theory' in 1988.<sup>16</sup>

Derrida used this opportunity to address the status of the heterogeneous body of work loosely known as theory within American universities at the time, and the place of 'deconstruction' within it. 'Some statements and truisms ...' is a revealing paper, not least because Derrida addresses the genealogy of deconstruction as a theoretical project, and makes some suggestions about its relationship to various Marxist and historicist modes of reading, which were gaining currency at the time against the more formalist deconstructionism popularized in the wake of the so-called Yale School. However the paper also offers a way of understanding deconstruction as itself a theoretical discursive formation, both in terms of what it shares with a number of competing theories, and in terms of what distinguishes it from these other theories.

Derrida proposes an attempt to tabularize the various theoretical approaches currently on offer in the academic battlefield (*Kampfplatz*) [SST 72] or marketplace [SST 73–4]. This attempt at a taxonomy of theories, however, is made impossible by the very nature of these theoretical 'jetties'. Each jetty 'is only a theoretical jetty inasmuch as it claims to comprehend itself by comprehending all the others' [SST 66]. Every theory presumes a claim to account for every other theory, even if this is only by virtue of being situated in relation to other theories. Each is:

the institution of a new statement about the whole state and of a new *establishment* aiming at state hegemony. Each jetty has a hegemonic aim, which isn't meant to subjugate or control the other jetties from the outside, but which is meant to incorporate them in order to be incorporated into them. [SST 68]

Any attempt at generating a meta-theory will merely replicate the implicit project of each theory; Derrida quotes Heidegger and Lacan: 'there is no metalanguage' [SST 76]. The quotation not only formalizes but exemplifies the problem. Derrida's meta-commentary on the problem of a metalanguage is both the repetitive instantiation of that very problem and an attempt to

account for this situation. In the terms with which we are now familiar, hauntology cannot escape ontology, deconstruction cannot avoid being a depoliticization, Derrida cannot slip the circle of political exemplarity. But the double movement in which deconstruction sketches both the economy of violence and intervenes in it must be understood as a strategy designed to let something else happen, to disrupt ontology, to offer a chance of a repoliticization.

As we might expect, Derrida's conclusion is not that we should give up attempting theoretical explanations. If the ontological determination, the institutionalization of politics is unavoidable, we cannot simply wash our hands of it. Nor can we carry on regardless, as if this new description of the problem had not arisen. On the contrary, we need to develop more and more rigorous formulations of this problem. This doesn't preclude engaging with 'reality' or history' – 'what happens or doesn't happen to happen' [POI 356 / 367] – but is the necessary precondition of a responsible engagement [SST 77]. 'Reality' or 'history' are themselves concepts, with their own 'reality' or 'history'. To institute a theory in the name of such concepts without reflecting on their genealogy is simply to institute a less coherent, less vigilant, theory.

Derrida's language here – 'institution' – suggests that the 'establishment' of a theory may be considered by analogy to the institution of the law in general. That this is the case is made explicit by the example Derrida gives of another conference, 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man', at which he presented 'Structure, Sign and Play' in 1966. This conference has subsequently been taken as the moment of the arrival of both structuralist and post-structuralist thought in literature departments in the USA. The reality or truth of the fact that this conference took place is not in question; but Derrida argues that, for the conference to become an 'event' in the narrative of deconstruction in America, another kind of evaluation must take place:

if something happened there which would have the value of a theoretical event, or of an event within theory, or more likely the value of an advent of a new theoretical-institutional sense of 'theory' – of what has been called 'theory' in this country for about twenty years – this something only came to light afterwards and is still becoming more and more clear today. [SST 80]

Derrida's point here depends on his analysis of the structure of the event in general. In his essay 'Psyche: Inventions of the Other' this is set out briefly in the context of a discussion of the concept of 'invention'. An invention, as an event, 'always presupposes some illegality, the breaking of an implicit contract; it inserts some disorder into the peaceful order of things, it disregards the proprieties' [PSY 25 / 11]. An event cannot be predicted in advance and,



like a decision, can only occur in a moment of the suspension of the law. Yet as soon as it has occurred the event is recuperated by a programme. The legal confirmation of the event of an invention by patent laws or some form of right of property testifies to the structure of the event as such; that invention begins by being susceptible to repetition, exploitation, reinscription' [PSY 28 / 16]. Invention is 'never private' [PSY 28 / 15]; the legal institution of an invention is only a response to its prior iterability. This means that, as for a decision, we can never be certain if an event has occurred: 'of this event, one is never sure' [PSY 56 / 54].

In 'Force of Law' Derrida takes the foundation of a nation state to be the best example of the institution of the law in general; and therefore, we presume, of the structure of an event [FoL 23–4 / 52]. In an earlier text he also takes this as a privileged example. Using the text of the American Declaration of Independence, Derrida shows in some detail that the status of the Declaration, considered in terms of speech act theory, is very uncertain indeed. The constitution is signed by the self-proclaimed representatives of the people of the United States: yet the people in whose name the signatories of the constitution sign is not constituted as a people until the event of signing has taken place. Further, the signatories have no authorization to sign until the people in whose name they sign has been constituted. Thus at the moment of signing there is a transgression, an illegal and illicit constitution of a law by representatives of a body which has not yet been brought into being, and who are therefore in no position to legislate:

This people does not exist. It does not exist before this declaration, not as such. If it is given birth, as a free and independent subject, as a possible signatory, this can only be by the act of this signature. The signature invents the signature.<sup>17</sup>

The founding moment of the institution of the law, Derrida writes, 'implies a performative force' [FoL 13 / 32]; what he elsewhere calls 'perverformative'.<sup>18</sup> This should remind us that what Derrida has to say about theoretical events – and the 'event' that 'The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man' may have been – applies to events in general and to the possibility of an event as such.

The most interesting passages of 'Some statements and truisms ...' for my present purpose come when Derrida dramatizes his conceptualization of the event in terms of his 'theoretical jetties'. The description of the jetties is clarified as a double movement which replicates that of the event and the decision: both an opening to the other, or a moment of undecidability which is the condition of something happening (or arriving – Derrida uses the verb '*arriver*') or of a decision being taken; and the immediate reinscription of law and programming in general. Derrida writes that each jetty is double: 'I will call the first the *destabilizing* jetty or even more artificially the devastating

jetty, and the other one the stabilizing, *establishing* or simply *stating* jetty'. Derrida characterizes this as follows. In the word 'jetty', he writes:

I distinguish, on the one hand, the force of the movement which throws something or throws itself (*jette* or *se jette*) forward and backwards at the same time, prior to any subject, object or project, prior to any rejection or abjection, from, on the other hand, its institutional and protective consolidation, which can be compared to the jetty, the pier in a harbor meant to break the waves and maintain low tide for boats at anchor or for swimmers. Of course, these two functions of the *jetty* are ideally distinct, but in fact they are difficult to dissociate, if not indissociable. [SST 84]

In the phrase 'the states of theory' Derrida wishes us to hear at once, as if tied together, both a static or stasis-inducing force, as well as a disruptive or path-breaking one. These two jetties are not equally opposed: one supplying momentum, one solidifying and hardening the outcome. Only the stabilizing jetty moves, or hardens: it is 'essentially edifying' [SST 93]. The destabilizing jetty *is* not, it cannot be said to exist, since as soon as we pose a question which can be given the form 'what is' we have stabilized, attempted to fix the jetty. There is a direct analogy here to the structure of the *retrait*, of democracy and of depoliticization. It cannot be a matter of distinguishing active and reactive forces, and opposing one to the other. The virtuous concept (equality, repoliticization) is attested to, witnessed, only in its cancellation or institutionalization, within the dark shadow of a determined and determining political programme.

The temptation here would be to see Derrida's work as the original or destabilizing jetty, and the institution of deconstruction in America to be its stabilization. However, Derrida insists that this is not the case. His own work must in and of itself be its own stabilization; or a stabilization of that destabilization to which it attempts to draw attention, and of which it must be an effect. So the deconstructive jetty could refer to three things. First,

neither a theory nor a philosophy [...] neither a school nor a method [...] not a discourse, not an act, nor a practice [...] [i]t is what happens, what is happening today in what they call society, politics, diplomacy, economics, historical reality. [SST 85]

Secondly, the forms of resistance provoked or inspired by 'what happens', a quasi-theoretical set of resistances to particular modes of reading, interpreting, writing about 'what happens'. Thirdly, these forms of resistance in turn generate their own stabilizations: 'the very thing which exceeds at the same time the theoretical, the thematic, the thetic, the philosophical and the scientific provokes, as gestures of reappropriation and suture, theoretical

movements, productions of theorems' [SST 87]. Derrida takes Rodolphe Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror* as an example. Gasché risks reconstituting the second deconstructive jetty as 'a philosophy of deconstruction' [SST 89–90].

Deconstruction, to summarize, would refer to three experiences: the destabilization which *is not* but remains the necessary condition for that which happens, and its concomitant stabilization ('a resistance which produces theories' [SST 87]); a theoretical discourse which attempts to describe this structure while being an example of it; and the further institutionalization of this discourse in certain academic or journalistic contexts which 'isn't bad, it isn't an evil, and even if it were one, it would be a necessary evil' [SST 88]. The potential confusion between deconstruction as a name for what happens, and as a name for the various levels of formal institutionalization of the study of what happens, of what escapes such institutionalization, underlines that there is no 'pure' event, nothing prior to the hypostatization which takes place in the course of an analysis, an interpretation, a deconstruction.

## THE DECONSTRUCTION OF POLITICS AND THE POLITICS OF DECONSTRUCTION

On the basis of this account of deconstruction, we might distinguish three levels or modes of depoliticization:

1. The first would be that depoliticization operative within the events and decisions of what is called politics. Following the argument of *Politics of Friendship*, depoliticization would be at work wherever the political decision follows a rule – that is wherever there is a decision – and either follows or founds a naturalized sense of political responsibility, in which political equality or justice is limited to the one group rather than another. It is clear that in this sense depoliticization is necessary for there to be what we call politics. Indeed, from one point of view it looks very like the definition of politics in its most common current form, as the management and allocation of the resources of a state among its citizens and a select group of other fraternal friends in the form of overseas aid. Yet from Derrida's point of view, as soon as this becomes the total definition of politics, we could no longer speak of politics, since there would be no outcome which has not been programmed in advance. Only to the extent that there remains a self-deconstructive motif within politics, as Derrida has claimed of democracy, that is to say that politics can be put in question, or puts its own founding decisions into question, politics itself bears witness to democracy-to-come.

Derrida comments in an interview to which I have already referred that 'there is deconstruction, there are deconstructions everywhere':

In contexts that are always very determined, it is one of the possible names for designating, by metonymy in sum, what happens or doesn't happen to happen, namely, a certain dislocation that in fact is regularly repeated – and wherever there is something rather than nothing; in what are called the texts of classical philosophy, of course and for example, but also in every 'text' in the general sense that I try to justify for this word, that is in experience, period, in social, historical, economic, technical, military, etc., 'reality'. [POI 356 / 367]

If deconstruction is democracy, democracy has always been an experience of deconstruction. Derrida's work must imply the possibility of writing a history of democracy, which would also be a history of our present, understood in terms of the eruption and frustration of an unconditional appeal to equality which destabilizes and dismays politics as the calculable distribution of political goods. This would be a material history in the sense that it would not draw a final distinction between the rhetoric or ideology of democracy and its political forms, would not dismiss ideas and concepts as less substantial than 'concrete' political practice. This democratization need not be exceptional, unleashed in some revolutionary moment, but attested to even in the most everyday political situation.

2. The second form of deconstruction as depoliticization would name the theoretico-practical description or definition of this situation within the particular way of thinking labelled deconstruction. These might be exemplified in the work of Jacques Derrida, which offers itself as a set of strategic interventions in the political field, as both examples of the structure of any political negotiation and as attempts to account for, as far as possible, the necessary depoliticizing effect of any political discourse. This defines deconstruction as a political practice, as it was set out in the second part of this book. By affirming the depoliticization put into operation by more traditional types of political thought, this mode of depoliticization would be an attempt to repoliticize, without predicting an outcome, or instituting a doctrine. But there could be no question of simply sifting out repoliticizing and depoliticizing tendencies within this notion of deconstruction. The criticism that deconstruction in this sense is merely negative, or needs to be supplemented with the construction of a new political practice, misses the point entirely. So too does the complaint that deconstruction does not offer the new theoretical model it claims to. Deconstruction does not name a 'fundamental project' or even 'the techniques [Derrida] use[s] for reading and writing'. Deconstruction is not even *one* thing: 'I have never had a "fundamental project"' [POI 357 / 367]. Deconstructions would be examples of the attempt to make a responsible negotiation within the violent economy of politics.

3. The third order of depoliticization would be the depoliticizing tendency for deconstruction to reconfigure itself as a theory, or method of analysis, rather than as a series of singular political interventions. As Derrida acknowledges in 'Some statements and truisms ...' this is an equivocal but unavoidable phenomenon. But we might also see it as an effect of the political exemplarity of any event recast in yet another form. The kind of singular analyses deconstruction might practice on politics would always imply a reconstituting, a stabilizing force. The possibility of a reflection such as this one in which I am engaged demonstrates the possibility of this further depoliticization of Derrida's own strategies. Again, as with Gasché's re-philosophizing of deconstruction, this makes my own project at worst a 'necessary evil' [SST 88]. The consequence of this however, is that there would be no particular virtue in calling for a specific politics under the banner of deconstruction. Understanding that what Derrida is really interested in is the way in which politics is already deconstruction directs us instead to intervene under whatever names we judge most effective in a particular time and place. Since repoliticization cannot directly be the object of a political demand, only some more or less violent form of depoliticization, our attention must turn from the politics of deconstruction to the deconstruction of politics. But that means not an operation performed upon politics, not a theory or an analysis of the political, but a patient attention to the self-deconstruction of politics.

Such a strategy might be linked directly to the notion of emancipation, as we can see from some of Derrida's most suggestive and explicit comments on repoliticization, made in 'Force of Law':

Politicization [...] is interminable even if it cannot and should not ever be total. To keep this from being a truism or a triviality, we must recognise in it the following consequence: each advance in politicization obliges one to reconsider, and so to reinterpret the very foundations of law such as they had previously been calculated or delimited. This was true for example in the Declaration of the Rights of Man, in the abolition of slavery, in all the emancipatory battles that remain and will have to remain in progress, everywhere in the world, for men and for women. Nothing seems to me less outdated than this emancipatory appeal. [FOL 28 / 62]

Discussing these comments in his 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', Derrida is somewhat concerned by Simon Critchley's surprise at them. He reiterates his position:

I believe there is an enormous amount to do today for emancipation, in all domains and areas of the world and society. Even if I would not wish

to inscribe the discourse of emancipation into a teleology, a metaphysics, an eschatology or even a classical messianism, I none the less believe that there is no ethico-political decision or gesture without what I would call a 'Yes' to emancipation. [DAP 82]

Taken together these statements confirm the suggestions I have been making. By emancipation we might also understand repoliticization; however, every individual emancipatory step must itself also be a relative depoliticization, which must in turn require yet more repoliticization, further emancipation. This is why the notion of a code of human rights is problematic for deconstruction, since it claims the form of a universal and natural set of values, rather than leaving itself open to negotiation, challenge and political revision. This in no way negates the emancipatory effects of such a code, in specific struggles, but remains open to the possibility of struggles in which the idea of human rights would no longer be progressive.

If more politicization or emancipation is the object of deconstruction, the difficulty comes in trying to formulate a politics or a political demand which could achieve such an end, without immediately resigning oneself to the depoliticizing tradition of teleology, eschatology and metaphysics. However, no political theory can supply the solution to this question without falling foul of one of these traditional traps. Not only can there be no adequate theory of this politicization; if there is politicization at all, we will be unable to recognize it until after the fact. Only when the law has been cast into doubt by the arrival or event of something unpredictable can emancipation be seen to have taken place. The challenge Derrida poses through the exemplary political practice of deconstruction is of thinking and acting politically in a way you judge to be the most open to this event of emancipation, even while you attempt not to prejudge the issue.

## CONCLUSION

What Derrida calls a deconstructive genealogy of the concept would seem to have an immediate chance when grafted into the realm of political discourse and political theory. Derrida has himself taken some steps along this path, but there remains a much broader and longer task. Such concepts as security, sovereignty, representation and property call out for deconstructive analysis; both in terms of the tradition of thought from which they arise, but also in terms of their everyday polemical and political use. This would be an interminable project; but it is not incompatible with the strategic use and redevelopment of the terms in question. So, for example, it might be possible to transplant deconstruction into international relations theory. The political challenge at the border of the state – a challenge made by and to the figure of the refugee, the asylum seeker or the economic migrant – corresponds to one

of the structural limits of politics. A political decision enforces limits, defines the interior and exterior of a state, while showing these limits to be always already permeable, and crossed. Such a decision already takes the realm of politics beyond the state. Only once this has been recognized, does politics have a chance of becoming more than the programmed distribution of goods to the citizens of a state. Conventional theories of state sovereignty and of the obligations of one people to another all cancel politics in the name of the state. What would remain of international relations after deconstruction?

The affirmation of this kind of analysis would need to be articulated with whatever directly strategic interventions are possible: for example either the affirmation of particular cosmopolitan or internationalist treaties and organizations, or their critique. The task of thought would be to judge as best one can which moment is most propitious for either. I have shown that Derrida's comments on hospitality, the cosmopolitical and international law are consistent with this proposition. Such work would mean translating deconstruction not only from one institutional context to another, or showing deconstruction to be already at work there, but from one national or state context to another, and from one philosophical idiom to another.

But in addition to its more familiar form as intellectual genealogy, a negotiation with the tradition of inherited political concepts, I have suggested that deconstruction might also be the model for a mode of political analysis, which would be concerned with the political event as a combination of a set of depoliticizing tendencies, which together testify to the possibility of a repoliticization. This is a project which exceeds the scope of this book. It also remains essentially ambiguous, and highly susceptible to the necessary and inevitable institutionalization of deconstruction which Derrida describes in his paper 'Some statements and truisms ...', and which can itself be understood as more or less equivalent to what I have designated as depoliticization. Such analyses would have to develop out of the events themselves, rather than approaching a particular political problem with a predetermined deconstructive grid to lay over it. Derrida's insistence that deconstruction is what happens, that deconstruction is democracy, means not only that deconstruction can be considered as a political practice. It must lead us not only to see deconstruction as politics, but politics as deconstruction. Indeed, a deconstructive account of politics might focus not so much on what deconstruction has to say about politics, as on what politics has to tell us about deconstruction.

The structure I have set out in this chapter is well described in these remarks:

All that a deconstructive point of view tries to show, is that since conventions, institutions and consensus are stabilizations, this means they are stabilizations of something essentially unstable and chaotic. Thus it becomes necessary to stabilize precisely because stability is not natural; it

is because there is instability, that stabilization is necessary; it is because there is chaos that there is a need for stability. Now this chaos and instability, which is fundamental, founding and irreducible, is at once naturally the worst against which we struggle with laws, rules, conventions, politics and provisional hegemony, but at the same time it is a chance, a chance to change, to destabilize. If there were continual stability, there would be no need for politics, and it is to the extent that stability is not natural, essential or substantial, that politics exists and ethics is possible. Chaos is at once a risk and a chance, and it is here that the possible and the impossible cross each other. [DAP 83–4]

In this context we can understand depoliticization as the effect of a stabilization in the political field. ‘Chaos and instability’ becomes another name for what Derrida calls ‘democracy-to-come’ and ‘justice’ elsewhere. Depoliticizing stabilizations of this field of forces are necessary; but until we think chaos itself as fundamental, no kind of political thought will be able to grasp the ‘chance to change’ or destabilize. This is what deconstruction offers to political theory, and it depends directly on the apparent refusal to repoliticize, to introduce a new ontology of politics. Deconstruction is apparently both the most radical and the most ascetic alternative to such theories as those of Schmitt and Benjamin, by seeking to discover a revolutionary potential in the everyday, to discern the possibility of destabilization attested to in the maintenance of the law, and to put into question political theory as in and of itself depoliticizing. Yet Derrida insists that repoliticization only has a chance if a decision could be thought without criteria, without rules or any defined or expected outcome. In the vocabulary of his essay ‘Psyche: Inventions of the Other’, ‘the only possible invention is the invention of the impossible’ but ‘an invention of the impossible is impossible. [...] It is in this paradoxical predicament that a deconstruction gets under way [*qu’est engagée*]’ [PSY 60 / 59]. But this is not to resign ourselves to just anything happening. As Derrida argues in ‘Force of Law’, ‘incalculable justice *requires* us to calculate’ [FOL 28 / 61]. This calculation will not be without risk, but even in the worst circumstances, ‘there is no ethico-political decision or gesture without what [Derrida] would call a “Yes” to emancipation’ [DAP 82].



## Conclusion

It has become a commonplace – for Derrida and for his readers – that deconstruction is a work of infinite patience. Following Levinas and Blanchot, Derrida has negotiated with the possibility of a passivity beyond passivity. From this stem many of the complaints levelled at his work: deconstruction is the patience of a reading which never takes a position in relation to the real world; a patient attention to opposing ways and paths which cannot choose a path; the suspense of the decision in the undecidable which can never take the necessary political decision.

Gillian Rose's objections to Blanchot are emblematic of this line of criticism. In her remarkable essay 'Potter's Field', Rose comments on the suggestion in *The Writing of the Disaster* (Rose does not mention it, but the original version was a shorter text called simply 'Discourse on patience') that what is left to us in the face of the worst disaster is passivity:

*I will not believe it. [...] it requires a work, a working through, that combination of self-knowledge and action which will not blanch before its complicities in power, activity beyond activity, not passivity beyond passivity. For power is not necessarily tyranny, but that can only be discovered by taking the risk of coming to learn it – by acting, reflecting on the outcome, and then initiating further action.*<sup>2</sup>

Echoed in this are not only Rose's own criticisms of Derrida, but also those of many others. Derrida himself occasionally seems on the verge of formulating this same criticism. In *Politics of Friendship* he poses the following challenge to his own account:

[...] such a reading may perhaps seem too philological, micrological, *readerly* – complacent, too, with the time it allows itself when matters are urgent, at just the moment when one should no longer wait. At a moment when our world is delivered over to new forms of violence, new wars, new figures of cruelty or barbarity (and not always to this 'just' and necessary barbarity that Benjamin sometimes called for against the other, the barbarity of the old culture), at a moment when hostilities are breaking out, no longer resembling the worst that we have ever known, the political and historical urgency of what is befalling us should, one will say, tolerate less patience, fewer detours and less bibliophilic discretion. Less esoteric rarity. This is no longer the time to take one's time, as a number of our well-intentioned contemporaries must no doubt think [...]. [PoF 78–9 / 97]

Derrida is prepared to subscribe to this thesis up to a point. 'Absolute urgency' is not an accident which has befallen us, but is 'the law of decision, the event and responsibility, their structural law, which is inscribed a priori in the concept'. Infinite responsibility dictates not having the time to take one's time: 'our answers and our responsibilities will never be adequate, never sufficiently direct' [PoF 79 / 98].

But rather than respond to the urgency of the decision by giving in to its demand, Derrida demands the right to take his time. Just as the depoliticization which frustrates any attempt to identify a pure politics must be understood as a conceptual rather than a historical problem, so the urgency of the decision must be seen not as the problem of our time, but of the concept, the event, the decision itself. Patience is required in the face of the decision in order to try to ensure that we do not decide in advance, programming the decision and locking up responsibility and politics. To presume to know what politics is, or what a decision is, or how we might know such things, is to betray the decision. As Geoffrey Bennington has argued, that would include a suspicion regarding the urging of this urgency – which if it is structural and unavoidable, cannot be recuperated by, resolved by or become dependent on a historical account.<sup>3</sup> What the urgency of the decision seeks to obscure in calling us to action is that, as I have suggested, theory is always practice. To choose to theorize is always to decide for one type of action rather than another, just as it must also do so within one language rather than another. To commend 'passivity' is already an 'activity'.

Yet to commend 'patience' does not seem to be much of an answer to that pre-eminent political question: 'what is to be done?' Derrida often combines a number of voices, of registers, of rhetorical and political strategies within individual texts. To begin to attune one's ear to the singularity of Derrida's work, and to the project of a political patience, it might be necessary to distinguish at least two dimensions of patience. The first would be that of the word's original meaning – not so much waiting as enduring in the face of suffering. The political practice of deconstruction would be that of bearing witness to suffering. There is a consistent thematic strand throughout Derrida's political texts which would reinforce this reading. He regularly speaks of – and to – 'chaos' itself. This is a chaos which is both 'a risk and a chance' as we have seen; but it is also 'the worst against which we struggle' [DAP 84]. Derrida's own response seems caught between the risk and the chance. In a paper given in the United States prior to the delivery of the lecture that would be published as *Specters of Marx*, Derrida goes over many of the themes of the subsequent text. But certain passages read more like the Blanchot of *The Writing of the Disaster* than any in the subsequent and more notorious version of the text:

This is what one has to know: It is against the background of this disaster; it is only in the gaping and chaotic, howling and famished opening, it

is out of the bottomless bottom of this open mouth, from the cry of the *Khaein* that the call of justice resonates. Here then is its chance and its ruin. Its beginning and its end. It will always be given thus as the common lot [*en partage*], it will always have to be at once threatened and made possible in all languages by the *being out of joint: aus den Fugen*.<sup>4</sup>

Justice is inseparable from the disaster; of this, deconstruction is the exemplary witness. But that is all.

This is perhaps Derrida's most patient mode of response, and it is one of his most constant. For there is an uncanny resonance between such a claim and that of his 'Introduction' to Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry':

*If there is any history*, then historicity can be only the passage of Speech, the pure tradition of a primordial Logos toward a polar Telos. But since there can be nothing outside the pure historicity of that passage, since there is no Being which has sense outside of this historicity or escapes its infinite horizon, since the Logos and the Telos *are* nothing outside the *interplay* (*Wechselspiel*) of their reciprocal inspiration, this signifies then that the *Absolute is Passage* [...] This movement is also *Danger(ous) as the Absolute* [*l'Absolu d'un Danger*].<sup>5</sup>

At the risk of completing the circle, we can turn back to Blanchot:

The disaster [...] is outside history, but historically so [...] The disaster is the improperness of its name and the disappearance of the proper name (Derrida); it is neither noun nor verb but a remainder which would bar with invisibility and illegibility all that shows and is said – a remainder which is neither a result (as in subtraction), nor a quantity left over (as in division). Patience again.<sup>6</sup>

Deconstruction as patience is perhaps just a name for our improper dwelling in the face of the disaster. But it also consists in the recognition that to think in the mode of the perhaps is not only to admit a necessary and inexorable uncertainty with regard to the possibility of confidently answering the question 'what is to be done?', but also to admit the necessary possibility that there is nothing that could be done; that the worst is also possible. However, it would be a mistake to think that this is Derrida's only response.

We must learn to hear other political responses within Derrida's work. Perhaps these would be less patient, and more hasty than that which I have just outlined; but then it seems to me less than certain that patience is in fact possible. Can patience ever be patient enough? Surely, as soon as I am conscious that I am waiting for something, even for something indeterminate, I am already acting impatiently. To wait is to expect, to demand, to require an arrival. Could there ever be a pure patience, an absolute patience, a waiting

which was not aware of itself as waiting? For then there would be no waiting at all, and not even the possibility of the slightest patience. Like the virtues of democracy, equality or responsibility, patience could only be measured in degrees of impatience. From this point of view, certainly closer to that of Blanchot and Derrida than of Rose, there could only be an economy of impatience, an economy of the violent suspension of the law in the taking of a decision. The choice for every participant in that economy would be between different degrees of impatience.

Deconstruction, I have argued, is an attempt to describe this economy, the theory and practice of political patience – or impatience, but the distinction appears to be very slight, almost nothing, at this point. ‘Impatience is never justified’, Derrida comments, while describing his own impatience towards certain formulae in the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Paul de Man.<sup>7</sup> There can never be any justified action within this economy of impatience, neither a ‘passivity beyond passivity’ nor an ‘activity beyond activity’. But there is never any inaction, either. The impossibility of choosing between different politics of impatience, different strategies of violence, is what Derrida has described as a ‘hiatus’ in *Adieu*, while in *Politics of Friendship* he says of one such choice:

we must be patient at the crossroads and endure this *undecidable triviality*. Without it – and this is the thesis and the decision – no decision would be possible, or ever any friendship. There are we. In this very place? No, there. [PoF 123 / 145]

This does not mean that we do not choose or decide. To some extent, this in itself is enough, since for Derrida ‘there is no ethico-political decision or gesture without what I would call a “Yes” to emancipation’ [DAP 82]; any decision is worth something. So the challenge faced by a deconstructive politics takes its distinct shape: not so much that of *deciding*, of the legislative evaluation of possible courses of action, but of trying to ensure that there might be decisions at all; of resisting the programming and prediction which threaten to end politics itself. Derrida argues in ‘Force of Law’ that we

*must* calculate, negotiate the relation between the calculable and the incalculable, and negotiate without the sort of rule that wouldn’t have to be reinvented there where we are cast, there where we find ourselves; but we *must* take it as far as possible. [FoL 28 / 62]

Even if, as the problem is set out in ‘Psyche: Inventions of the Other’, what is at stake is the invention of the impossible, we must act as if there might be ways of thinking or acting which would give the impossible more of a chance than other ways of thinking or acting. That such an analysis is not a neutral or formal task is the conclusion we can draw from our reading of

Derrida's identification of deconstruction with democracy. Some politics may betray the democratic promise more than others, but there can be no politics which does not pass through the formal equality of the law which may betray, but also promises, the possibility of more democracy.

We know that any attempt to translate deconstruction into politics must be depoliticizing; even the proposal that we must understand politics as already being deconstruction risks hardening into a method, a programme, a new ontology of politics. So perhaps leaping to conclusions is the last thing we need here. But since a conclusion to a negotiation with the impossible will always be just that – a leap – not only will no conclusion ever be possible, or even of the order of the possible, but no impossible conclusion will be in and of itself without an appeal to an emancipatory 'yes'. A yes to politics itself in the face of the disaster, to the impossibility of patience, and the possibility of a productive impatience.

# Notes

## INTRODUCTION

- 1 'Nietzsche and the Machine', interview with Richard Beardsworth, cited in Morag Patrick, *Derrida, Responsibility and Politics*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997, p. 141.
- 2 'Deconstruction and the Other', in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 119.
- 3 Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophy and the Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 161–210.
- 4 Thomas McCarthy, 'The Politics of the Ineffable: Derrida's Deconstructionism', in *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Critical Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991, pp. 91–117; p. 115.
- 5 'The Politics of the Ineffable', p. 118; p. 116.
- 6 'The Politics of the Ineffable', pp. 106–7. The article by Nancy Fraser to which McCarthy refers is 'The French Derrideans: Politicizing Deconstruction or Deconstructing Politics', *New German Critique*, 33 (1984), pp. 127–54; Bill Readings replies to Fraser in 'The Deconstruction of Politics', in Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (eds), *Reading de Man Reading*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 223–43.
- 7 Geoffrey Bennington, *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction*, London: Verso, 1994; Morag Patrick, *op. cit.*; see also 'Excess and Responsibility: Derrida's Ethico-Political Thinking', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 28:2 (1997), pp. 160–77.
- 8 Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 19–20.
- 9 This relationship is analysed extensively in Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, chapter 7 'Abbau, Destruktion, Deconstruction', pp. 109–20.
- 10 See also Derrida's comments in *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie McDonald, Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1985, pp. 86–7.
- 11 For example Reiner Schürmann uses 'deconstruction' freely to refer to Heidegger's work throughout *From Principles to Anarchy: Heidegger on Being and Acting*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros and Reiner Schürmann, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, although he presumably attributes Derrida's use of the word to his 'undeniable talent for gleaning catchwords from Heidegger', pp. 352–3 n.17.
- 12 See for example 'Où commence et comment finit un corps enseignant', in D. Grisoni (ed.), *Politiques de la Philosophie*, Paris: Grasset, 1976 [DP 111–45]; and 'Otobiographies: the teaching of Nietzsche and the politics of the proper name' (1979), in *The Ear of the Other*, pp. 3–38.
- 13 Many texts relating to these activities were collected in *Du Droit à la philosophie*, Paris: Galilée, 1990.
- 14 Thomas McCarthy, 'The Politics of the Ineffable: Derrida's Deconstructionism', in *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Critical Theory*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991, pp. 97–119.
- 15 Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 33.
- 16 Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986. Reviewed by Geoffrey Bennington in 'Deconstruction and the Philosophers (The Very Idea)', in *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction, op. cit.*, pp. 11–60. Bennington's own reading of Derrida is set out in 'Derridabase' in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993; Gasché supplements his account with *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques*

- Derrida, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994; also reviewed by Geoffrey Bennington: 'Genuine Gasché (Perhaps)', in *Interrupting Derrida*, pp. 165–71.
- 17 See for example Derrida's discussion of the concept of history in *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass, London: Athlone, 1987, pp. 56–60.
- 18 Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political*, London: Routledge, 1996.
- 19 Geoffrey Bennington, 'Emergencies', in *Interrupting Derrida*, pp. 172–79.
- 20 Jacques Derrida, 'History of the Lie: Prolegomena', *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 19:2/20:1 (1997), pp. 129–61.
- 21 'Du mensonge en politique', interview with Antoine Spire, in *Sur Parole: Instantanés Philosophiques*, Paris: l'aube, 1999, pp. 91–114.
- 22 Jacques Derrida, 'But Beyond ... (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)', trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1986), pp. 155–70, p. 168. Derrida is responding to McClintock and Nixon's attack on him in 'No Name Apart: The Separation of Word and History in Derrida's "Le Dernier Mot du Racisme"', *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1986), pp. 140–54, itself prompted by the publication of 'Racism's Last Word', trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), pp. 290–9.
- 23 Keith Peterson, 'Derrida's Responsibility', *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 28:3 (1997), pp. 287–303; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso, 1986. (Derrida and Wittgenstein are also compared in Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984; Samuel C. Wheeler, *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000; and Martin Stone, 'Wittgenstein on Deconstruction', in Alice Cracy and Rupert Read (eds), *The New Wittgenstein*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 83–117); 'deceptively simple' is Bennington's comment in *Interrupting Derrida*, p. 25.
- 24 See the comments by Paul Davies in his review '“Postdeconstructive Temporal Musings” or Taking the Time to follow Derrida', *Research in Phenomenology*, XXI (1991), pp. 183–92.

## CHAPTER 1: NO DEMOCRACY WITHOUT DECONSTRUCTION?

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Marion Faber with Stephen Lehmann, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994, § 376 'About Friends', p. 194.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Mémoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay *et al.*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 28–9.
- 3 John Caputo, 'Who is Derrida's Zarathustra? Of Fraternity, Friendship, and a Democracy to Come', *Research in Phenomenology*, xxix (1999), p. 184. Cf. also p. 189; p. 190; p. 197. Of course, Blanchot is not Jewish.
- 4 See Simon Critchley, 'The Other's Decision in Me', in *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity*, London: Verso, 1999, pp. 254–86.
- 5 Aristotle, *The Athenian Constitution, The Eudemean Ethics, On Virtues and Vices*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, London: Heinemann, 1935, p. 387.
- 6 See John Llewelyn's discussion of the middle voice in *Derrida on the Threshold of Sense*, London: Macmillan, 1986, pp. 90–4.
- 7 Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 25.
- 8 Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T. A. Sinclair, revised Trevor J. Saunders, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992, pp. 239–40.
- 9 Geoffrey Bennington, 'Demo', paper presented to the 'Deconstruction Reading Politics' conference at Staffordshire University, 29 July 1999.
- 10 See Nicole Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, especially chapter IV 'As for the Name ... It is called a Democracy', pp. 172–220; and *The*

*Children of Athens: Athenian Ideas about Citizenship and the Division between the Sexes*, trans. Caroline Levine, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984, especially chapter 1 'Autochthony: An Athenian Topic', pp. 37–71.

- 11 Paola Marrati, 'Le rêve et le danger: où se perd la différence sexuelle?' in Jean-Michel Rabaté and Michael Wetzel (eds), *L'Éthique du Don: Jacques Derrida et la pensée du don*, Paris: Métailié-Transition, 1992, pp. 194–211.
- 12 Bennington, *op. cit.*, pp. 44–5, p. 12.
- 13 Derrida refers here to Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor *et al.*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; and Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans. Barry Joris, Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988. I have discussed this further in 'Against Community: Derrida *contra* Nancy', in Michael Strydom (ed.), *The Politics of Community*, Aurora, CO: Davies, 2001, pp. 67–84.
- 14 'Deconstruction and the Other', in Richard Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984, p. 120.
- 15 Even in the sense in which Drucilla Cornell finds an 'unerasable moment of utopianism' in Derrida's work. See *The Philosophy of the Limit*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 10.
- 16 This is dealt with at length by Derrida in 'Avance', foreword to Serge Marcel, *Le Tombeau de Dieu Artisan*, Paris: Minuit, 1995, pp. 34–40.

## CHAPTER 2: DECONSTRUCTION AND LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

- 1 Claude Lefort, 'The Question of Democracy', in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, p. 10.
- 2 'The Ideality of the Literary Object': see Derrida's discussion in 'The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations', trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in Alan Montefiore (ed.), *Philosophy in France Today*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 34–50, pp. 37–8.
- 3 David Wood (ed.), *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.
- 4 See *Ulysse Gramophone: deux mots pour Joyce*, Paris: Galilée, 1987; *Signéponge*, Paris: Seuil, 1988; *Parages*, Paris: Galilée, 1986; *Demeure*, Paris: Galilée, 1999; *Schibboleth: pour Paul Celan*, Paris: Galilée, 1986.
- 5 See Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophy and the Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, pp. 185–210.
- 6 Rodolphe Gasché, 'A Relation called "literary"', in *Of Minimal Things: Studies on the Notion of Relation*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 233.
- 7 'The Time of a Thesis: Punctuations', pp. 37–8.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *L'autre cap: suivi de la démocratie ajournée*, Paris: Minuit, 1991, pp. 121–2.
- 9 Derrida suggests this connection with explicit reference to 'the secret of literature' in *Resistances: de la Psychanalyse*, Paris: Galilée, 1996, pp. 38–41. See also PM 341.

## CHAPTER 3: DECONSTRUCTION AND RADICAL DEMOCRACY

- 1 Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox*, London: Verso, 2000; William Connolly, *Identity and Difference*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991; Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- 2 Chantal Mouffe, 'Introduction' to Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, London: Verso, 1992, pp. 13–14.



- 3 See Bennington, *Legislations*, p. 6 n.6.; *Interrupting Derrida*, p. 198 n.4. For a general account of Laclau and Mouffe's work see Anna Marie Smith, *Laclau & Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary*, London: Routledge, 1998.
- 4 See Antony Easthope, *British Post-structuralism*, London: Routledge, 1988; Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London: Routledge, 1990, for partial accounts of Hindness and Hirst's work and influence.
- 5 Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time*, London: Verso, 1990.
- 6 For example in Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, London: Verso, 2000, pp. 302–3.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 305.
- 8 For a rigorous attempt to deal with such irreconcilable demands see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- 9 For an account of Lefort's work see Bernard Flynn, 'Claude Lefort: The Flesh of the Political', in *Political Philosophy at the Closure of Metaphysics*, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1992.
- 10 Claude Lefort, *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey, Oxford: Blackwell, 1988, p. 17; p. 19.
- 11 Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, trans. John B. Thompson, Oxford: Polity, 1986, pp. 301–3.
- 12 *Political Forms of Modern Society*, p. 292; *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 20.
- 13 *Political Forms of Modern Society*, p. 297.
- 14 *Democracy and Political Theory*, p. 10.
- 15 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, ed. Simon Sparks, *Retreating the Political*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 122–34.
- 16 This account of this encounter comes in ED 209–10.
- 17 *Political Forms of Modern Society*, p. 310.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 300.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 313.
- 20 *Dimensions of Radical Democracy*, p. 1.
- 21 Crichtley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity*, p. 283.
- 22 Chantal Mouffe, 'Deconstruction, Pragmatism and Democracy' in Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 1.
- 23 *ibid.*, p. 9.
- 24 *Interrupting Derrida*, pp. 32–3.

#### CHAPTER 4: DECONSTRUCTION AND PHILOSOPHICAL NATIONALISM

- 1 There seems to be some confusion regarding the date of this seminar. Whereas in *Politics of Friendship* Derrida dates the first of the sequence on nationalism to 1983 [PoF vii / 11], in *Du Droit à la philosophie* he suggests the sequence was in itself a 'necessary development' from the 1983–4 seminar of the same title as the latter book [DP 53 n.1].
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Le Droit à la philosophie du point de vue cosmopolitique*, Paris: Verdier-UNESCO, 1997, *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort*, Paris: Galilée, 1998.
- 3 For a full account of Derrida's relation to Husserl see Paola Marrati, *La Genèse et la Trace: Derrida lecteur de Husserl et Heidegger*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1998.
- 4 Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson, London: Allen & Unwin, 1931, p. 96.
- 5 Edmund Husserl, 'Philosophy as a Rigorous Science', trans. Quentin Lauer, in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, New York: Harper & Row, 1931.

- 6 Edmund Husserl, 'The Origin of Geometry', in *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970, p. 371.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, 'Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*', trans. John P. Leavey Jr, in *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry': An Introduction*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, p. 77.
- 8 *Le Droit à la philosophie du point de vue cosmopolitique*, p. 8.
- 9 Etienne Balibar, 'Fichte and the internal border: on *Addresses to the German Nation*', in *Masses, Classes, Ideas*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 61.
- 10 Immanuel Kant, 'Toward Perpetual Peace', trans. Mary J. Gregor, in *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 317–51; J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, trans. Michael Baur, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. 320–34.
- 11 J. G. Fichte, *Addresses to the German Nation*, trans. R. F. Jones and G. H. Turnbull, Chicago: Open Court, 1922, p. 127.
- 12 *ibid.*, p. 125.
- 13 Theodor Adorno, 'On the question: what is German', trans. Henry W. Pickford, in *Critical Models*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, pp. 212–3.
- 14 Robert Bernasconi overstates the case when he speaks of Derrida's 'reliance' on Patočka's account in 'What goes around comes around: Derrida and Levinas on the economy of the gift and the gift of genealogy', in Alan D. Schrift (ed.), *The Logic of the Gift*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 256–73. Derrida's strategy appears to be similar to that of his early essays: he introduces Patočka's work in order to problematize the possibility of such a genealogy of responsibility.
- 15 See John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. Caputo had already proposed this resemblance in *Radical Hermeneutics: Repetition, Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987: naturally he is delighted to see it confirmed!
- 16 Derrida returns to his cat in 'L'animal que donc je suis', in Marie Louise Mallet (ed.), *L'animal autobiographique: autour de Jacques Derrida*, Paris: Galilée, 1999.
- 17 David Wood, 'Responsibility Reinscribed (and How)', *Pli*, 6 (1997), pp. 103–13, p. 105; see also 'Comment ne pas manger: Deconstruction and Humanism', in H. Peter Steeves (ed.), *Animal Others: On Ethics, Ontology and Animal Life*, New York: SUNY, 1999, pp. 15–35; 'Much obliged', in *Thinking after Heidegger*, Cambridge: Polity, 2002, pp. 125–34.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 110.
- 19 'Much obliged', p. 128.
- 20 On the impossibility of a non-response, see 'Comment ne pas parler: dénégations', in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre*, Paris: Galilée, 1987, pp. 535–95.

## CHAPTER 5: THE POLITICS OF EXEMPLARITY: DERRIDA AND HEIDEGGER

- 1 For Derrida's comments on the Heidegger affair see the interview entitled 'Heidegger, the philosopher's hell' [Poi 181–90/193–202]. There are further comments on this subject in the other interviews in the collection [Poi 193–5/206–7; 286–7/300–1] and, in the English translation only, another interview dealing with Derrida's own entanglement in the argument: 'The Work of Intellectuals and the Press' [Poi 422–54].
- 2 See also the reference in John Sallis, 'Flight of Spirit' in David Wood (ed.), *Of Derrida, Heidegger, and Spirit*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993, p. 148 n.1. David

- Farrell Krell refers to 'that third generation of "Geschlecht" which he has promised and we will not allow him to forget' in 'Spiriting Heidegger', Wood (1993), p. 36.
- 3 See in particular, Hermann Rapaport, *Heidegger and Derrida*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991; Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986; David Wood (ed.), *Of Derrida, Heidegger, and Spirit*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993. See also David Wood, 'Heidegger after Derrida', *Research in Phenomenology*, 17 (1997) pp. 103–16; Geoffrey Bennington, 'Derridabase', in Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993, pp. 302–10; Marc Froment-Maurice, *That is to Say: Heidegger's Poetics*, trans. Jan Plug, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998, ch. 9 'The Different Step: From Heidegger to Derrida', pp. 195–221.
  - 4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, p. 83.
  - 5 Martin Heidegger, 'Language in the Poem', *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz, New York: HarperCollins, 1982, p. 195. The other passage to which Derrida refers at length is at p. 170.
  - 6 *ibid.*
  - 7 'On Reading Heidegger: An Outline of Remarks to the Essex Colloquium', *Research in Phenomenology*, xvii (1987) pp. 171–85.
  - 8 Geoffrey Bennington, 'Spirit's Spirit Spirits Spirit', in Wood (1993), p. 91.
  - 9 Simon Critchley, 'The Question of the Question', in Wood (1993), pp. 101–2.
  - 10 David Farrell Krell, in Wood (1993), p. 31.
  - 11 'Khora', in *On the Name*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.
  - 12 Jacques Derrida, *Le problème de la genèse dans la philosophie de Husserl*, Paris: PUF, 1990, p. 250.
  - 13 *Being and Time*, p. 163.
  - 14 'Tympan' [MAR ix–xxix / l–xxv]; *Otobiographies*, Paris: Galilée, 1984; 'On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy', trans. John P. Leavey Jr, in Peter Fenves (ed.), *Raising the Tone of Philosophy*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993, pp. 117–71.

## CHAPTER 6: HOSPITALITY AND THE COSMOPOLITICAL

- 1 The idiomatics of 'pas' are discussed at length in Jacques Derrida, 'Pas', in *Parages*, Paris: Galilée, 1986, pp. 9–116.
- 2 Emile Benveniste, 'Hospitality', in *Indo-European Language and Society*, trans. E. Palmer, London: Faber, 1973, pp. 71–83.
- 3 For example, Kimberley Hutchings, *Kant, Critique and Politics*, London: Routledge, 1996; Mark F. N. Franke, 'Immanuel Kant and the (Im)Possibility of International Relations Theory', *Alternatives*, 20 (1995) pp. 279–322.
- 4 Immanuel Kant, 'On a supposed right to lie from philanthropy' (1797), trans. Mary J. Gregor, *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 613.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Aporias*, trans. Thomas Dutoit, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993, p. 17 / *Apories*, Paris: Galilée, 1996, p. 39.
- 6 Jacques Derrida *et al.*, *Marx en Jeu*, Paris: Descartes & Cie, 1997, p. 54.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, 'A silkworm of one's own (points of view stitched on the other veil)', trans. Geoffrey Bennington, *Oxford Literary Review*, 18 (1997) p. 41.
- 8 *Marx en Jeu*, p. 74.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 83.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 90.

## PART 3: INTRODUCTION

- 1 Geoffrey Bennington 'Deconstruction and the Philosophers', first published in *Oxford Literary Review*, 10 (1988), and reprinted in *Legislations: The Politics of Deconstruction*, London: Verso, 1994, p 45.
- 2 Robert Bernasconi, 'Deconstruction and the Possibility of Ethics', in John Sallis (ed.), *Deconstruction and Philosophy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.

## CHAPTER 7: ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE: DERRIDA AND LEVINAS

- 1 Robert Bernasconi, 'Justice without Ethics', *Pli*, 6 (1997), pp. 58–69.
- 2 Following standard practice in translating Levinas, I will use 'other' for both '*autre*' and '*Autre*' and Other only for '*autrui*' when it is not qualified by 'absolute' or 'person', for example. It is generally accepted that Levinas himself is inconsistent in his capitalization of the terms.
- 3 See Adriaan Peperzak, *Beyond: The Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas*, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997, p. 112.
- 4 Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death and Time*, ed. Jacques Rolland, trans. Bettina Bergo, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 243 n.1.
- 5 For example, in 'Jacques Derrida', *Interrupting Derrida*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 12–13.
- 6 WD 102 / 151, cf. VM 347; WD 125–6 / 185, cf. VM 442; twice at WD 128–9 / 188, cf. VM 444; twice at WD 148 / 220, cf. VM 467. NB also the alteration at WD 117 / 173, cf. VM 433.
- 7 Cf. the discussion of 'desire' in its Levinasian and Hegelian forms at WD 92–3 / 137–8. Derrida suggests here that despite their differences – 'Hegelian desire would be only need, in Levinas's sense' – a closer reading of Hegel might reveal Levinas to be more Kierkegaardian – and therefore in a sense more Hegelian – than he would admit: 'Despite his anti-Kierkegaardian protests, Levinas here returns to the themes of *Fear and Trembling*.' Is Derrida announcing the programme undertaken many years later in the second half of *The Gift of Death* [GoD 83–4 / 116–17]?
- 8 On the difficulty of heterology, see Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, pp. 79–105.
- 9 For example in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973; 'Introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*', trans. John P. Leavey Jr, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989.
- 10 Rodolphe Gasché considers this argument in 'God, for example', in *Inventions of Difference: On Jacques Derrida*, Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 150–70.
- 11 This is Robert Bernasconi's suggestion in 'Levinas and Derrida: The question of the closure of metaphysics', in Richard A. Cohen (ed.), *Face to Face with Levinas*, Albany: SUNY, 1986, pp. 181–202.
- 12 Cited at WD 320 n.92 / 228 n.1.

## CHAPTER 8: AGAINST COMMUNITY

- 1 Simon Critchley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity*, London: Verso, 1999, p. 283.
- 2 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Jacques Derrida: Wholly Otherwise', in *Proper Names*, trans. Michael Smith, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996, p. 58

- 3 Emmanuel Levinas, 'Signatures', in *Difficult Freedom*, trans. Gary Mole, London: Athlone, 1993, p. 195.
- 4 'What remains after this imaginary destruction of everything is not something, but the fact that there is [*il y a*]. The absence of everything returns as a presence, as the place where the bottom has dropped out of everything, an atmospheric density, a plentitude of the void, or the murmur of silence' Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. Richard A. Cohen, Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1987, p. 46.
- 5 See Bettina Bergo, *Levinas between Ethics and Politics: For a Beauty that Adorns the Earth*, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1999, pp. 146–7; Jacques Rolland, *Parcours d'Autrement*, Paris: PUF, 1999.
- 6 *Interrupting Derrida*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 44. Cf.: 'Levinas opposes to Husserl's difficulties in the *Cartesian Meditations* with the problem of the other the sense that the other is *absolutely* other than me, and Derrida defends Husserl on the grounds that [...] that other is in some sense the *same* as me' (p. 204 n.8).
- 7 'At this very moment in this work here I am', trans. Ruben Berezdivin, in Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (eds), *Re-Reading Levinas*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 11–48.
- 8 Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', trans. Frank A. Capuzzi, in *Pathmarks*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 269–71.
- 9 Robert Bernasconi has suggested that Levinas himself began to respond to Derrida's concerns about the use of the word 'ethics' in his later work. See 'Justice without ethics', *Pli*, 6 (1997), pp. 58–69.
- 10 'The Ethics of Deconstruction: an Attempt at Self-Criticism', *Pli*, 6 (1997) pp. 87–101.
- 11 'Choreographies', in *The Ear of the Other*, ed. Christie McDonald, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985, p. 178.
- 12 'Politics After', in *Beyond the Verse*, trans. Gary Mole, London: Athlone, 1994, p. 194.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 See also Derrida's comments on the situation in Palestine when speaking at a conference in Israel [KJG 39–40].
- 15 'Politics After', p. 194.
- 16 John Llewelyn, *Emmanuel Levinas: The Genealogy of Ethics*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 211.
- 17 Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 144.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 I owe this point to Geoffrey Bennington, *Legislations*, London: Verso, 1994, pp. 27–8; p. 56 n.43.
- 20 Bernasconi, 'Justice without Ethics'.
- 21 Critchley, *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity*, p. 279.

## CHAPTER 9: THE SPECTRALITY OF POLITICS

- 1 For discussion of this work, in addition to the texts by Honig and Rancière cited below, see Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, ed. Simon Sparks, *Retreating the Political*, London: Routledge, 1997; Benjamin Arditì and Jeremy Valentine, *Polemization: The Contingency of the Commonplace*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999; Darrow Schecter, *Sovereign States or Political Communities*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999.
- 2 Bonnie Honig, *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993, p. 2; p. 7.

- 3 Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Philosophy and Politics*, trans. Julie Rose, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, p. xii. For discussions of Rancière's work see Arditì and Valentine, *Polemization*; Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology*, London: Verso, 1999; Peter Osborne, 'Radicalism and Philosophy', *Radical Philosophy*, 103 (2000) pp. 6–11. See also 'Post-Democracy, Politics and Philosophy: an interview with Jacques Rancière', *Angelaki*, 1:3 (1994), pp. 171–8.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, 'Marx and Sons', trans. G. M. Goshgarian, in Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations*, London: Verso, 1999, pp. 213–69, p. 223.
- 5 On the recent revival of interest in Schmitt's thought see Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *The Challenge of Carl Schmitt*, London: Verso, 1999.
- 6 Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. George Schwab, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985, p. 36.
- 7 Plato, *Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 187–8.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 192.

## CHAPTER 10: DEPOLITICIZATION AND REPOLITICIZATION

- 1 'Perhaps or Maybe', Derrida in conversation with Alexander Garcia Düttmann, *Pli*, 6 (1997), pp. 1–18, p. 11.
- 2 This sentence has been expanded on republication in French in *Force de Loi*. I have included the additional material in square brackets.
- 3 'The Time is Out of Joint', trans. Peggy Kamuf, in Anselm Haverkamp (ed.), *Deconstruction is/in America*, New York: New York University Press, 1995, p. 17.
- 4 There is no English translation of this work. I have referred to Carl Schmitt, *La Notion de Politique et Theorie du Partisan*, trans. Marie-Louise Steinhauser, Paris: Flammarion, 1993, p. 262; p. 265.
- 5 The French republication of the text adds notes linking the discussion of Benjamin to that of Schmitt in *Politics of Friendship*, p. 87 n.2; pp. 126–7 n.1.
- 6 Cf. Samuel Weber, 'Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt', *Diacritics*, 22:3 (1992), pp. 5–18.
- 7 'Marx and Sons', pp. 250–1.
- 8 'Perhaps or Maybe', p. 11.
- 9 Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 192.
- 10 David Campbell reaches similar conclusion on the value of deconstruction's engagement with the state in his 'Deterritorialization of Responsibility', in David Campbell and Michael J. Shapiro (eds), *Moral Spaces: Rethinking ethics and world politics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, pp. 57–91.

## CHAPTER 11: THE POLITICS OF SPECTRALITY

- 1 Cited in Herman Rapaport, *Heidegger & Derrida: Reflections on Time and Language*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991, p. 177.
- 2 Miguel de Beistigui, *Heidegger and the political: dystopias*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 76.
- 3 Rodolphe Gasché, *Of Minimal Things*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000, p. 241.
- 4 See also Christopher Norris, *New Idols of the Cave: On the limits of anti-realism*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, p. 104.

- 5 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, ed. Simon Sparks, *Retreating the Political*, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 112.
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 139.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 110.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 126.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 128.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp. 122–3.
- 11 See for example Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor *et al.*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991; *The Experience of Freedom*, trans. Bridget McDonald, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993; *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; *Being Singular Plural*, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Byrne, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- 12 *Retreating the Political*, p. 126.
- 13 Simon Critchley, 'Re-tracing the political: politics and community in the work of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy', in David Campbell and Michael Dillon (eds), *The Political Subject of Violence*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993, p. 83.

## CHAPTER 12: DECONSTRUCTION AND DEPOLITICIZATION

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, 'Melancholy and the Act', in *Critical Inquiry*, 26 (2000), pp. 657–81, pp. 664–5.
- 2 *ibid.*
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 *ibid.*, pp. 665–6.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 663.
- 6 Antonio Negri, 'The Specter's Smile', in Michael Sprinker (ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations*, London: Verso, 1999, pp. 5–16, pp. 8–9.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 8.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 9.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 14.
- 11 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 47.
- 12 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999, p. 232.
- 13 Jean-François Lyotard, 'Discussions, or Phrasing "after Auschwitz"', in Andrew Benjamin (ed.), *The Lyotard Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, pp. 360–92, pp. 387–9.
- 14 Jacques Derrida, 'Marx and Sons', in *Ghostly Demarcations*, pp. 213–69, p. 261; p. 259.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 261.
- 16 The proceedings were published as David Carroll (ed.), *The States of Theory*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.
- 17 'Declarations d'Independence', *Otobiographies*, Paris: Galilée, 1984, pp. 21–2.
- 18 'Marx and Sons', pp. 224–5.

## CONCLUSION

- 1 Maurice Blanchot, 'Discours sur la patience (en marges de livres d'Emmanuel Levinas)', *Le Nouveau Commerce*, 30-1 (1975), pp. 19-44.
- 2 Gillian Rose, 'Potter's Field: Death worked and unworked', in Carolyn Bailey Gill (ed.), *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 204.
- 3 Geoffrey Bennington, 'Emergencies', *Interrupting Derrida*, London: Routledge, 2000, pp. 162-79; cf. also pp. 24-5.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, 'The Time is Out of Joint', trans. Peggy Kamuf, in Anselm Haverkamp (ed.), *Deconstruction is / in America*, New York: New York University Press, 1995, pp. 14-38.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, 'Introduction to *The Origin of Geometry*', trans. John P. Leavey Jr, in *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry': An Introduction*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989, p. 149.
- 6 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.
- 7 Jacques Derrida, 'Introduction: Desistance', Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989, p. 15.



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