

ASPECTS OF THE PROBLEM OF REFERENCE (IV)

Section 5 : Meaning and Reference in Deconstruction

When we move from Ricoeur's hermeneutics to the theory of Deconstruction in Derrida, we note a certain similarity or affinity in over all concerns, yet co-existing with profound differences in aims, method and presuppositions. These striking contrasts in temper and method between the classicism and synopticism of Ricoeur's hermeneutics with its readiness for synthesis and participatory dialogue and the restless radical and subversive questioning of Derrida are so great and undeniable that very often it is only these contrasts that remain in view. Perhaps more fundamental than all other points of difference and disparity between Ricoeur and Derrida, there is this question of the attitude to philosophy of the respective thinkers. For, Ricoeur preserves the classical sense and feeling for philosophy as a universal discourse; it is true that in him, philosophy enters into dialogue with an astonishing variety of disciplines, from structural linguistics to psycho-analysis and comparative mythology and religion, but in all these encounters, philosophy preserves its autonomy and separate identity. This feeling for philosophy as, in a sense a self-assured discourse, is particularly evident in his discussion of rhetories and other figurative uses of language in *The Rule of Metaphor*.¹⁰⁹ While showing a sustained interest in the study of metaphor Ricoeur resists the assimilation of philosophy to metaphorical language in general. The attempt is to preserve a zone of validity and sense for philosophy which

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will not be dragged into the ruses and stratagems of metaphor. In a sense, it may be said that philosophy, in Ricoeur, aims at the rule of metaphor in the sense of mastery of the work of such figurative languages. It is in this spirit that he resists the suggestion that the problems of metaphysics, as for example, the doctrine of the many senses of being in Aristotle, are determined by the ideas of resemblance and analogy of the theory of metaphor. This intention to preserve the intentions of philosophic discourse free from the problems caused by its textuality, this motivation to pursue philosophy as a theory of discourses rather than itself a discourse, is most clearly evident in his discussion of Derrida's 'White Mythology' in *The Rule of Metaphor*.¹¹⁰ This discussion about the autonomy of philosophy is, however, conducted in terms of what may appear to be a highly recondite and purely technical issue, namely about 'dead' and 'living' metaphors.

The difference and contrast here is so basic and deep going that two very untypical and uncharacteristic features of Ricoeur's discussion of Derrida may be noticed. First, unlike other thinkers with whom Ricoeur is so constantly engaged in dialogue and comment, Ricoeur hardly ever meets with Derrida on any sustained basis; perhaps the passage in *The Rule of Metaphor* that I just now referred to is the only long discussion of Derrida to be met with in Ricoeur.¹¹¹ But secondly, what is even more symptomatic, is that Ricoeur approaches Derrida under certain unquestioned stereotypes; for example, he takes Derrida's reflections on textuality and meaning as an expression of what he calls 'the absolute text' a text with no outside at all. He takes deconstruction as negating all referentiality. This caricatural image of Derrida as some kind of transcendental solipsist for whom nothing real exists outside the text has been the sloppy misreading of Derrida which has been very common with some of his more

'vehement' critics, such as T. Seung in *Structuralism and Hermeneutics*.¹¹² It is true that Ricoeur's approach is never so blatantly unseeing and inattentive. Yet in Ricoeur too, there is a flattening of the argumentation of Derrida on the problem of reference. The possibility that what Derrida is really interrogating is the unsuspected complexity of the referential relation of discourse rather than reference itself is hardly entertained. This is all the more surprising, for Derrida himself has been very explicit precisely on this issue. Derrida, in a recent interview, has deplored such readings of his work which take him to be saying that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language, and other stupidities of that sort.¹¹³ He goes on to explain that his object has not been to deny any connection between language and the real, but to show how the question of reference is far more complex than traditional theories will allow.¹¹⁴ To distance oneself from the habitual structure of reference, to challenge or complicate our common assumptions about it, does not amount to saying that there is nothing beyond language

One of the aspects of the common assumptions about reference which Derrida is here suspending is the simple conviction that the relation between language and reality is a simple correspondence, that every significant expression stands for an object, which is signified. To question this picture of reference is not to deny that there is a world and that our thought and language in some sense are about it. It is to question the simplicity and obviousness of seeming self-evidence of the referential relation. And indeed on this point, namely, a distrust about and a profound interrogation of the presence of object to thought, of the immediacy and givenness of the referential relation, both Ricoeur and Derrida are one. Ricoeur, too, as we have seen, is critical of the thesis of immediacy, whether it takes the form of

the Husserlian phenomenology of consciousness or of the immediate disclosure of Being in Heidegger's fundamental ontology.¹¹⁵ We have already seen Ricoeur's critique of the phenomenological version of immediacy; hence, we shall confine our attention here to Ricoeur's reservations about the ontological version of immediacy in Heidegger.

Ricoeur appropriates the idea of Heidegger's fundamental ontology that Being, as distinguished from particular beings, is disclosed to human being in the interpretation of the mode of man's being in the world. This moment of disclosure of Being as unconcealed is, in Heidegger, connected with the emphasis on immediacy and self-presence Being, although concealed over by beings, is yet immediately present to Dasein; in his later period, the emphasis shifts from the anticipatory projection of Dasein to the self-giving of Being itself.¹¹⁶ Ricoeur appropriates this disclosive aspect of hermeneutics, but with an important proviso; insofar as it is a text which has this capacity for disclosure, it is in language or through language that it takes place. As Ricoeur puts it "the difficulty in passing from understanding as a mode of knowledge (hermeneutics) to understanding as a mode of Being (fundamental ontology) consists in the following: the understanding which is the result of the Analytics of Dasein is precisely the understanding through which and in which this being understands itself as being. Is it not once again within language itself that we must seek the indication that understanding is a mode of being?"¹¹⁷

If we look at this text from the point of view of Derrida, it appears that Ricoeur here is emphasising the unexpungeable involvement of the question of being in the question of language. Any idea of truth as the disclosure of being which looks upon this disclosure as the transparency of language would not do, for the notion of something other than language, which, however, is

ultimately that all language is about, in other words, the idea of Being as the transcendental signified of all signifiers, any such idea of a transcendency of discourse, is a mirage, for the very idea of reference is thinkable only in terms of language. Further more, insofar as language is determinable in its meaning and reference only by interpretation and since interpretation is an open ended process, the comprehension of Being, the moment of *altheia*, is a reflection and not an immediate intuitive deliverance. The point of describing this moment of understanding of Being as reflection is two-fold, firstly it is to emphasise the mediateness of this moment of comprehension as given through and only through an understanding of symbols and secondly and consequently, it is to emphasise the recovery of Being as a *task* rather than an immediate illumination. The reflectiveness of understanding Being is a way of distancing hermeneutics from the philosophies of immediacy. It is, of course, only too well known that both Cartesian and Husserlian philosophies are philosophies of immediacy, but what is to be noted at this point is that the illuminative comprehension of Being in fundamental ontology is also a form of immediacy. It is against this immediacy of existentialist comprehension that hermeneutic reflection suggests an open endedness and incompleteness of understanding. As Ricoeur himself puts this point of contrast, "while no immediate ontology is possible, it is possible by way of a hermeneutics of symbols."¹¹⁸

This open-endedness of hermeneutic interpretation which Ricoeur connects up with language expresses the deferment of meanings, the postponement of sense, which Derrida emphasises as one of the sides of 'difference' — the perpetual movement from signifier to signifier and the postponement of 'final' meaning in this deference of signifier to signifier. The idea of an infinite task arises in both hermeneutics and Derrida's reflection on

language and sense. Yet, as I shall soon try to point out, behind this point of convergence, is concealed a profound disagreement between hermeneutics and deconstruction. But first it is necessary to foreground the convergent similarity.

The idea of interpretation as an endless task, of hermeneutics, therefore, as a programme, which by its very nature cannot claim to have reached any closure, is not new to reflections about meaning and interpretation. On the contrary, at the very origin of philosophical hermeneutics, Schleiermacher gives expression to this idea. "The task is an infinite one since it is an infinity of the past and the future which we wish to perceive in the moment of speech."¹¹⁹ Schleiermacher even hints at the ideas of perpetual deferral and intertextuality. "Language is infinite because every element is determinable in a particular way through the rest"¹²⁰ But perhaps it is in the hermeneutical philosophy of Gadamer that we can see a sense of proximity to Derrida. For Gadamer too, Western philosophy, since the time of the Greeks, has been involved in a struggle against language, in a denial of the intimate relation of language and thought. He considers the task of philosophical hermeneutics to break with "the forgetfulness of language." For Gadamer also, interpretation is not a matter of penetrating to an ultimate objectifiable truth but rather being caught up in an endless "happening of meaning."¹²¹ Ricoeur continues this endlessness of interpretation at a number of levels; as we saw, interpretations presuppose certain primary pre-understandings and arising within such presupposed frames, lead to further questions and further presuppositions; this endless dialectic of pre-understanding and interpretative understanding is one aspect of the infinity of interpretations. Another dimension of the same is the notion of plurality of interpretations, of the diversity of what we called hermeneutic styles.

Hence, for both Derrida and the hermeneutic tradition; interpretation is an endless process, but they reach this idea, as it were, from diametrically opposed ends. For Ricoeur and the hermeneutic tradition in general, interpretation is endless because of the wealth and over-abundance of sense. It is because of the fecundity of meaning that interpretation becomes an open dynamic process, nourished by its own success. Endlessness of interpretation is a sign of inexhaustibility of meaning. As against inexhaustibility which is the sign of the hermeneutic tradition, 'dissemination' is the key of Derrida's strategy. Derrida, specifically referring to the endlessness of interpretation, writes— "if one cannot summarize dissemination, seminal difference, in its conceptual tenor, this is because the force and form of its disruption burst the semantic horizon".^{1,2} Derrida's view is not that meaning is inexhaustible but rather that any specification of meaning can only function as a self-defeating attempt to stabilize and restrain the dispersal of the text. A stress on multiple or even infinite meanings still attempts to evade this rupture.

Derrida is here suggesting that the ideology of infinite meanings and the consequent self-understanding of hermeneutics as an unending task still is captive to the metaphysics of presence, for what lends force to this programme is the implicit and implied idea of an already present fund of meanings, a totality in some sense already given and requiring to be articulated and drawn out in a series of interpretative acts. The picture is of a present totality which, however, can be appropriated, as it were, only piecemeal. It is precisely because an infinity of signification is given that the endlessness of the interpretative labour becomes a necessity. Somewhat as in the Platonic framework, time is said to be the moving image of eternity, the incessant activity of interpretation is in its own way the expression of the infinite wealth of meanings. This idea is, fundamentally a return to a

phenomenological theme, for it may be remembered that Husserl felt that phenomenology is an endless process of clarification. Hence Derrida feels that with this idea alone of the endlessness of interpretation hermeneutics does not displace the metaphysics of presence. As opposed to this account of endless interpretative labour, for Derrida, the unceasing character of interpretation is a symptom of dispersal. It is because there is a deferral and postponement of meaning in the chain of signifiers, in other words, it is because meaning has to be redeemed within the sphere of intertextuality, where the meaning of a text is modulated by other texts, that the recuperation of sense can never be final. Dissemination is tied up with the non presence of sense in a text or syntax considered by itself. There is also another theme touched upon in Derrida's account of endlessness of interpretation; this unceasing process is not to be imaged as a linear progression, but rather as an uncontrolled oscillation between opposed or incompatible interpretations. As an example of the instability and radical perturbation of Derridean interpretation, we may cite his gloss on Nietzsche's comparison of truth with woman.

Nietzsche's statement "Perhaps truth is a woman", according to Derrida is, under the pressure of a perpetual two-fold oscillation, first, the words 'truth' and 'woman' are themselves ineradicably polysemous and because of this plurality of senses, the meaning of the statement as a whole is not merely liable for varied interpretations, but it is undecidably so. Derrida says that the perpetually oscillating meaning of the statement can express three fundamentally different propositions. The first of them depicts the woman as a figure of falsehood; as such, she is censured, debased and despised. The second position presents the woman as the figure of truth. This is the Christian notion of truth; in this role again, woman is debased and despised, since this is merely the other of the first view. The third position is

the double negation of the first two.¹³² Although taken in isolation these three positions are decidable, the oscillation between these three interpretations is undecidable; embracing any one does not assure stability of meaning for that very sense throws us onto the other and in this perpetual play and sliding of senses, our interpretations are never fixated but are ever in the position of 'between' of different constructions.

There is also the note of inner subversion and diremption in this process of endless oscillation. This subversive function is, of course, the most important function of Derrida's deconstructive strategies. They work by first inverting the order of priority and significance within a given binary opposition such as speech-writing, signifier-signified, intelligible-sensible, man-woman etc., and then in a second moment of a reversal of a reversal, seek to dismantle the pair structure of the oppositions. It is this deconstructive force within the discourse itself which leads to the perpetual oscillation of understanding of meanings. Derrida does not claim to imposing any induced vertigo on the natural stability of discourse; the deconstruction that he practices is not read into discourse from the outside, but as his study of *pharmakon* in Plato so clearly brings out, this instability and going over into the opposite is inscribed in the very terms of the opposition; for instance, in the very attempt to contain writing as an inferior and supplementary form of discourse, as signifier of a signifier, Plato is led precisely to the opposite idea and uses the model of writing for true interior thinking.¹²⁴ The subversion, the inner turn-about, is a play within the frame of the discussion, a moment of insurrection within the argument.

There is a similar idea of the ineradicable contestability of all interpretations in Ricoeur as well as Gadamer, when they describe the basic opposition of two types of interpretation which Ricoeur calls the hermeneutics of trust and the hermeneutics of

suspicion. But in Gadamer, particularly,¹²⁵ one of these two hermeneutic modes, namely, the hermeneutic of trust, is privileged and in a different way, in Ricoeur also, there is a suggestion of a hope of ultimate reconciliation. This hope is given, as Gadamer very clearly recognises, in the very project of hermeneutics as coming to an understanding with another. In these terms, mutuality and trust are inscribed in the hermeneutical project.¹²⁵

It, therefore, appears that the one of the roots of the difference between hermeneutics and deconstruction has to do with the respective place given to writing in relation to meaning, understanding and speech. Here, again, before we attempt to give an account of Derrida's position, we may consider Ricoeur's treatment of the problem of textuality as against speech, for in his approach to writing, there are certain ideas which point towards Derrida and yet these indications are held within the over all configuration of a hermeneutic theory whose outcome is different from that of Derrida.

Ricoeur holds that when we move from oral speech to written discourse there is a loss as well as a gain. The aspect of loss has, in fact, been almost universally and exclusively recognised. Oral communication or speech has been privileged and writing has been seen as parasitic upon it. This privileging of orality over textuality is expressed most paradigmatically in Plato and Ricoeur, like Derrida, also concentrates on Plato's *Phaedrus* in this connection.¹²⁶ In the *Phaedrus*, Plato mounts an attack on writing in the name of genuine knowledge and true recollection. Writing cannot further true reminiscence but merely aid remembrance and also make possible, not genuine instruction, but a false conceit of knowledge. Ricoeur also mentions Rousseau and Bergson in this critique of writing. For Rousseau, as long as language relied only on voice, it preserved the presence of oneself to oneself and to others. Language was still the expression of

passion. It was eloquence, not yet exegesis. With writing, began separation, tyranny and inequality. Writing ignores its addressee just as it conceals its author. It separates men just as property separates owners.

The tyranny of the lexicon and of grammar is equal to that of the laws of exchange, crystallized in money. Instead of the Word of God, we have the rule of the learned and the domination of the priesthood. The break up of the speaking community and the partition of the soil, the analyticity of thought and the reign of dogmatism were also born with writing. Bergson directly questions the principle of exteriority which witnesses to the infiltration of space into the temporality of sound and its continuity. The written word has severed its ties with the feeling effort and dynamism of thought.^{1,7}

It is interesting to note that Ricoeur too takes Plato and Rousseau as examples of the critique of writing and like Derrida, he too locates this critique within a larger consideration of the intellectual, social and moral powers and needs of human beings. For Ricoeur too, the elevation of speech over writing, the primacy of the spoken word, is no mere element in a theory of language, but it is the expression of an entire philosophy and metaphysics, what Derrida calls phonocentrism. But while responding to this critique of writing, Ricoeur would, in a sense, agree that in moving from oral to textual discourse, there is a loss. But we must locate this dimension of loss and diremption differently. For this more phenomenologically oriented comparison of oral and textual discourse, we may briefly recall Austin's formulation of the three functions of speech acts.

1. The locutionary aspect—the act *of* saying.
2. The illocutionary aspect—the act *in* saying.

3. The perlocutionary aspect—the act or effect achieved *by* saying.

According to Ricoeur, in the inscription of discourse in the form of writing, these three functions or aspects diminish in the order in which they have been stated above.¹²³ This can be seen when we remember that writing represents a fixation of meaning in which the 'said' assumes greater importance than the act of saying, because the content can be more easily preserved, but the performative aspect, the dynamic doing in saying, is less easily inscribed in writing and much less, the perlocutionary force and impact on the audience.

But this loss is the condition on which the gain in the access to text is manifested; as we have already seen, Ricoeur holds that the text gains a secondary reference, a capacity to disclose new ways or aspects of being in the world; it leads to a re-description of reality such that we see the world under a new aspect. Ricoeur holds that this new dimension of reference is possible only on the basis of the suppression of primary or literal reference, just as in a metaphor, the semantic innovation, the production of the new meaning, is possible only on the basis of the breakdown of the customary sense.

Ricoeur, therefore, sees the specific uniqueness of the text in terms of its capacity for new modes of reference. But even here the text is not an abrupt break from speech or oral discourse. On the contrary, Ricoeur sees textual functions as actualizations of certain implicit tendencies given in speech itself. Furthermore, Ricoeur is able to see the continuity between speech and writing, because he sees both of them as discourse which he sets off against language. It is this primary contrast between language as structure and language as meaning that is fundamental in Ricoeur and the contrast between speech and writing takes its place as a

further specification within discourse. This point may be of some interest, for as we shall soon see, in Derrida also there is a critique of structuralism but that critique of structuralism is very different from that of Ricoeur and leads to the deconstruction of the speech/writing schema itself. For Ricoeur, within structuralism, a sign must not be defined in terms of some object for which it stands, but rather in terms of its relations with other signs within the system of which it is a part. By constituting itself as the study of language as a system in this sense, Ricoeur argues that structuralism excludes a number of fundamental phenomena. But most importantly, it excludes the primary intention of language which is to say something about something. With Frege, Ricoeur accepts the basic claim that we are not satisfied with sense but also demand reference. But Ricoeur grounds this demand for reference in the claim that this demand is an expression in linguistic terms of the intentional thrust of human existence, that it is a mode of being in the world. It is true that in Ricoeur, intentionality has shed much of its cartesian aura, as a propulsion of consciousness, and appears more as a description of human existence than of subjectivity. But it is still, in its existential form, determinative of his philosophy of meaning, leading to primacy of reference over sense.

Derrida devotes a long and sustained study to Plato's *Phaedrus* precisely focussing on this issue of the contrast of speech and writing and the denigration of writing as an inferior supplementarity.¹³⁰ At one level, Derrida seems to be making the same points as Ricoeur, when he reconstructs the philosophical assumptions and presuppositions which give force to this critique of writing. Thus, like Ricoeur, he brings out the contrast between true recollection and a mere external remembrance; he also explicates Plato's argument that writing, while seemingly

augmenting the range and scope of the knowable, by means of its external sedimentation in a material medium really robs cognitive processes of their real motivating impulse; they only contribute a false and deceitful semblance of learning just as the art of cookery mimics medicine and cosmetics, true gymnastics. Hence, writing, sophistry, rhetoric and myth are all aligned, as figures of semblance, against the logos of philosophic inquiry. At this level, Derrida's study of the myth of writing in the *Phaedrus* moves on the same level as that of Ricoeur, but Derrida adds a series of complications to this seemingly smooth and compulsive philosophic reading of the text and it is these complications and perplexities which invest the entire critique with another level of antithetical significance. If we may put it that way, Ricoeur's reading moves only on one plane—the philosophical or argumentative. At this level he reconstructs the logical motivations of the critique and its presuppositions. It is not that these conceptual determinations and intentions are not there in the text; the argument of the text certainly moves along these levels. But in Derrida, there is, as it were, a bi-focal perspective on the text. While he, like Ricoeur, also attends to the conceptuality of the critique, he is also concerned with its textuality i.e., the argument is embodied in the form of a discourse structured by a series of metaphors and other figurative devices. The rhetorical texture of the passage does not allow itself to be wholly pervaded by its conceptuality with the result that behind the foreground argumentation, in the background there is a struggle which is staged, a struggle between concept and expression, between thought and discourse. It is to this agonistic struggle that Derrida's reading alerts us, by drawing our attention to a number of enigmas of the composition of the text. At first glance, such tactics may appear as distractions from a philosophic reading of the dialogue, as intrusions of stylistics into epistemology and theory semantics. But Derrida's point is

precisely to make us see the effects of textuality upon philosophic arguments. We may begin to grasp this over determination of a philosophical text, to use a Freudian term, by first reminding ourselves that this critique of writing is presented as a myth, of the gift of the god Thoth to the Egyptian King. Thoth offers the gift of writing, among others to the king, but he rejects it and it is during the course of explaining the wisdom of the king's rejection that Socrates builds up the case against writing, whose philosophical foundations we have already seen. What is intriguing about it and constitutes itself as the first enigma of the passage is that the Socratic logos expresses its integrity and purity precisely by way of a myth.¹³¹ But Derrida holds that this regression to myth is no momentary or isolated accident which befalls the philosophic logos, but, on the contrary, it is inevitable the moment Plato decides to embody Socratic speech in the form of writing. Plato himself regards the fact that his master, Socrates never even once wrote down his views, as not merely a personal detail about him, but as an expression of his philosophic integrity and power. Yet, Plato had to record this by writing. This complex relation between Socrates and Plato alerts us to a latent guilt and bad faith in the texts of the dialogues.¹³² Perhaps this sense of guilt makes itself felt when Plato falls back upon the metaphor of writing at the very moment he is trying to describe the purity of genuine thought. So, speech is represented, not only as the opposite of writing, but as a 'good' kind of writing that is inscribed in the soul and similarly true memory is described in terms of engraving and inscribing.¹³³ In the very attempt to distantiate speech from writing, Plato describes it as a form of writing. This double edged feature of the dialogue reaches its most arresting moment in the metaphor Plato uses for writing 'pharmakon'. Pharmakon is not just an ambiguous term; its chief senses are 'poison' on the one hand and 'remedy' or 'cure' on the other. One would

think that these two meanings could hardly come together in a single utterance or context of usage, but that is precisely Derrida's point—that these two antithetical senses of the word are everywhere co-present in Plato's text, defeating all attempts to choose one or the other according to context;¹³⁴ we may perhaps put this in psycho-analytic terms by saying that in Plato, writing is the unconscious of speech.

The objective of such deconstructive strategies is not to invert an accepted order, to stand on end conventional priorities; in the case before us, Derrida is after much bigger game than merely to make out a case for writing; on the contrary, what he wants to show and wishes us to see (although perhaps such a 'visual' invitation is contrary to his style of argument) is that the binary opposition of speech and writing is itself radically unstable and is subversive. But what also must be 'seen' is that we cannot substitute a less infected form of thinking, use concepts and categories which would be immune from the difficulties and perplexities of the concepted model. A connected point also may be kept in mind. In questioning these patterns of our thinking, Derrida is not denying reality; the object of his critique is the way we think about the world rather than the world itself. In other words, I am suggesting that a nihilistic interpretation of deconstructionism, which unfortunately seems to be the gut reaction of so many of his critics is a naive reading. This point, I hope, will become more pertinent when we come to the issue of reference in Deconstruction. But it may still be asked why attach so much metaphysical weight and pathos to a distinction between speech and writing. That Derrida attaches the gravest consequentiality to this most evident in *On Grammatology* where he writes 'All the metaphysical determinations of truth and even the ones beyond the metaphysical onto-theology that Heidegger reminds us of, are more or less

immediately inseparable from the instance of logos, or of a reason thought within the lineage of the logos, in whatever sense it is understood : in the pre-Socratic or the philosophical sense, in the sense of God's infinite understanding or in the anthropological sense, in the pre-Hegelian or the post-Hegelian sense. Within this logos, the original and essential link to the phone has never been broken".¹³⁵

The enormous weight he attaches to the critique of speech is due to his claim that the link between reason or truth or logos and speech has been fatefully determinative of the Western philosophical, metaphysical as well as anti-metaphysical tradition and hence a critique of speech is also a critique of the self-presentations of philosophy in that tradition. This claim can be judged only on the basis of a close and attentive consideration of all of his texts, but particularly *On Grammatology*¹³⁶ and *Margins of Philosophy*.^{137a} But we can make a few remarks here and now. First, as we shall see presently, the deconstruction of the speech-writing opposition is a model and basis for the deconstruction of the conception of self-identity as understood in the Western philosophical tradition. Second, in a different study I have shown how this engagement with the concept of the sign has serious implications for the Human sciences.^{137b} The signifier-signified opposition is part of what may be called a binary complex, which also includes such other consequential oppositions as the intelligible and the sensible, reality and appearance, nature and culture, man and woman. The scope of deconstruction is, therefore, as wide and deep as human thinking itself

But to return to the point with which we started these reflections on the aim and scope of deconstruction. I said that for Derrida, what is involved is the questioning of the schema of our thought and not so much any of its results. For example,

it is the way we think about language, meaning and truth that he wants to expose and interrogate. The guiding principle of this interrogation is one of the most crucial operative 'concepts' of deconstruction, namely 'Differance'.¹³⁸ It would be impossible and pointless to attempt a summarizing of the idea of differance and for our present purpose, it is also not called for. What is more relevant and manageable is to keep in view the two component associations of the Derrida's term—*difference* and *deferance* in the sense of postponing, delaying etc. What Derrida is suggesting is that all signs exhibit these two features; writing only does so in a manifest or palpable manner, such that writing serves as a model for all language and signification. In that sense writing is a 'root metaphor' for language and understanding through language.

I propose to comment briefly on these two aspects—difference and deferance and I shall connect the first with Derrida's response to De Saussure and the second with his response to Heidegger.

Difference is a constitutive or defining condition for both the signifier and the signified, for De Saussure. He writes "in language there are only differences. Even more important; a difference generally implies positive terms between which the difference is set up; but in language, there are only differences *without positive terms*. Whether we take the signified or the signifier, language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system. The idea or phonic substance that a sign contains is of less importance than the other signs that surround it".¹³⁹ De Saussure is saying that a signifier is determined not by what it is, as it were, in itself or by itself, but in terms of its differences from other signifiers; so also the signified, the sense or concept, is fixed by differences

from other senses; the identity of both the signifier and the signified is a relational and oppositional identity. But it must be noted that this kind of difference is a synchronic characteristic of signs within a system. In a sense it may be said that Derrida attaches a temporal signification to De Saussure's difference. This is one of the overtones of the metaphor of writing, for writing as an inscription, is a trace of thought and speech in the temporal sense as an 'after-event'. For Derrida the meaning of any sign is perpetually deferred; the signified concept can never be fully present to the signifier. The signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences. Such a play, then—difference—is no longer simply a concept but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general".¹⁴⁰ (Difference, we may say, is not a concept, but a condition of possibility of all concepts and hence 'transcendental').

The idea of a meaning always postponed, deferred and concealed in the play of signifiers and thus never present in its identity takes us on to Heidegger's sense of difference. For Heidegger, the basic contrast is between Being and particular beings in plural and dispersal; it is this which he calls the ontological difference and further especially in his later works, there is the idea that Being is concealed in beings and there is, therefore, the presence of Being in the mode of absence. While these ideas do have a certain affinity with Derrida, yet there is also a difference for, in Heidegger, there is also the idea of a recovery and possession of truth in the resoluteness of 'thinking of Being'. In this sense, Derrida claims that Heidegger's thought, however radical and critical of metaphysics it may be,

is yet within the basic logocentrism of the Western tradition. Just as previously, we noted that Differance is a condition of possibility of all concepts and conceptuality, we can now say that it is also the condition of possibility of the ontological difference. It is precisely in this way that Derrida claims that deconstruction is more radical than Heidegger's fundamental ontology, in the sense that it explains the unexplainable in Heidegger.

I said that one of the reasons Derrida concentrates so much of his attention on the notion of sign understood as the unity of signifier–signified, as understood in structuralism is that it is this schema of the signifier and the signified that has also been the pattern of thinking of self–identity. Hence, to question the sign as Derrida does is to interrogate the schema of self–reflection. Considering that it is this pattern of self–reflection which has served as the philosophical matrix of humanism, the impact of Derrida's questioning can well be imagined.

The model of the sign is particularly apt for the understanding of the structure of self–identity or personal identity in the Western philosophical as well as humanistic tradition. As De Saussure describes it, the sign is the unity of the signifier and the signified where the signifier is the expression of the signified and the signified is the foundation of the signifier. Furthermore, the signified, although primary in one sense, is yet accessible to us only by way of the signifier; we grasp the signified by way of the expressive power of the signifier. Applying this as the model of personal or self–identity we may make a number of comments :

1. We may say there is a foundation or the self in itself, analogous to the signified; this is the object term of self–consciousness, for it is that of which we are said to be aware when we are aware of ourselves. Of course, this

foundation or basis may be understood differently in different philosophical paradigms, as body self, as sensuous stream of impressions, as active will, or as desire, or reason, or of transcendental subjectivity, or as Dasein which it at once ontic and ontological or as soul or spiritual substance, or as the mystical unity of the individual and universal.

2. This founding reality of the self is expressed in a certain reflective awareness, which, we may say, corresponds to the signifier in the model of the signifier–signified complex. Self-awareness or self-consciousness is the coming to awareness the active expression of the self.

Self-identity, therefore, is a sign in the sense that it consists of an expression (signifier) of an underlying sense (signified). But here we may recall a certain strategy of Husserl's treatment of meanings; we noted that Husserl says that although 'meaning' or 'sense' are originally given at the level of language thus standing for the meaning or sense of a word or other linguistic element, yet the notion can be extended to the level of prelinguistic acts such that we may legitimately speak, not only of linguistic meanings but also of act meanings. As per this, we can now say that although the notion of sign is first encountered at the level of language, yet we may extend it to the structure of self-identity. But as with Husserl, this is only an opening move, for in Husserl, it is the phenomenological stratum of intentional acts and their noematic meanings that explain linguistic meaning. So also even here, it may be said that the self-identity of the subject is the basis and foundation for identity of other things somewhat reminding us of Kant's point that the unity of self consciousness is the ground of the possibility of experience and knowledge.

It is because of this deep and interior connection between the identity of the self and the identity of objects, that it is possible for certain theories to presuppose self-identity although they are about very different phenomena. Thus a certain linguistic theory of signs and their signification which has nothing to do with self or personal identity, but because the schema it uses for its own inquiries is the schema of self-identity, such theories of the sign do have a certain metaphysical salience. Also, it is because of this bond that a critique of language can also function as a critique of metaphysics.

With these remarks in mind, when we turn to the implications of Derrida's deconstruction of the sign for the problem of the self and its identity, we find the following :

1. Derrida's critique of the presence of the signified and his counter-claim that the signified is always deferred and absent unsettles the conviction of the subject as presence. The notion of 'différance' is a profound questioning of any philosophy of immediacy, particularly phenomenology.
2. The idea of the absent signified as set up by the play and dissemination of the signifiers, that it is a function of this perpetual 'sliding' also calls into question the stability and self-presence of the subject.

Derrida himself draws the final conclusion from this critique of self-consciousness. In his 'Introduction' to *The Origin of Geometry* he speaks of difference as transcendental. In *Speech and Phenomena* he says that difference is primordial nonself presence—it is not something which occurs to a transcendental subject, it is what produces it.¹¹¹

But it may now be asked what happens to meaning and reference, to truth and falsehood, if neither a stable sense nor a

subject is admissible. If all presence has been deconstructed and the signified is only the illusion thrown up the perpetual play of the signifiers, have we not abolished all notions of reference of our utterances and writings being 'about' something, as holding true of it? This, of course, is the fundamental objection which Ricoeur has expressed, namely, that the very intention of language is to be true of something, that this drive from sense to reference is primordial and irrepressible. If this is so, it would follow that the network of ideas relating to referentiality of discourse, ideas like being about something, as holding true of it and so on, would be so fundamental that this network of ideas would pervade all our utterances; somewhat like the Kantian categories, they would be found wherever there is language, assertion or denial. If so, it would appear that no deconstruction could really get out of the schemas instituted by these notions.

Derrida is fully alive to this situation for he holds that all deconstructive strategies, in the very moment they call the binary oppositions of thought into question, also fall back into conceptual space organized by these oppositions. This involvement of a critique of concepts in the very conceptuality it seeks to call into question is the converse of 'ordinary' philosophical discourse. As noted in our discussion of Plato, while setting out to establish the primacy of speech over writing, the argumentation implicitly subverts itself. So also here, deconstructive arguments also suffer this kind of reversal. But Derrida would not, therefore, conclude that all critique is futile and condemned to a kind of unintended repetition. Through these inner dislocations and aporetic reversals, it is possible to have a glimpse of reality; as he says there is something which glimmers through these 'broken' claims. The crucially important question that we have to consider is what is the proper way of responding to this situation of a broken disclosure.

This issue is an aspect of the more basic problem of reference in Derrida's thought. As we have already seen, an extreme response to Derrida's work on language and writing has taken that he dismantles the whole idea of reference, that for him there is nothing outside the text and that we are condemned to a solipsism of the absolute text. We have also seen how Derrida himself has protested against such 'nihilistic' readings. But it is now necessary to pursue the matter further and try to determine in what sense we should understand the deconstructionist critique of reference. For this purpose, we may begin with one of Derrida's remarks that "we need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things."¹² I suggest that one of the things that this remark of Derrida may suggest, in the context of the problem of language and reference, is that what we have to examine is not, so to say, the phenomenon of reference, but the modes in which we understand and talk about reference; it is the discourses of reference to which we must shift our attention. This may recall to our minds the Kantian claim of the necessity of shifting the mode of inquiry. When we, thus, examine the modes of understanding the relationship of thought, language and reality, when we shift to the discourses of reference, Derrida suggests that in the tradition of philosophic thought there have been two basic models, two guiding praadigms which have shaped theories of knowledge and truth. It may not be even proper to call them theories of truth or theories of reference; they are comparable to Kuhnian paradigms which can serve as the matrices of a plurality of theories; there is a further point of analogy with the notion of paradigms. Like paradigms, these discourses of reference are seldom fully articulated; very often they are effective precisely because they remain implicit and assumed. The first of these models of truth is the idea of truth as an adequate correspondence with things. It is this idea of truth as a certain fit between words and things, the idea that the

referential relation is a simple one of names or words standing for objects and states of affairs that has been the source of a number of realistic theories of knowledge and truth. Opposed to this is the idealist theory or 'picture', which sees truth as a form of inward reflection, as an interior presence before consciousness. It may appear to differ totally from the first view insofar as it seems to do away with the postulation of anything external, anything which may be said to be 'the other' of consciousness or the subject, but in spite of this manifest difference between them, they rest upon a shared presupposition that an object is what is present before the subject. Hence, the opposition and strife between these two views or preunderstandings simply describe an oscillation within the same circle of assumptions and presuppositions; hence the battle of the giants as Plato once called this strife between idealism and materialism,¹⁴³ is yet paradoxically of so little real transformation; hence the appearance in history of philosophy of an illusory battle, of a strife in which neither position can be either established or overthrown, for in the very moment of establishing the one, the grounds for the re-emergence of the other are laid down. Hence the periodical returns and revivals of abandoned views. But the criticism of the concealed shared presuppositions has the appearance of dismantling the notion of truth itself. Since reference and validity has been pre-delimited by these concealed presuppositions, since they limit our discursive possibilities, any rejection of that hidden model strikes one as an elimination of truth itself; the spectre of a solipsism which has lost the world, rises up to paralyse our thought. Derrida, as we saw, has no pretensions of transcending the constraints and double binds which have held fast the discourse of philosophy from its institution; he does not believe that deconstruction could pretend to be a deliverance from these burdens imposed on tho-

ught by language. On the contrary, what is alone in our power is to interpret this predicament and here too Derrida talks of two modes of recognition, two interpretations of interpretations in his terms. "There are thus two interpretations of interpretation of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth, or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile... Turned towards the lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this interpretation is saddened, negative, nostalgic and guilty side of thinking, whose other side would be the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth."¹⁴⁴

But still a few lingering questions and reflections may be permitted. The two kinds of interpretation that Derrida is talking of here may recall Ricoeur's description of the hermeneutics of trust and the hermeneutics of suspicion. This may be reinforced by the fact that Derrida mentions Nietzsche whom Ricoeur describes as a master of suspicion. But these are few further reflections which may somewhat delay the identification of Derrida's two interpretations with the hermeneutics of trust and of suspicion respectively. Ricoeur would perhaps fasten on the allusion to the overcoming of truth in Derrida's passage, but the accent falls upon the joyful acceptance or affirmation of the world.¹⁴⁵ Similarly the other interpretation Derrida is here contrasting evokes nostalgia and sadness and guilt, whereas the hermeneutics of trust would see itself under the sign of hope. Perhaps the hermeneutics of Heidegger with its search for Being lost and concealed over by beings but recoverable by thought is closer to such a hermeneutics of trust. But what is so unsettling about Derrida's contrast of two interpretations is that in *The Margins of Philosophy* where he does mention Heideggerian

hope for Being he nevertheless remarks that from the side of the second Nietzschean interpretation of free affirmation, this hope is called into question. It now appears that the hermeneutics of trust and hope is the repressed other of nostalgic guilt.¹⁴⁶

This nostalgia, the dream of an immediacy and presence is the very principle and ground which animates the hermeneutical project. Hence, given in the very idea of a hermeneutics as the recovery of sense and meaning, there is a prejudgement of the hermeneutics of trust; it is in these terms that Gadamer feels that interpretative understanding itself is possible only in terms of participation and coming to agreement. In these terms, the so-called hermeneutics of suspicion is and can only be a limited moment, a phase of critical reserve and caution which is valuable only as a moment in a dialogue. Similarly the second interpretation named by Derrida and of which Nietzsche is the exemplary name, is also a transgression of the forms of discourse within which hermeneutics dwells. But a transgression into what? At first, it appears that it is a transgression into the willful, the disorderly and the capricious, a celebration of the death of truth. When this aspect of the matter surfaces, we are filled with a sense of doom and foreboding. But Derrida also speaks in another voice. Here Derrida is talking of the movement of his own deconstructive critique. "Within the closure, constantly risking falling back within what is being deconstructed, it is necessary to surround the critical concepts with a careful and through discourse—to mark the conditions, the medium and the limits of their effectiveness and to designate rigorously their intimate relationship to the machine whose deconstruction they permit and *in the same process*, the crevice through which the yet unnameable glimmer beyond the closure can be glimpsed".¹⁴⁷ What form of reality beckons us through this notion of a crevice

opened up by deconstructive critique ? To what are we bidden here to listen ? What awaits us ? An investigation into such questions, however, falls outside the scope of the present series.

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NOTES

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