

**saussurean terontology: what  
derrida did not read in the  
*course in general linguistics***

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It will be a question here of reading a text whose question is precisely that of reading—a text that even presents itself as a defense and an illustration of a certain *practice* of philosophical reading: the second chapter of Jacques Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* puts forward a reading of chapter 6 of the introduction of the *Course in General Linguistics* where Saussure first considers the question of writing. Derrida shows the strangeness and even the anomaly of this chapter within the conceptual apparatus put in place by the *Course*. He sees there the symptom of a problem that the “structuralist adventure” (as Barthes called it) reveals and conceals [*manque*] in the same movement.

I take these pages of Derrida to be essential for understanding what made the 1960s a truly philosophical moment. Not, however, because this chapter has long been considered the one that opened the passage from “structuralism” to “post-structuralism,” from the “philosophies of structure” to the “philosophies of difference,” but rather because it makes clear, in the most characteristic manner, the essential tension that animates “structuralism.” To understand the philosophical stakes of the research associated with this movement in the human sciences, and above all in linguistics, requires that we highlight a kind of excess of their discovery over the conceptual resources in which it was expressed. This allows us then to position ourselves at this decade’s most essential point of instability, a point that gathers it by dividing it, not only into different historical phases, but also

into different disjointed projects. A philosophical moment cannot be considered simply as an epoch, one that would be defined by a certain number of theses or presuppositions; it is always the opening of a thinking that ceaselessly demands to be taken up again and that can only be taken up again by being renewed. Derrida's text is a paradigmatic illustration of this creative repetition, which was to remain one of the great examples of structural analysis, at the same time as it proposed a profound re-interpretation of it.

In order to grasp it, however, I would like to confront Derrida's text with a text other than the one he commented on, a text, which, moreover, he was not able to read since it had not yet been published: I am referring to the relatively fragmentary traces that we have of the texts, the teaching, and the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, from which the editors of the *Course in General Linguistics* assembled their apocryphal book. Only recently<sup>2</sup> has this body of work become available to us and it has already provoked numerous new interpretations of the Saussurean event.<sup>3</sup> It will be a question here of evaluating the retroactive effects of this text on the reinterpretation of the 1960s.

Of course, in proposing this reading, I heed the warning concerning the very nature of the text that are at the heart of Derrida's chapter. I do not wish to contest Derrida's reading as much as I wish to grasp a movement that envelops his reading at the same time as the latter produces this very movement without necessarily fully comprehending it, a movement whose origins are deeper and that also takes other forms. In short, I wish to grasp there something of the philosophical moment of the 1960s that I would willingly characterize as a tireless attempt to rewrite the book that Saussure himself, for essential reasons, was unable to write. To situate deconstruction in the interminable writing of this impossible book is to begin this work of rereading the 1960s, which seems necessary today, and to search therein for the still active epicenter of the question that this moment poses to us.

## I. DECONSTRUCT, HE SAID

*Of Grammatology* opens with a discussion of an hypothesis, that of a science of writing and of its eventual relation to the project of constituting language as the object of a positive science, such as it is supposed to have been put forward by Ferdinand de Saussure in the *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure sets himself the task of showing that this project, the *linguistic* project, finds its condition of

possibility in its inclusion in a larger project, *semiology*, defined as the “science of the life of signs in society.” We know, however, that Derrida immediately discovered a paradox in this project: writing, far from being given to semiology as a natural theoretical object, appears as a devalued, secondary object, even a nuisance: the true object of the sciences of language would be *spoken* language. Better still, orality would constitute the *real* of language, its ontological basis, while writing would function as a usurping representation that winds up passing itself off as what it represents.

Derrida attentively rereads Saussure’s chapter in order to highlight how writing is truly *condemned* by the master from Geneva in the style of a Calvinist preacher. On the one hand, writing harms the scientific study of language since linguists no longer directly study the thing, but its “image.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, it corrupts the object itself by modifying the evolution of language; speaking subjects begin to pronounce a word according to how it is written. Thus *Lefèvre*, though technically spelled *Lefebvre*, ends up being read *Lefébure*.<sup>5</sup> Though it seems natural to us today, the pronunciation of the final *t* in *vingt* is actually the result of an orthographic reform. Saussure even goes so far as to call all of these phenomenon “pathological” and “teratological” insofar as they present cases of phonetic evolution that do not in any way follow the laws of the evolution of historical phonetics: though we can make clear the general phonetic mutations which, for example, make *caballus* become *chevail*, there is no reason immanent to spoken language for which *le faber* becomes *lefébure*.

Derrida does not linger over the fact that this double argumentation indeed seems to be in contradiction with itself, since, after all, the fact that writing intervenes in the very history of language is proof that there is a reason to take it into account when studying the latter. He is more interested in the fact that Saussure’s motives for quarantining off writing seem to be in direct contradiction with the very definition of the sign that he had already given. Indeed, Saussure can only carry out this condemnation in the name of a pre-structuralist conception of the sign, which sees writing as *representing* speech in an “image.” What follows from there is a movement that will soon become the canonical example of every deconstructive reading.<sup>6</sup> It is a matter of showing that this derived object, writing, functions in reality at another level as the originary model that allows for spoken language itself to become a theoretical object. Not only is it always the *letter* that Saussure gives as an example of the sign<sup>7</sup>; not only does semiology only make sense on the condition that language be, as Saussure says, “comparable” to writing as to other

systems of signs; but more importantly, the affirmation in the last instance of the “formal,” “algebraic,” and “in no way phonic” character of language shows that it is only on the condition that we consider language as a kind of writing that the linguistic phonemes can be constituted as objects of a rigorous science. According to Saussure, the error of linguists is to have not seen that language is not to be confused with the phonetic or acoustic substance, to not have seen that there is, in the very “signifying” part of language, an immaterial dimension or, as he says himself, “incorporeal.” The units of language must be defined, not in positive terms as empirical types of sound, but rather as oppositional terms whose realization in a particular substance (graphic or acoustic or articulatory or gestural, etc.) appears from then on as contingent. It is indeed this program that will give rise to all structural phonology, which we can consider as the veritable demonstration of the fecundity of Saussure’s hypotheses.<sup>8</sup>

But Derrida does not stop there. He wants to show that the concept of writing defines the object of the science of signs at the same time that it can only constantly, for the same reasons, be subtracted from it. This is what is at stake in Derrida’s remarkable reading of Hjelmslev and the works of the Copenhagen Circle, which constitute the most systematic accomplishment of the Saussurean project of establishing language as pure “form,” independent of all substance. Indeed, Hjelmslev quietly assumes that there is not any particular primacy of orality over writing, and that writing must be an autonomous object of study for semiology. But Derrida points out that writing can be conceived neither as derived from orality, nor as completely independent of it, since it is rather its condition: there is a grammatical dimension in speech if it is true that it is made up of purely differential punctuations. If we must no longer define the sign by the property of referring back to a thing (the sign as nomenclature), but by a set of differences by which it is opposed horizontally to other signs, we see that the sign is always not only *signifier of a signifier*—which corresponds already to a rather intuitive notion of writing—, but even pure *positional marking*: the sign is the instituted trace of a difference to be made, the positive terms that will be distinguished being from then on relatively contingent. For instance, the French *r* can be rolled or pronounced uvularly without resulting in the loss of the operative difference. To speak a language is nothing other than to have such a system of traces at our disposal.<sup>9</sup>

All of this takes place then as if there had to have already been a certain relation to the possibility of writing, in the sense of a pure trace, in order to be able to speak. However, Derrida notes that this notion of writing cannot be confused with the

graphic systems invented by humans in relation to their language activity. Writing is not as much an empirical concept as it is a transcendental concept (or, more precisely, quasi-transcendental, since it can only function as an origin insofar as it ceaselessly erases the possibility of an origin, in making the structure of reference itself the origin of language and of meaning). It is in order to designate this status of writing that Derrida introduces the concept of *arche-writing* or *arche-trace*. Indeed, the trace is not a thing that would be in relation with another thing, Friday's footprint being a thing in the sand and Friday's body another thing.<sup>10</sup> It is the way in which Friday is absent from the beach (or more precisely from each of these surfaces of the beach where a foot is put down) that constitutes its trace in the sand. The phenomenological structure of such an object is already complex. But it is more radical still in the case of language, since in this case, we can and even must abstract from the "substance" in order to determine these traces: it is the way in which the words *bain* and *main* and *lin* absent themselves from one another that *reciprocally* constitutes the word *pain*. Linguistic signs are thus necessarily, for structuralism, traces of traces. Derrida again sees supplementary proof of this in the definition of the sign as a "psychological imprint of sound," and even as a cerebral trace.<sup>11</sup> It seems then that Saussure's conceptual apparatus rests upon a kind of circle wherein the notion of writing intervenes twice: a first time in the classical empirical sense, as a system of graphic notations, and a second time in a transcendental sense, as an originary trace. The concept of *arche-trace* that some have found incomprehensible<sup>12</sup>, has no other aim than to draw our attention to this double positionality, or this double play, of the notion of the trace. We once again find here the movement already operative in Derrida's commentary on *The Origin of Geometry*: writing cannot simply be the *object* of science since it is also the *condition* of science itself.

It appears then that linguistic structuralism, according to Derrida, produces a theoretical object (the differential and oppositional entity of language [*langue*]) that exceeds the conceptual resources of traditional metaphysics, since it indeed posits something like a structure of reference without a first term, nor any final completion. But at the same time, it covers over this metaphysical "monstrosity" with the very concept of the "sign" by looking to it for something like an immediate unity of sound and meaning, of speech and thought. The condemnation of writing would be at once a symptom of Saussure covering-over his own discovery, and a resource to retrospectively bring it to light, hence the use of paradoxical formulations such as *at the origin was the non-origin ...*

Different objections have been made to Derrida's philosophical program. Some simply saw it as a repetition of a classical hermeneutic theme, one that makes the unattainable character of meaning an essential property of meaning. It is because we cannot completely fix meaning that there is something like meaning, something that is always to be taken up again, always to be reformulated. All meaningful phenomena would presuppose this essential opening. Meaning that could actually be encountered would no longer have any meaning. So that there be meaning, there always has to be more meaning, a "meaning behind meaning" as Lévi-Strauss said about Ricoeur. This simply amounts to saying that meaning is *ideal*, in Kant or Husserl's sense. But this is to not fully understand the displacement Derrida performs here: we must not look for the ideality of meaning in the origin of signs, but, on the contrary, look for the very origin of the ideality of meaning itself in the ontology of the sign: it is because every sign is the trace of a trace that meaning is ideal. I take this reversal as essential and profoundly faithful to the Saussurean project: philosophy has to accept that the true problems are not there where it has always looked, in speculation on the nature of meaning, but in phenomenon apparently so modest that belong to the type of perceived object that is the sign.<sup>13</sup>

Others have accused Derrida of drawing glaringly metaphysical consequences from a linguistic phenomenon that does not warrant as much: if phonemes are purely differential and oppositional, it is because they have the function of differentiating between significations. They thus do not constitute purely differential *entities* and do not pose any staggering ontological problems.<sup>14</sup> But it seems to me that Derrida is, on this point, closer to the methodological and empirical stakes of linguistics than his critics. They would be right if the signified was not just as differential and oppositional as the signifier. But this is precisely Saussure's hypothesis and an entire structural semantics is built upon it.<sup>15</sup> I only have in mind images of something when I say "metro" because it differs from "train," in the same way that *bus* differs from *car*, or *route* from *street*. Certainly, this is a particular empirical hypothesis, and certain linguists, even some "structuralists," beginning with Jakobson and Martinet, refuse it. But for this reason we can say that they were not structuralists, but functionalists: language is for them, at bottom, an instrument. This is not the case for Saussure and what concerns him. It seems that we could say precisely that signs are positive entities constituted uniquely by the correlation of differences, in short, of traces, that is to say traces of traces, entities that cannot be accounted for according to a certain conception of being (as presence).

How then are we to understand Saussure's insistence on the "monstrosity" of writing? Would he not have to see therein the monstrosity of language and of the sign in general? To be sure, this is precisely what he does, as we will now show.

## II. WRITING AND THE METAPHYSICAL SCANDAL OF LANGUAGE ACCORDING TO SAUSSURE

We know today that the editors of the *Course* significantly altered the structure of the lectures. They transformed what was for Saussure a *critical* process going from the actual practice of linguists ("showing the linguist *what he does*", as Saussure said in a famous letter to Meillet)—a practice that is nothing other than that of comparativism—to a clarification of the problematic character of the very *object* that they produced ("to show what type of object language is," he said in the same letter) into a dogmatic, axiomatic, and foundational program. To understand the status of these remarks on Saussure's "general linguistics" it is important to recall that he was educated in Leipzig in the 1870s at the height of the "neogrammarian" movement. The neogrammarians wished to sort out linguistics's epistemological status in order to make it a science of observation and induction like the others. This observable data would simply be the individual ways of speaking, and change would be explained by the physiological and psychological constraints exerted on speaking subjects. They were thus rigorously opposed to the hypostatization of language in their predecessors (in particular, August Schleicher and Max Müller) who believed in being able to conclude, from the idea that languages evolve in a harmonious way that the speaking subjects do not realize, that languages constitute a kind of supra-individual spiritual organism. Saussure's whole project is set up against this normalization of linguistics. Nobody was more aware of the aberration that constituted language itself than Saussure when he wrote, "whoever enters the realm of language may as well abandon all hope of finding a fitting analogy, *earthly* or otherwise."<sup>16</sup> For him, it is a matter of highlighting the truly philosophical scandal that linguists discovered without ever taking it up or even recognizing it.

Reflection on the "object of linguistics" is not the result, contrary to what one wanted to believe in the 1960s, of some "epistemological break": it is not meant to be axiomatic, but *problematic*, and it in fact falls within the scope of what we call *ontology*. It is a matter of showing that a positive discovery exceeds the conceptual resources available for characterizing the type of objects brought to light or produced in a theoretical practice. Saussure's manuscript notes are particularly

explicit on this point. There he speaks incessantly of “Being,” “entity,” “essence,” “substance,” etc. When Saussure says “we are very far from wanting to engage in metaphysics,” it is to show more clearly that it is language itself that forces us to pose these questions:

Unless I am mistaken, in other domains one speaks of different objects of inquiry, if not of things existing themselves, or at least of things encapsulating certain positive things or entities requiring different formulations (unless perhaps facts are taken to the very limits of metaphysics, raising the question of the nature of knowledge, which we cannot go into). The science of language appears to be in a different situation whereby the objects it must deal with never have any *innate* reality, are never *distinct* from other objects of inquiry. There is nothing underlying their existence other than *their difference*, or DIFFERENCES of whatever kind that the mind manages to attach to *the fundamental difference* (however, each one’s entire existence depends on reciprocal difference). Never do we abandon the fundamental, eternally negative factor of the DIFFERENCE between two terms, rather than the properties of one term.<sup>17</sup>

We can see that this is not only an “ontic” matter, to speak like Heidegger, that is to say, it is not only a question of *correctly designating* what does and does not fall within the scope of language, but it is “ontological,” that is to say, that it implies a reopening of the very question of being due to the strangeness of a singular “being” that is highlighted by a particular science. It seems then that Saussure’s project has a good deal in common with Derrida’s: to show the excess of a positive discovery over the metaphysics that attempts to cover it up.

It just so happens that, in the three courses, the reflections on writing are part of this critical movement and can only be understood in this context. It is always a matter of showing that there is a “problem” with what constitutes linguist *data* itself, that is to say, the “unities” and “identities” that are at work in language. Saussure’s position is inscribed in a double refusal: on the one hand, a refusal to believe that alphabetic writings give us a proper analysis of the flux of language (as was done by Bopp or Grimm by speaking of “letters” in order to designate the elements on which phonetic mutations operate), and, on the other hand, a refusal to believe that one could position oneself in front of individual speech acts and observe them in total neutrality in order to find in them pre-given identities and unities. By inverting the order of the presentation of the lectures, which went

from the practice of linguistics (Indo-European) to the exposition of the philosophical problems they raise, the editors obscured the meaning of these remarks on writing. Even more problematic, they separated them from the critique of phonetic physiology to which they were closely linked in the first and third courses. But the critique of writing only makes sense in the context of a critique of the utopic idea of a direct observation of spoken language, that is to say, of the very idea of phonetics.

We can summarize this critique in the following way: Saussure shows that the observation of articulatory actions does not give us any unity; the articulated flux is, if not continuous, at least articulated in such a way that has nothing to do with the unities that we perceive:

Even if all the movements made by the mouth and larynx in pronouncing a chain of sounds could be photographed, the observer would still be unable to single out the subdivisions in the series of articulatory movements; he would not know where one sound began and the next one ended.<sup>18</sup>

The phonetician will only have *something to describe* by leaving the domain of the strictly observable and entrusting himself to the “ear’s judgment,” which alone perceives unities. However, these unities are not concrete sounds that would have to be analyzed from the point of view of their physical substance, but “acoustic impressions,” that is to say purely qualitative effects, spiritually induced sensations, as we know, by their association with a “concept.” In short, these are the entities of *langue* [*langue*]. The consequence that follows is that we cannot do without a hypothesis about language in order to describe the activity of language. Instead of saying that a language is a statistical abstraction resulting from the imitation of the ways in which concrete individuals speak, we have to say that to speak is essentially to speak a language [*langue*], that is to say, to realize pure possibilities that preexist their actualization. It is here that Saussure reintroduces the table of pronunciation that he had condemned in his analysis of writing, but in order to revisit it in greater detail: yes, to speak is to pronounce a preexistent virtuality, but it is not necessary that such a virtuality be a written text in order for it to be already operative in language:

We both hear and *speak*. This much, gentlemen, is certain, but it only ever follows on from the acoustic impression, which is not only received, but mentally assimilated; it is this alone that decides what we produce. Ev-

everything depends on this; it is enough to be aware of this to know that language will be produced, but I repeat that the acoustic impression is essential for any specific linguistic unit to be produced.<sup>19</sup>

Saussure is thus led to reintroduce a kind of hypostasis: language [*langue*] as a set of double entities, differential and articulated. In sum, what he discovers in studying the procedures of the phonological analysis of the “spoken chain” is that there are realities that are such that they can only be understood as *actualizations* (what means, at bottom, “pronunciation”), and which in turn requires a separation between “virtual” entities and the processes of actualization.<sup>20</sup> There are parts of the real that are real only because they are *actualized*. In short, language confronts us with an ontological problem. The concept of the sign tries to respond to this problem by claiming that linguistic unities are not given on only one plane of observation because they are always double, negative and systematic.

### III. DECONSTRUCTION: AN EPOCH IN THE HISTORY OF COMPARATIVISM

It then seems to us plausible that the *status* of the critique of writing was misunderstood by Derrida: far from wishing to tranquilize us with respect to the essence of language, its objective is to force us not to evade the problem, at once methodological and metaphysical, posed by linguistics. But what ultimately does this mean? Would we be able to take all of the operations that Derrida performs on Saussure’s text in the name of deconstruction and attribute them to Saussure himself? The interest of such an approach would certainly be scant. Furthermore, it would corroborate a profound miscomprehension of the very spirit of deconstruction, which does not pretend to operate on the text from the outside, but is founded upon the hypothesis that a text deconstructs itself. This would then be the best confirmation of Derrida’s reading.

But to show that the question of writing is already for Saussure symptomatic of the metaphysical strangeness of language is to provide the means to re-inscribe the Derridean enterprise itself in a different history than the one in which Derrida places himself: this history is no longer the completely speculative history of Being, but one that is, in the first instance, scientific, that of comparativism. The next question that will be posed is to know whether the concept of the sign put forward by Saussure or the concept of arche-trace put forward by Derrida best captures the metaphysical problem that comparativism provoked despite itself.

Three points deserve to be brought up here. The first concerns the relations of philosophy to positive knowledges [*savoirs*]. It sometimes seems that Derrida, following Heidegger, wants to show that the destiny of science is itself dependent upon metaphysical decisions made several millennia earlier: “philosophy before linguistics”<sup>21</sup>... But I believe that we have to resist this overly Heideggerian reading: if Derrida is so important to us, it is precisely because he saw that the project of the human sciences, such as it is defined throughout “structuralism,” or more precisely, “semiology,” escapes *de facto* the metaphysical conceptuality that leads us to define a science as having a relation to an *object*. He prolonged the work of Saussure in the sense that he sought to take stock of the questioning of the very nature of objectivity that is implied in the production of a certain type of theoretical “object,” the linguistic object. In doing so, he truly left behind the phenomenological tradition of the transcendental reduction where it risked incessantly closing-in upon itself, at the risk of taking up a “reactionary” attitude (the critiques of technology by Heidegger and, in a more complex way, of the project of the positive sciences by Husserl in the *Krisis*, feel, it must be said, a bit dated)... Above all, semiology destabilized the sovereign position of philosophical thinking alone grasping at the joints of world history whereas all other human practices, especially those associated with “modernity,” would be trapped in a kind of metaphysical cage whose nature they ignored. I believe that Derrida’s project is, at its best, the exact inverse of this: it is always a question of taking account of the *effective excesses* produced by metaphysics.

The second point concerns the point-source of this excess in the case of structural linguistics, in particular, *comparativism*. In order to understand that the critique of writing in Saussure is a way of highlighting the ontological problem that language poses, and its blockage, demands that we reread both Saussure and Derrida in the wake of the comparativist discovery. Linguists discovered that it is possible to reconstruct languages that have long since disappeared, of which we truly have no record, but of which we can nonetheless reconstitute immense parts by *comparing* a plurality of present languages. We can thus reconstruct Indo-European, a non-documented language from 6,000 B.C., by comparing Latin, Greek, High German, Sanskrit, etc. We do not insist as much anymore, convinced that we have simply overcome this kind of linguistics—and overcome it, precisely, with structuralism—on the extraordinary nature of this discovery. It signifies nothing less than an entirely new conception of history and event. It establishes the possibility of a history without a positive document, which proceeds uniquely by constituting many phenomena as alternative variations of one another in order to find in them

the traces of a previous unity: it is because Indo-European became Latin, Greek, etc., that we can reconstitute it. But then what are we reconstituting? Not a certain manner of speaking, that is, particular sounds, but rather a certain structure. This is exactly what Saussure himself did in his book, *Mémoire sur le système des voyelles*, which immediately made him famous at the age of 21, where he establishes that there must have been 4 forms of *a* in the Indo-European language, and not 3 as was previously held. It is impossible to know if these *a*'s were pronounced as *a*—there could have been completely different sounds—but, then again, we can establish the *number* and the *function* of vowels, indeed, their structure. From there Saussure proposed the strikingly “modern” definition of phoneme in the *Mémoire*: “an element of a phonological system, whatever its exact pronunciation may be, is recognized as different from every other element.”<sup>22</sup> It is thus the possibility for completely distinct empirical realizations to include in reality the same value, that is to say, to be the transformations of one another, and, inversely, the possibility for a single empirical realization, corresponding in reality to different values, that led Saussure to posit the non-empirical character of linguistic values. It is also the reason for which he believed it possible to say that a language has an “algebraic” character. Indeed, a sign is not as much an empirical type as it is a correlation between the limits of variation. Thus, a phoneme must be defined by the way in which a certain articulable variation is compatible with a certain acoustic variability:

This shows that in a well-thought-out system all the considerations of possibility (or impossibility) which constitute the basis of combinatory phonology would not take the form of a rule which, given a particular starting point, suggests that the very fact of going beyond this point takes one into a completely new case. Rather it would take the form of an algebraic equation in which, apart from having certain terms balanced on both sides of the equation, there is no indication of what can happen if one exceeds them.<sup>23</sup>

The third point follows from the second. Indeed, for Derrida, the great discovery of structuralism is the differential character of the sign. But we've seen that for Saussure that this is only a response to a deeper problem, that of the efficacy of the comparativist gesture and the type of object it produces. To make this claim is perhaps to propose a completely different history of structuralism in which the textual-conceptual work of Derrida would be included without Derrida himself having had the means of correctly identifying it. It is no longer as much a prob-

lem of identity and difference, but rather a problem of the one and the multiple. What comparativism discovers is that there is a positivity of the multiple as such. Instead of being an obstacle to a scientific investigation, variation becomes its privileged instrument: it is because Latin is French, Italian, and Spanish that it can be an object of knowledge and only this variation ultimately tells us what the active values of Latin were. Far from having to conclude with Montaigne that due to the variability of human customs there is an absence of “communication with being,” we must, on the contrary, define being itself as *that which varies*, that which exists only across many variations. It is no longer a question of overcoming this variation so as to reach the invariant, but of finding, in the alternations that each instantiation proposes of the other, the only source of truth that can be spoken of it. If there was ever a reversal of Platonism this is perhaps the most radical: not because it renounces the ontological project, but, on the contrary, because it separates the notion of being from that of the invariant in order to identify being with variation. If this interpretation of the history of structuralism is correct, it appears that Derrida’s deconstruction does not belong to the long and fundamentally speculative history of Being, but to a relatively short history that depends upon a positive discovery, namely, the metaphysical shock that the comparativist disciplines imposed, surely but subterraneously, on all of thought. What irrupted from thought, and which found itself in excess over metaphysics, is, strangely enough, the Indo-European language and with it the notion of *variation*.

#### IV. SIGN OR ARCHE-TRACE?

It is on the basis of this question, which predates both Saussure and Derrida that it is well worth the effort to take up again the dialogue between them. Two questions arise here: 1) Is the affirmation, recognized by Saussure, of an autonomy of orality in relation to writing justified in light of the metaphysical radicality that he claims? 2) Does the concept of the “sign” that he will propose in order to grasp this very radicality not betray itself? Are we not forced to replace it with the paradoxical concept of arche-writing that Derrida proposes?

We first have to correct a few precise points in Derrida’s interpretation so that we do not take up any false problems. First, Saussure does not claim that writing must faithfully reproduce speech. On the contrary, he wishes to establish its independence. It is the reason for which, moreover, he does not favor a reform of orthography. Nor does he misrecognize the autonomous character of the semiological system of writing, not even when he “critiques” it. On the contrary, this is

precisely what he seeks to establish so as to separate it from orality:

[...] the study of spelling would thus be a social at the same time as a semiological study. This would clearly be very interesting, <as long as> it was separated from spoken semiology <which cannot be joined with it> in an imaginary unity. I shall thus confine myself strictly to the spoken language.<sup>24</sup>

These are, he says, two separate traditions, which each evolve on their own. We must not confound the one with the other precisely because it is a question of two distinct systems. From this point of view, we can reverse Derrida's argument: it is precisely because writing does not represent speech that it must be kept separate from the analysis of speech, and we must study each system for itself.

Likewise, to be sure, Saussure does not morally condemn teratological evolutions like Lefébure, but rather is content to affirm its exceptional character from the point of view of phonetic evolution.<sup>25</sup> Better still, he accepts that we can consider such an evolution as "normal" in a broadly alphabetic context and goes as far as to say that it is these phonetic laws themselves that are transformed:

The error suggested by writing being a general one, we can say that phonetic laws transform change when spoken language takes on a system of written signs. We then have in the language two semiological axes; even if we take these phenomena of falsification as regular and not as pathological, we have two linguistic sciences and we must consider spoken language completely separately from the written language.<sup>26</sup>

It is thus not a matter of repressing these kinds of phenomena. On the contrary, Saussure insists on the necessity of taking writing into account in order to understand the evolution of alphabetic languages ("we cannot completely refuse the importance of writing"<sup>27</sup>; "we are obligated to take literary, written language, into account"<sup>28</sup>). What Saussure then wants to say regarding writing is that there exists a semiology of speech that is *de jure* independent of the semiology of writing, that speech has laws unknown to writing, and vice versa. This does not mean that there is no semiology of writing to be done, nor does it mean that there are not many interesting things to be said about the particularities of alphabetic languages. Nonetheless the fact remains that what is essential in human languages is not dependent upon on writing, either because they have never been written, or

because the oral tradition continues its path independently even in an alphabetic context.

But the true question that arises is how can Saussure both say that the two semiological systems are distinct and that the one is subordinated to the other? The third course is particularly insistent on this point:

A language and writing are two systems of signs, one having the <sole> function of representing the other. [...] one is only the servant or image of the other.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly he writes in the first course:

The purpose of the alphabet is to fix by means of conventional signs what exists in speech. There are not two kinds of words (at least in every phonetic writing system, discounting purely ideological systems like Chinese); the written word is not coordinated with the spoken word but is subordinate to it. By right therefore preeminence falls to the spoken word over the written word.<sup>30</sup>

How are we to understand this subordination? Why can the one only be the image of the other? Is this not contrary to the very notion of the sign Saussure himself constructed?

But is there truly a contradiction between saying that writing is a semiological system and that its function is to represent spoken language? I do not think so. The arbitrariness of the linguistic sign, for example, does not mean that language has nothing to do with the world, quite the contrary. It means above all that we must not explain a sign by its isolated relation with an idea (or a thing), but by the reciprocal structuration of two continuums, which Hjelmslev following Saussure calls “substances,” producing two emergent systems (or “forms”) of expression (signifier) and of content (signified). Signifier and signified are not externally related to one another: “meaning” is a dimension *internal* to the signifier, and vice versa. In short, the sign is a synesthesia, a “sound-image,” a third completely original percept.<sup>31</sup> In the same way, it would be an error to believe that a graphic sign represents an oral sign in isolation, that is to say, that the *signified* of a graphic sign is already given in the oral *signifier*, whereas the sound that we read (the way a graphic sign sounds to us) is proper to writing: all linguistic writing is also a synes-

thesia, a “speech-graphic.” This does not mean that it does not have any relation to speech. Nor does this mean that semiology treats only the oral *form* itself as a *substance* to be analyzed, and that it is analyzed by means of another substance, the graphic substance, and from which a new form will result. The particularity of writing with respect to speech is thus that the *substance of its content* is already a *form of expression*. It is in this sense that we can say that writing is a “representation,” that is to say, a *second* system. That writing represents speech is thus not in contradiction with its semiological dimension; it is simply a way of saying that it is a matter of a semiological system that restructures an experience already structured by another semiological system.

But we then touch on a deeper question, since one might object, and rightly so, that Derrida’s thesis is precisely that *every* system of signs is *already* secondary, that every system capable of producing meaning already belongs to this order. It says quite simply that a symbolic system never arrives alone: it always operates on at least one other symbolic system, which itself etc. If Derrida affirms that writing is a better model than orality for thinking the sign in its generality, it is precisely because writing is a secondary system that is founded on the deconstruction-reconstruction of another, and that there is no sign without this movement of “representation.” What he rejects then is the idea that the substance of the content of oral language is not *also* already the form of expression of another semiological system.

This, in fact, is an empirical thesis that would have to be put to the test. But we cannot help but be struck by how much this thesis is in reality faithful to certain fundamental insights of structuralism. Lévi-Strauss speaks thus of culture as a *system of symbolic systems* in a disjointed relation with one another,<sup>32</sup> of *bricolage* as the essence of the savage mind,<sup>33</sup> or myth as a second system, connected not to the signifying side of natural languages like writing, but to the side of the signified.<sup>34</sup> Or there is the concept of instances of a structure in Althusser,<sup>35</sup> or the “aberrant communications” between the faculties in Deleuze, or the complex relations of the “visible” and the “sayable” in Foucault, etc. But Saussure himself compares language to a “garment covered with patches cut from its own cloth”<sup>36</sup> or again to a “stick thrust into an anthill, the damage will be repaired immediately.”<sup>37</sup> More generally, he often insists on the fact that language does not cease to reconstruct itself with its own debris, to reinterpret itself, in such a way that the history of languages is a movement by which the formed materials become substances to be reinterpreted by the next generation:

[...] when new forms appear, the process, as we saw, is one whereby existing forms are deconstructed and other forms reconstructed from material belonging to the existing forms.<sup>38</sup>

We were able to show elsewhere that for Saussure a system is always *in the process of remaking itself*, worked over by an essential secondarity, and it is moreover the reason for which there is no *origin* of language.<sup>39</sup> It seems then that Derrida touches here upon a fundamental point that is at the heart not only of the mysteries of Saussure's thought, but also of its "structuralist" heritage in its most acute points of the 1960s. He emphasizes the double exigency that structuralism is confronted with: to maintain *both* a certain immanence of the determination of signs inside systems *and* the communication of these systems with others. It is perhaps this problem that explains the internal tipping point wherein structuralism had always already begun to get mixed up with "post"-structuralism.

So, do we really have to replace the concept of "sign" with "trace"? It is unclear what we truly gain in doing so. There are three things that we have to be able to think simultaneously if we wish to conceptualize the *essence* of the unthought theoretical object produced by comparativism that need to be clearly distinguished and that the notion of trace used by Derrida tends to confuse. First, the differential and systematic character of the unities of language, next, the double character of these differences, and finally, the intrinsically secondary character, "*bricolé*," deconstructed and reconstructed, of every system, that is to say, the fact that every structure is the restructuration of another structure, and, in the first instance, a restructuration of itself. If the notion of trace does well to capture the first it treats rather poorly the second two. The second is absolutely essential. It corresponds to what Saussure calls the "double essence" of language, what Hjelmslev called "bipolar," a property according to him that distinguishes authentic semiotic systems from formal languages.<sup>40</sup> It means that a difference never comes alone, but that it is always double: a phoneme does not refer only to other phonemes, but depends upon a difference between signifieds, and vice versa. Certainly, Derrida seems to say something like this when he affirms that the trace is always the trace of a trace. But if we still hold onto the language of the trace, we have to at least account for the process by which each trace traces the other, as in the style of a drawing by Escher where two hands draw each other reciprocally. Better still, we would have to be able to imagine a drawing where a human hand draws a wolf's paw that in turn draws a computer that then draws the first human hand (with as many intermediaries as you like, and above all the uncoupling pro-

duced by the lateral relations of the hand with other hands that themselves draw other wolves' paws, etc.). We see that the structure of this object is more complex than even that of a multi-level temporalization.

The same can be said for the third property: the notion of the trace only captures it by sacrificing its complexity. It is indeed present in Saussure, but there it is associated with a distinction between *levels* at the very heart of language, between what he calls *differences* and *oppositions*, a distinction that corresponds to what linguists since Martinet call the “double articulation” of language. If language is always a kind of representation it is because these *oppositions* between whole signs (double entities) pass through *differences* that can be repeated from one sign to another: for example, the same difference is operative between *pain* and *bain* as in *pal* and *bal* (likewise on the side of signified, between *metro* and *train*, *bus* and *car*, or *street* and *route*). Just as the level of oppositions is purely formal (that is to say that we can in theory abstract from all substantial traits), the level of differences is still partially substantial (it is a question of qualitative differences, selected by their association with other qualitative differences). Saussure sets himself the task of showing that the linguistic instinct does not cease reconstructing the formal system of oppositions (of values) on the basis of qualitative differences such as they are produced in a certain linguistic environment. And Saussure even wishes to find in this mechanism of “integration” or “retrospective reflection”<sup>41</sup> the fundamental principle of linguistic change. Thus, precisely because what alone matters is maintaining certain gaps (or oppositions) between terms, subjects have a good deal of flexibility when it comes to pronunciation. This is then why the plural in Germanic languages can vary, *fōti* becoming *fēti* then *fēt* or *feet*, likewise *tēthi* becomes *teeth* etc. But this free variation produces a new opposition, no longer founded upon the addition of a flexional ending, but upon the alternating root: the speaking subjects born into this context are going to *interpret* this qualitative variation as a new opposition of value, the singular/plural opposition being from now on no longer the result of a declination, but of an alternation. It is thus the whole grammatical mechanism that changed as result of the double play between, on the one hand, a relatively free variation of differences and, on the other hand, an interpretation of formal oppositions bearing on these differences. We see that Saussure thus explains linguistic change by this phenomenon of the internal representation of language by itself, a result of this doubly determinate character, as differences and as oppositions, of the entities of language.<sup>42</sup>

We thus see that the concept of arche-trace is too simplistic to give an account of the ontological object discovered by comparativism, that is at once differential, dual, and doubly articulated. On the other hand, we have to credit Derrida with having clearly seen this ontological problem, and of having kept open the work of *writing* that Saussure, for essential reasons, had not succeeded in addressing in a book length work. That the concept of trace is perhaps unsatisfying means only that this work on writing is not yet finished. It is indeed still our task today.

A final word must be said here. If Derrida uses the notions of trace, writing and arche-writing, it is also because he does not think that the substitution of one ontology for another will resolve this ontological crisis. It can only be carried out by the destabilization of the oppositional couples of traditional metaphysics. The question here is strategic, and it indeed implies an entire conception of philosophical practice. On the one hand, a deconstructive wager, and on the other hand, a constructive wager. We would here have to oppose Derrida to Deleuze: it is Deleuze who without a doubt set himself the task of constructing this other metaphysics that would be in line with the radicality of the Saussurean concept of the sign and the comparativist innovation that preceded it. The choice between these strategies would not, however, be purely conceptual. It is also a matter of *efficacy*: which of the two would best preserve and prolong the theoretical creativity of the comparative sciences. It is not only a question of “saving the phenomena,” but also of wanting to see something new in them, to move towards new formalisms that would not sacrifice the nature of the object in the name of “modelization,” in short, it would be a question of setting up new conditions for a productive dialogue between the sciences, formal disciplines (that is to say, mathematics, in particular), philosophy, and even the arts and poetry. But the evaluation of the success of these strategies would lead us well beyond the 1960s: the decades that follow will indeed be the ones where we will see these philosophical operations reversed in the human and even in the formal sciences (one thinks of the popularity of deconstruction in Anglophone area studies, or in a completely different register, Jean Petitot’s usage of Deleuze in his attempt to formalize structuralism), the ones where we will also see a more direct intervention by these authors in these fields (one thinks of Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*), the ones which lead us finally to the questions which are ours today: the questions of an *active* heritage of the 1960s.

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## NOTES

1. TN: The translator would like to thank Patrice Maniglier and Les Presses universitaires de France (PUF) for granting permission to translate this article. It first appeared as “Térontologie saussurienne: ce que Derrida n’a pas lu dans *le cours de linguistique générale*” in a volume edited by Maniglier entitled *Le moment philosophique des années 1960 en France* (Paris: PUF, 2011). The translator would also like to thank Alexander R. Galloway for his encouragement and generosity.
2. The first book to give us an idea of the “source manuscripts” of the *Course in General Linguistics* was Robert Godel’s *Les sources manuscrites du Cours de linguistique générale de F. de Saussure* (Genève: Université de Genève, 1957). Since then, we must above all mention the critical edition of the *Cours de linguistique générale*, critical edition ed. Rudolf Engler (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1967 (tome 1) and 1974 (tome 2)) and the publication of the recently discovered texts in *Writings on General Linguistics* ed. S. Bouquet and R. Engler, trans. Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) and in *L’Herne: Saussure*, ed. S. Bouquet (Paris: Éditions de l’Herne, 2003).
3. Cf. Simon Bouquet, *Introduction à la lecture de Saussure* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, coll. ‘Bibliothèque scientifique Payot’, 1997), *L’Herne: Saussure*, ed. S. Bouquet (Paris: Éditions de l’Herne, 2003), Johannes Fehr, *Saussure entre linguistique et sémiologie*, trans. Pierre Caussat (Paris: PUF, 2000 [1997]), Arild Utaker, *La philosophie du langage, une anthropologie saussurienne* (Paris: PUF, coll. ‘Pratiques théoriques’, 2002), and Patrice Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes. Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2006).
4. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 24; see also 30-31.
5. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 31.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 [1972]), 41-42.
7. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 119.
8. Cf. Jean-Claude Milner, *Le Périple structural, Figures et paradigmes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, coll. ‘La couleur des idées’, 2002).
9. On this point, we should mention a note in Saussure’s recently discovered manuscripts that Derrida could not have known: “While out walking, I carve a line in the bark of a tree, without saying a word, as if for pleasure. The person who is with me retains the idea of this line and undeniably associates one or two ideas with this line, when in fact my only idea was to mystify them or to amuse myself. To us any material thing immediately constitutes a *sign*: i.e. An impression we associate with others, but something material seems indispensable. The linguistic sign’s one particularity is that it produces a more precise association than any other, and we may one day see that it represents the most perfect association of ideas, since it can only be established on a conventional *sôme*.” (*Writings in General Linguistics*, p. 79)
10. [TN] Here, Maniglier is referring to the character Friday in Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*. Derrida will analyze Defoe’s novel at length in his final seminar, *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2001-2003), albeit in a less “structuralist” register.
11. We could add to this the idea that language is a “treasure” and a “residue”. See Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes. Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme*, 204-213.
12. Cf. “Saussure and Derrida”, in Roy Harris, *Saussure and His Interpreters, second edition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

13. Cf. Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes. Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme*.
14. Cf. Thomas Pavel, *The Spell of Language: Poststructuralism and Speculation*, trans. Linda Jordan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989 [1988]).
15. Cf. François Rastier, *Sémantique interprétative* (Paris: PUF, 1987).
16. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, ed. S. Bouquet and R. Engler, trans. Carol Sanders and Matthew Pires (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 154.
17. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 42 (translation modified). See also, p. 56.
18. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 38.
19. Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 175.
20. See *Course in General Linguistics*, p. 66, editors note: “the sound-image is par excellence the natural representation of the word as a fact of potential language, outside any actual use of it in speaking.”
21. This is the subtitle of a chapter in Derrida’s *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1982 [1972]).
22. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Recueil des publications scientifiques*, ed. Charles Bally and Léopold Gautier (Geneva-Paris: Slatkine Reprints, 1984 [1922]), 114.
23. Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 178.
24. *Premier cours de linguistique générale*, edited and translated by Eisuke Komatsu & George Wolf (Oxford: Pergamon Press, Language & Communication Library Volume 15, 1996), 11a.
25. Saussure clarifies this point in his lectures: “Of course here I am making merely a scientific judgement” (Saussure, 1996, p. 10a).
26. *Premier cours de linguistique générale*, 10a.
27. *Premier cours de linguistique générale*, 12.
28. *Premier cours de linguistique générale*, 14.
29. *Troisième cours de linguistique générale (1910–1911) d’après les cahiers d’Emile Constantin/ Saussure’s Third Course of Lectures on General Linguistique (1910–1911) from the notebooks of Emile Constantin*, edited and translated by Eisuke Komatsu & Roy Harris (Oxford: Pergamon Press, Language & Communication Library Volume 12, 1993), 41a.
30. *Premier cours de linguistique générale*, 5a.
31. Cf. Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes. Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme*.
32. Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, trans. Felicity Baker (Abingdon: Routledge, 1987 [1950]).
33. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, trans. Anonymous (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966 [1962]). In particular, Chapter I.
34. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man: Mythologiques, Volume 4*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981 [1971]), In Particular, “Finale.”
35. On this point, the reader is referred to an incredible book by Lucien Sebag, *Marxisme et structuralisme* (Paris: Payot, 1964), where he stages the encounter between Lévi-Strauss and Althusser.
36. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 172.
37. Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 191.
38. Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 131.
39. Cf. Maniglier, *La vie énigmatique des signes. Saussure et la naissance du structuralisme*, 361–369.
40. Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, trans. Francis J. Whitfield (University of Wisconsin Press, 1961 [1943]), 112.
41. Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 60.
42. On this point, I am forced to refer the reader to my book *La vie énigmatique des signes. Saussure*

*et la naissance du structuralisme*; in particular, on the distinction between difference and opposition, see p. 298-333, and how it is used to explain change, see p. 422-429.