Derrida's *Of Grammatology* : (Hi)stories of Writing

IST, Term 3 (June-July 2017)

Session 4

Thursday 13 July 2017

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CH. 3

OF GRAMMATOLOGY AS A POSITIVE SCIENCE

The questions of a science :

> … on what condition is grammatology possible ?
>
> On the condition of knowing what writing is and how the plurivocity of this concept is formed. Where does writing begin ? When does writing begin ? Where and when does the trace, writing in general, common root of speech and writing, narrow itself down into "writing" in the colloquial sense ? Where and when does one pass from one writing to another, from writing in general to writing in the narrow sense, from the trace to the *graphie*, from one graphic system to another, and, in the field of a graphic code, from one graphic discourse to another, etc. ?
>
> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 74
>
> French edition : 109

SECTION 1

ALGEBRA : ARCANUM AND TRANSPARENCE

On the break of the 18th century : important progressions towards 'histories' of writing.

Progressions beyond old and strong prejudices :

1. The theological prejudice
2. The 'Chinese prejudice'

   An arbitrary and thus a-historical writing, cf. Leibniz and analytic/ mathematical methods…

   the quest of forming a universal language, Descartes…

> Such at any rate is the *function* of the Chinese model in Leibniz's projects. For him what liberates Chinese script from the voice is also that which, arbitrarily and by the artifice of invention, wrenches it from history and gives it to philosophy.
>
> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 76
>
> French edition : 113

… but this *characteristic* would be still logocentric :

> That is why, appearances to the contrary, and in spite of all the seduction that it can legitimately exercise on our epoch, the Leibnizian project of a universal characteristic that is not essentially phonetic does not interrupt logocentrism in any way. On the contrary, universal logic confirms logocentrism, is produced within it and with its help, exactly like the Hegelian critique to which it will be subjected.
>
> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 78-79
>
> French edition : 117

3. The 'Hyeroglyphist prejudice' (early Egyptology in the 17th c., admiration of its mystic tones, till Champollion and the Rosetta Stone in 1822)

PART 1	CH. 3	**SECTION 2**
		SCIENCE AND THE NAME OF MAN

Grammatology cannot be a *human science* : it touches the name of man …

> Grammatology ought not to be one of *the sciences of man*, because it asks first, as its characteristic question, the question of the *name of man*. To free unity from the concept of man is undoubtedly to renounce the old notion of peoples said to be "without writing" and "without history." André Leroi-Gourhan shows it well ; to refuse the name of man and the ability to write beyond its own proper community, is one and the same gesture. Actually, the peoples said to be "without writing" lack only a certain type of writing. To refuse the name of writing to this or that technique of consignment is the "ethnocentrism that best defines the prescientific vision of man" and at the same time results in the fact that "in many human groups, the only word by which the members designate their ethnic group is the word 'man'." (Leroi-Gourhan)
>
> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 83-84
>
> French edition : 124-125

… and there was writing even before there was man :

> But it is not enough to denounce ethnocentrism and to define anthropological unity by the disposition of writing. Leroi-Gourhan no longer describes the unity of man and the human adventure thus by the simple possibility of the *graphie* in general ; rather as a stage or an articulation in the history of life — of what I have called differance — as the history of the *gramme*.
>
> …
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> Since "genetic inscription" and the "short programmatic chains" regulating the behaviour of the amoeba or the annelid up to the passage beyond alphabetic writing to the orders of the logos and of a certain *homo sapiens*, the possibility of the *grammè* structures the movement of its history according to rigorously original levels, types, and rhythms.
>
> Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 84
>
> French edition : 125

The linearity of symbols :

The concept of *linearisation* is much more effective, faithful, and intrinsic than those that are habitually used for classifying scripts and describing their history (pictogram, ideogram, letter, etc.). Exposing more than one prejudice, particularly about the relationship between ideogram and pictogram, about so-called graphic "realism," Leroi-Gourhan recalls the unity, within the mythogram, of all the elements of which linear writing marks the disruption : technics (particularly graphics), art, religion, economy. To recover the access to this unity, to this other structure of unity, we must de-sediment "four thousand years of linear writing." (Leroi-Gourhan)

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 85-86

French edition : 127-128

The line — metaphysics of presence. The line sterilises.

The "line" represents only a particular model, whatever might be its privilege. This model *has become* a model and, as a model, it remains inaccessible. If one allows that the linearity of language entails this vulgar and mundane concept of temporality (homogeneous, dominated by the form of the now and the ideal of continuous movement, straight or circular) which Heidegger shows to be the intrinsic determining concept of all ontology from Aristotle to Hegel, the meditation upon writing and the deconstruction of the history of philosophy become inseparable.

The enigmatic model of the *line* is thus the very thing that philosophy could not see when it had its eyes open on the interior of its own history. This night begins to lighten a little at the moment when linearity — which is not loss or absence but the repression of pluri-dimensional symbolic thought — relaxes its oppression because it begins to sterilise the technical and scientific economy that it has long favoured. In fact for a long time its possibility has been structurally bound up with that of economy, of technics, and of ideology. This solidarity appears in the process of thesaurisation, capitalisation, sedentarisation, hierarchisation, of the formation of ideology by the class that writes or rather commands the scribes. Not that the massive reappearance of non-linear writing interrupts this structural solidarity ; quite the contrary. But it transforms its nature profoundly.

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 86

French edition : 128-129

Leroi-Gourhan on the future of reading… and writing :

Linear writing has therefore indeed "constituted, during many millennia, independently of its role as conserver of the collective memory, by its unfolding in one dimension alone, the instrument of analysis out of which grew philosophic and scientific thought. The conservation of thought can now be conceived otherwise than in terms of books which will only for a short time keep the advantage of their rapid manageability. A vast 'tape-library' with an electronic selection system will in the near future show pre-selected and instantaneously retrieved information. Reading will still retain its importance for some centuries to come, in spite of its perceptible regression for most men, but writing [understood in the sense of linear inscription] seems likely to disappear rapidly, replaced by automatic dictaphones. Should one see in this a sort of restoration of the state anterior to the phonetic confiscation of the hand ? I should rather think that it is here a question of an aspect of the general phenomenon of manual regression and of a new 'liberation.' As to the long-term consequences

in terms of the forms of reasoning, and a return to diffuse and multidimensional thought, they cannot be now foreseen. Scientific thought is rather hampered by the necessity of drawing itself out in typographical channels and it is certain that if some procedure would permit the presentation of books in such a way that the materials of the different chapters are presented simultaneously in all their aspects, authors and their users would find a considerable advantage. **It is absolutely certain that if scientific reasoning has clearly nothing to lose with the disappearance of writing, philosophy and literature will definitely see their forms evolve.** This is not particularly regrettable since printing will conserve the curiously archaic forms of thought that men will have used during the period of alphabetic graphism ; as to the new forms, they will be to the old ones as steel to flint, not only a sharper but a more flexible instrument. Writing will pass into the infrastructure without altering the functioning of intelligence, as a transition which will have some centuries of primacy" (Leroi-Gourhan).

Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (endnotes), 332-333

French edition (footnote) : 129-130

SECTION 3
THE REBUS AND THE COMPLICITY OF ORIGINS

Grammatology cannot also be a *regional science*, i.e. graphology, a science of writing.

There is no 'proper' noun — it is already metaphorical and part of a chain of meanings :

Thus the name, especially the so-called proper name, is always caught in a chain or a system of differences. It becomes an appellation only to the extent that it may inscribe itself within a figuration. Whether it be linked by its origin to the representations of things in space or whether it remains caught in a system of phonic differences or social classifications apparently released from ordinary space, the proper-ness of the name does not escape spacing. Metaphor shapes and undermines the proper name.

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 89

French edition : 136

The problem of the picture-puzzle :

The problem of the picture-puzzle (*rébus à transfert*) brings together all the difficulties. As pictogram, a representation of the thing may find itself endowed with a phonetic value. This does not efface the "pictographic" reference which, moreover, has never been simply "realistic." The signifier is broken or constellated into a system : it refers at once, and at least, to a thing and to a sound. The thing is itself a collection of things or a chain of differences "in space" ; the sound, which is also inscribed within a chain, may be a word ; the inscription is then ideogrammatical or synthetic, it cannot be decomposed ; but the sound may also be an atomic element itself entering into the composition : we are dealing then with a script apparently pictographic and in fact phonetico-analytical in the same way as the alphabet. What is now known of the writing of the Aztecs of Mexico seems to cover all these possibilities.

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 90

French edition : 136-137

Iterability and origin :

A signifier is from the very beginning the possibility of its own repetition, of its own image or resemblance. It is the condition of its ideality, what identifies it as signifier, and makes it function as such, relating it to a signified which, for the same reasons, could never be a "unique and singular reality." From the moment that the sign appears, that is to say from the very beginning, there is no chance of encountering anywhere the purity of "reality," "unicity," "singularity." So by what right can it be supposed that speech could have had, "in antiquity," before the birth of Chinese writing, the sense and value that we know in the West ? Why would speech in China have had to be "eclipsed" by writing ? If one wishes really to penetrate to the thing that, under the name of writing, separates much more than techniques of notation, should one not get rid, among other ethnocentric presuppositions, also of a sort of graphic monogenetism that transforms all differences in to divergences or delays, accidents or deviations ? And examine this heliocentric concept of speech ? As well as the resemblance of the logos to the sun (to the good or to the death that one cannot look at face to face), to the king or to the father (the good or the intelligible sun are compared to the father in the *Republic*, 508 c) ? What must writing be in order to threaten this analogical system in its vulnerable and secret center ? What must it be in order to signify the eclipse of what is good and of the *father* ? Should one not stop considering writing as the eclipse that comes to surprise and obscure the glory of the word ? And if there is some necessity of eclipse, the relationship of shadow and light, of writing and speech, should it not itself appear in a different way ?

In a different way : the necessary decentering cannot be a philosophic or scientific act as such, since it is a question of dislocating, through access to another system linking speech and writing, the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *episteme*. The natural tendency of theory — of what unites philosophy and science in the episteme — will push rather toward filling in the breach than toward forcing the closure. **It was normal that the breakthrough was more secure and more penetrating on the side of literature and poetic writing** : normal also that it, like Nietzsche, at first destroyed and caused to vacillate the transcendental authority and dominant category of the *episteme* : being.

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 91-92

French edition : 138-140

Writing and sign-making goes far beyond the object of one science :

The fact that access to the written sign assures the sacred power of keeping existence operative within the trace and of knowing the general structure of the universe ; that all clergies, exercising political power or not, were constituted at the same time as writing and by the disposition of graphic power ; that strategy, ballistics, diplomacy, agriculture, fiscality, and penal law are linked in their history and in their structure to the constitution of writing ; that the origin assigned to writing had been — according to the chains and mythemes — always analogous in the most diverse cultures and that it communicated in a complex but regulated manner with the distribution of political power as with familial structure ; that the possibility of capitalisation and of politico-administrative organisation had always passed through the hands of scribes who laid down the terms of many wars and whose function was always irreducible, whoever the contending parties might be ; that through discrepancies, inequalities of development, the play of permanencies, of delays, of diffusions, etc., the solidarity among ideological, religious, scientific-technical systems, and the systems of writing which were therefore more and other than "means of communication" or vehicles of the signified, remains indestructible ; that the very sense of power and effectiveness in general, which could appear as such, as meaning and mastery (by idealisation), only with so-called "symbolic" power, was always linked with the disposition of writing ; that economy, monetary or pre-monetary, and graphic calculation were co-originary, that there could be no law without the possibility of trace …, all this refers to a common and

radical possibility that no determined science, no abstract discipline, can think as such.

…

This common root, which is not a root but the concealment of the origin and which is not common because it does not amount to the same thing except with the un-monotonous insistence of difference, this unnameable movement of *difference-itself*, that I have strategically nicknamed *trace*, *reserve*, or *differance*, could be called writing only within the *historical* closure, that is to say within the limits of science and philosophy.

…

Like all openings, this index belongs within a past epoch by the face that is open to view. This thought has no weight. It is, in the play of the system, that very thing which never has weight. Thinking is what we already know we have not yet begun ; measured against the *shape* of writing, it is *broached* only in the *episteme*.

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 92-93

French edition : 141-142