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Life, Existence, and Culture, or What I Have Learned from Deconstruction

Abstract: Taking as a starting point a few key passages in the Gospels about the Last Supper and Crucifixion, the author tries to show how the linguistic machinery of a text reveals its deconstructive aspect – making a call for cultural appropriation on the one hand and resisting this appropriation on the other. This duplicity is also projected onto an existential level, reflecting the tension between life as an idiomatic aspect of every human endeavor and culture understood as subjecting to shared experience. The main conceptual impetus of the essay goes against maintaining the sharp distinction between life rejecting an accurate representation and existence with all the reproduction devices it carries with itself. This analysis, referring to a vast corpus of Derrida’s texts, goes beyond a metacommentary limited to French philosophy or literary studies and can also be read as a contribution to a theological interpretation of the Gospels made with the help of deconstructive logic.

Keywords: Derrida, representation, life, crucifixion, Jesus, existence, Gospel, technics, prosthesis, repetition, tradition

La vie est survie¹

A Word (or Two) of Explanation

The first draft of this essay was written for the conference on deconstruction I organized in Kraków, at the Center for the Advanced Studies in the Humanities, in early June of 2009. At the time, my professional career approached a critical point: teaching in Poland seemed to reach its peak, and, during my temporary job at Brown University, I applied for the position of the Endowed Chair at the University of Illinois, Chicago, which was to have been given to me in six months, leading to my permanent move to the U.S.

1. Jacques Derrida, “Je suis en guerre contre moi-même,” *Le Monde* (Octobre 12, 2004): VI.

I am mentioning these circumstances not without reason. My academic path was marked from the beginning by my vital interest in deconstruction, with my influential monograph on Derrida, translations of his texts, and articles scattered throughout the professional and popular media. I was, to a large extent, if not identified with deconstruction by academics and non-academics, then at least counted into a postmodern cohort of scholars, of which Derrida's followers dominated. As much as I felt obliged to straighten constantly a very biased picture of deconstruction cherished by the popular audience, I also sensed how unproductive these battles were. Deconstruction did not have many chances to root in the nation so feverishly occupied in constructing its new identity after regaining independence in 1989. As much as the cultural elites in Poland were craving the most recent intellectual developments coming from the West, their conservative counterparts considered the same trends destructive to the Polish psyche. This foundational conflict of liberals (and leftists) and right-wing conservatives was to shape the political landscape of Poland for the next several decades, and, to be frank, after a few scar-producing fights in the epicenter of the fervent cultural war, I decided to leave the stage and move to the States.

I was not inexperienced. Having taught at Harvard and Northwestern, I knew the American academy. I had no illusions that embracing deconstruction could earn some bonus points, especially in Polish Studies. Fortunately, I was not a blind follower of Derrida et al., and I was never seduced to work exclusively on deconstruction as many of my American colleagues did, making their names forever attached to their intellectual guru. What I was more interested in was not deconstruction as such but the shape of the humanities *after* deconstruction, as the title of my four-years project subsidized by the Foundation for the Polish Science. I published the final result of this "master grant" in 2013 as *The Politics of Sensibility: An Introduction to the Humanities*.² Since then, I have never returned to Derrida and his books. It did not mean, however, that I abandoned deconstruction altogether. What one has learned in the intellectual apprenticeship cannot be easily discarded. The most exciting part of my academic life was figuring out to what extent my reading of Derrida influenced my intellectual trajectory. The essay that follows was, as I see it now, one of the first attempts to make deconstruction look as if it were a more contemporary version of the philosophy of *Existenz* (although not the existential philosophy³), to use a handy distinction made by Hannah Arendt.

2. Michał Paweł Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości. Wprowadzenie do humanistyki* (Kraków: Universitas, 2013).

3. About this difference see: Hannah Arendt, "What is Existential Philosophy?" in *Essays in Understanding 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Hartcourt, 1994).

By that time, I was unaware of the book *Radical Atheism*,⁴ in which a Swedish philosopher from Yale, Martin Hägglund offered a new, “immanentist,” so to say, exegesis of deconstruction. His work, however, went in an altogether direction, as he mainly focused on the philosophy of time and human finitude. Mine was culture-oriented and “theological” in the sense that I was reading a few chapters from the Gospels as the indubitable sources of our thinking about tropological dimensions of pain, suffering, and death. I can now see my interest in theological discourse and its complicated history going not against (as the critics would say) but along the lines of deconstruction. For that reason, I am presenting my essay without any changes (except a better English) with a strange feeling that there is a strong continuity in my writing throughout years and circumstances and that I may have been faithful to deconstruction in a much deeper way than I thought, even in texts that have no mention of Derrida at all.

Nothing Simple

What was in the beginning? According to Derrida, the beginning commences in multiple ways due to many tropes, gestures, and exchanges, because “at the origin [...] there is nothing simple, but a composition, a contamination.”⁵ In an essay on Artaud, it is *anaphora* with which history begins. As Derrida says, “For Artaud, the future of the theater – thus, the future in general – is opened only by the anaphora which dates from the eve prior to birth.”⁶ In the book about Joyce, it is a *telephone* without which there would be nothing at all. “In the beginning, there must indeed have been some phone call. Before the act or the word, the telephone. In the beginning, was the telephone.”⁷ Everything begins thus with a repetition present in anaphora and telephone, in the anaphoric “hallo, hallo,” and with a telephone call which has to be returned. Anaphora and telephone destroy the most cherished illusion of the *dzoön logon ekhon*, to have *logos* at one’s exclusive disposal, and not only *logos* but also *dzoe* and the very possibility of possessing (*ekhon*). Neither *logos* nor life belong to the human being as they would like them

4. Martin Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

5. Jacques Derrida, *Paper Machine*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press: 2005), 139.

6. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Routledge: London, 1981), 232.

7. Jacques Derrida, “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce,” in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 572.

to, and this very non-belonging, this heteronomy, this “absolute dissymmetry,”⁸ and this deconstruction puts life in motion.

In a Nutshell

This beginning without actual beginning has already attracted much insightful commentary.⁹ In a few words, I will give you my understanding of it. That there is no undivided origin means that there is no point in our existence where we could stand outside existence, and there is no simple genealogy of our being and thinking, made of many thoughts and voices. We are immersed irrevocably in the world, and our finitude calls for something different than us, which gives us a promise of a life beyond ourselves but never keeps its word. Time never stops, and history carries us forward. Our gestures get frozen (which is how institutions emerge), but we can defrost them by changing our breathing position. When we start to speak, we enter a culture in which there is no silence since its very being is determined by speaking. What is beyond culture does not exist, so to live, we must produce meaningful events to be repeated. If we do not want to vanish silently, we have to multiply the proofs of our existence, and thus we are doomed to repeat ourselves or to let others do this for us. There is a chance for survival in this strategy, but also fatigue of having to prove what is – for us – obvious.

Repetition at a Distance

This is how, maybe too simplistic, I understand deconstruction today after reading it patiently for some twenty years. For this paper, however, I will limit myself to *anaphora*, a privileged trope for deconstruction, even if Derrida does not return to it explicitly too often (or, as far as my knowledge is concerned, never). According to Heinrich Lausberg, anaphora, as a rhetorical device, belongs to the figures of “repetition at a distance” as “a repetition of the beginning.”¹⁰ As the most characteristic examples of anaphora, Lausberg lists the *Psalms*, whose anaphoric, invocative construction is traditionally considered to mirror a close relation of their performer to God (“The Lord hears my plea, The Lord will

8. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 41.

9. See Julian Wohlfray, “Introduction,” in *The Derrida Reader*, ed. Julian Wohlfray (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Peter Krapp, *Déjà vu: Aberrations of Cultural Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), *passim*.

10. Heinrich Lausberg, *Handbuch of Literary Rhetoric. A Foundation for Literary Studies*, trans. Matthew T. Bliss, Annemiek Jansen, and David E. Orton (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 281.

take my prayer”¹¹). This example leads me to one of the most famous anaphoric sentences in the history of Western culture, to a sentence pronounced by Jesus on the cross, on which I will dwell to the very end of my paper.

Everybody remembers the setting. Jesus has been already crucified and wounded, and having felt the end approaching too quickly, being in total abandonment, he directs to God these words: *Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani* (Matthew 27: 46), or *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani* (Mark 15: 34). These words are spoken in two languages: Hebrew and Aramaic. Both authors felt the necessity to translate them into their language, the language of the intellectual elite of this time, and they rendered them as Θεέ μου θεέ μου, ἰνατί με ἐγκατέλιπες (Matthew), or ὁ θεός μου ὁ θεός μου, εἰς τί ἐγκατέλιπές με (Mark). In the King James Version: *My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

The Suffering Begins

The commentators are quite unanimous to the fact that by saying these words, Jesus (meant to be godlike) seems to feel abandoned by his Father and therefore estranged from his divinity (had he not been separated from his Father, and had he kept his consubstantial divinity intact, he would not have been able to feel rejected and left behind). Having uttered these words, Jesus seems to fulfill his kenotic experience to the very bottom and thus reveal his humanity as something that cannot be shared with God. It is all about *sharing*: if God does not share His substance with His Son, the latter will not be able to participate in it, and thus a boundary will be set up between the human and the divine. Suppose sharing, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, defines our finitude. In that case, this God’s refusal to share his “substance” with somebody else (and Jesus is more than anybody some *body*) defines his inhuman character.

In the moment of agony, Jesus’s divinity seems suspended, and he dies in pain. We know that until he resurrects a few days after, he remains a human corpse deposited in a grave. The apparent paradox of this situation is that the life of Jesus as a human being is made possible in the very moment of his suffering and subsequent death. “Jesus, when he had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost” [Mt 45: 50], or “gave up the ghost” [Mk 15: 37]. “Jesus autem iterum clamans voce magna, emisit spiritum.” “Jesus autem emissa voce magna expiravit.” What is important here is *another anaphora*, which this time is composed of his “loud voice,” *phonē megále, voce magna*, repeated, *iterum*, as though no

11. *Psalm 6*, trans. Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 2007), 7.

suffering were possible without repetition, as though the pain had to double itself to be acknowledged (this is an interesting point: pain has to repeat itself to be recognized, so there is no pain outside the institution, outside the whole sensitive machinery we are). Thus we have two repetitions: the first one marks Jesus's separation from God (he would not have to repeat if he were listened to immediately), and the second intensifies his suffering (if pain were punctual, he would not repeat his cry). The repetition that makes him human condemns him, as we see, to death in pain. *Humanity, therefore, begins with repetition*, is built upon a figure, its beginning is figurative through and through, and if Jesus begins to live (as a human) due to the iterative exclamation thrown toward God, this distance (the Greek *tēlē*) separating the Son from God, as though they were not two parts of the same divine structure, makes his call very much telephonic. Jesus calls his Father, but Father does not pick up the phone. *This is how suffering begins: when the other does not pick up the phone.*

As Quoted

This telephonic structure of the last words pronounced by Jesus is supported by another series of calls made by the Psalmist. The words cried out by Jesus come from *Psalm 22*, which brings another repetition in as if everything had to begin “in the folds of citation.”¹²

Jesus, dying on the cross, repeats another sufferer, whose calls reached, fortunately, or they seemed to, the addressee; however, he does not quote the Psalmist's words in Hebrew but introduces a significant, idiomatic difference into this text, he introduces alteration into repetition. In a recent commentary on his new translation of the Psalms, Robert Alter explains that this modified quotation “is a kind of *peshet*, or fulfillment interpretation, of this psalm.”¹³ Erich Auerbach,¹⁴ borrowing the language of Christian theology, would here speak of *figura*, a meaning which, being rooted in a historical context of the Old Testament, refers (“to better purpose,” says Auerbach) to the spiritual meaning of the New.¹⁵ Regardless of whether the first exclamation demands a future fulfillment or is understood as a mere pretext for the real one, the words pronounced by Jesus cannot be extracted

12. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), 316.

13. *The Book of Psalms*, 71.

14. Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” trans. Ralph Mannheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 46–47.

15. See Edward Said, “Introduction,” in Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

from the context determined by the second line of *Psalm 22*. If Jesus interprets the Psalm while crucified, he points to the fact that only humans can quote and interpret and not God (God can be quoted but cannot quote himself: that is the difference). Interpretation may begin only in the distance between the Present and its postponements,¹⁶ between one who knows everything and one who is on the verge of losing one's mind and body, between one who cannot die and one who is thrown violently into time, which also means into death. There is no life without interpretation, and there is no interpretation that does not mark painfully the human finitude. In any act of interpretation, life is as much present as it is absent.

That to Philosophize Is Not to Learn How To Die

What Jesus exactly cried for the second time, neither Matthew nor Mark says.¹⁷ “He had cried again with a loud voice.” What is certain is that he cried in pain, in a loud voice, *phonē megále*, and then died. Even if he did not repeat his call to Father (which was possible), it would have been another anaphora, the anaphora of suffering. Abandoned and wounded, he did not want to die because he probably had *not yet learned how to live*. He could not have learned because his life, this time only human, has just been given to him as a promise, which could not be kept.¹⁸ This terrifying paradox consists of the fact that you start to seem to know what life is when it slowly begins to vanish. It is death that helps to acknowledge the life and not the way around. To philosophize is not to prepare for death, as the whole humanist school with “the old philosophical injunction,”¹⁹ from Plato and Cicero to Simon Critchley, maintains,²⁰ because death does not wait at the end of life but makes life possible and meaningful. Life without death would remain deprived of any meaning, as different people such as Karel Čapek,

16. Derrida says that what unites Judaism and Islam is “the urge of the infinite commentary” [*l’urgence du commentaire infini*], made possible by the transcendence of the Present, or, which is the same, the immanence of the Absent (Jacques Derrida, *Surtout pas de journalistes!* (Paris: L’Herne, 2005), 46.

17. Instead, we know the content of his last words from Luke (23:46): “And when Jesus had cried with a loud voice, he said, Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit: and having said thus, he gave up the ghost.” According to John (19:30), Jesus said: “It is finished,” *consummatum est, tetelestai*. It is not by chance that these two Gospels are the most theologically biased.

18. Shoshana Felman defines anaphora as “the act of beginning ceaselessly renewed through the repetition of promises not carried out, not kept” (Shoshana Felman, *The Scandal of a Speaking Body. Don Juan with J. L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 25.

19. Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally. The Last Interview*, trans. Pascale-Anne Braut and Michael Naas (New York: Melville House, 2011), 24.

20. Simon Critchley, *The Book of Dead Philosophers* (London: Granta, 2008).

Bernard Williams, and José Saramago showed.²¹ Life needs death to endow it with meaning. Without death, life would be meaningless. It would just be the same.

Filio(que)

The last words of Jesus are the only ones kept in the Greek Gospel in Aramaic. Matthew and Mark knew that fear and trembling were as idiomatic as they could be. They kept this idiom, but they hastened to translate it immediately into Greek, and this translation or even interpretation (*μεθερμηνευόμενον*) was not perfectly adequate but quite close to the rendering of the Psalm given by the Septuagint (ὁ θεὸς ὁ θεός μου πρόσχες μοι ἵνα τί ἐγκατέλιπές με). Jesus's Aramaic expression was a translation from Hebrew, a language not used by Matthew and Mark, who, ignoring Septuagint, translated it freely and interpreted it into Greek. Jesus's words were, therefore, as much preserved in a singular form as lost in translation, but this loss was the only way for them to survive since the Gospels could not have been written in Aramaic but the language of the cultural Empire.

Jesus's suffering is caught in a series of translations. He translates and interprets *Psalm 22*, while Matthew and Mark, in turn, translate or interpret his words in their way. There is, however, another interesting turn, another *phora*. When Jesus speaks out his last words, the crowd gathered at the cross misinterprets them and takes "Eli" for "Elias": "This man calleth for Elias [...]. Let us see whether Elias will come to save him." And precisely after this open misunderstanding, Jesus "had cried again with a loud voice, yielded up the ghost." Now, the second cry of Jesus might be interpreted differently. This is the cry of painful disagreement: do not misunderstand me, do not take me otherwise than I am. Now he addresses the others who missed his message of being born as a human and – in a loud voice – confirms his finitude which, on the other hand, saves him from being saved. If he agrees that he does not call for Elias, he must agree that he does not believe in salvation, in being saved by anybody else. If he dies as a human being, endlessly separated from his heavenly Father, he risks survival. His death might be complete, with no remainder, no trace left, no testimony made. How could you count on survival if the Other, whose power would be to make you immortal, or at least less mortal, does not pick up the phone? This refusal to communicate leaves Jesus outside what Derrida calls "the machine of filiation," whose primary

21. See: Karel Čapek, *Věc Makropulos (Aventinum: Praha, 1922)*; Bernard Williams, "The Makropulos Case: Reflections on the Tedium of Immortality," in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 82–100; José Saramago, *Death With Interruptions*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (New York: Harcourt, 2008).

purpose is to “domesticate, circumcise, circumvent everything.”²² Jesus, to whom God does not answer, loses his consubstantiality with God (ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρὶ, as in the Creed), marked by the *que* in *Filioque*.²³ He is thrown out of the whole domesticating machinery, which secures any survival due to its iterability. If he died alone, he died forever, and nothing, it seems, would be able to bring him back.

In meam commemorationem

However, this painful ordeal has had its pre-history, indispensable for a better understanding of what happened in that place called Golgotha. In the Gospel of Luke (22, 19–20), we read – in the Vulgata – about the institution of the Eucharist:

[19] Et accepto pane, gratias egit et fregit et dedit eis dicens: “Hoc est corpus meum, quod pro vobis datur. Hoc facite in meam commemorationem.” [20] Similiter et calicem, postquam cenavit, dicens: “Hic calix novum testamentum est in sanguine meo, qui pro vobis funditur.”

In the King James rendering:

[19] And he took bread, and gave thanks, and brake it, and gave unto them, saying, This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. [20] Likewise also, the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.

As the crucifixion is the event of emerging finitude condemned to total erasure, the Last Supper is the event of instituting tradition, capable of keeping the finitude open to infinite possibilities of repetition. The “subject” of this event is His body, referred to as “My body,” corpus *meum*, which is given *for* you, pro vobis *datur*. The body belongs and does not belong to Jesus because his body is given, given out, and expropriated. And expropriated in a double sense: once, as a sign of exchange (given *for* the others, *pro vobis*) and, twice, as a sign of commemoration, *anamnesis*, as the Greek version goes²⁴: this do in remembrance of

22. Jacques Derrida, “Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce,” in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 265.

23. Latin expression *Filioque* (lit. “and [from] Son”) appears in theological discussions of the early Church, when the origin of the *Spiritus Sanctus* is discussed (*Et [credemus] in Spiritum Sanctum, Dóminum et vivificántem: Qui ex Patre Filioque procedit*).

24. What is interesting here is the Greek terminology. In Plato, *anamnesis* refers to “good (living) memory,” as opposed to “bad memory (mechanical, technical, on the side of death), called *hypomneme*. In Jesus’s speech (or, more precisely, in Luke’s), a peculiar reversal occurs:

me, *hoc facite in meam commemorationem, touto poieite eis ten emen anamnesin*. Do this to keep me in your memory. Fully present (since pointed to *hoc est*, this is), the body postpones its presence allegorically through another body (bread, host, wine, etc.). Immediately given, yet doomed to memory and a gesture of repetition: do this in remembrance of me. And everything here is connected with *doing, poiesis*, with a specific *performance* which, to be legitimate, cannot happen just once. The Body of Christ cannot render itself present without a technique, *technē*, a system of recollections and anamneses, without a gesture of repetition, without creating (*touto poieite*), without *Dichtung*, without making up, without *fingere*, without fiction.

Fiction

Here – quite parenthetically – we can approach the issue of what fiction possibly is (this issue once stirred up a discussion between Peggy Kamuf and Derek Attridge)²⁵ in a much better way. Traditionally, fiction is considered in terms of logic, a quality of sentences that do not affirm anything because they are not factual statements. I. A. Richards called this group of sentences “pseudo-statements,” the Polish phenomenologist Roman Ingarden, a disciple of Edmund Husserl, named them “quasi-judgments,” and John Searle, Derrida’s famous opponent, “nonserious illocutions.” In all cases, fictitious statements do not claim – to use Searle’s formula – “to commit to truth” because their authors do not believe that their sentences refer to actual states of things and the rules of logic. Fiction is here understood as a particular speech act in which its author pretends to make an assertion but does not. He performs *as if* telling the truth, but his sentences are beyond the opposition between true and false.²⁶

good memory becomes inseparable from a bad one as life becomes inseparable from death. See Jacques Derrida, “Plato’s Pharmacy,” in Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs For Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 70–71.

25. See: Peggy Kamuf, “‘Fiction’ and the Experience of the Other: For Derek Attridge, in answer to a question,” in *The Question of Literature: The Place of the Literary in the Contemporary Theory*, ed. E. B. Bissell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

26. John R. Searle, “Logical Status of Fictional Discourse,” *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (Winter 1975).

As it appears in Derrida, the word fiction does not refer to the logical status of discourse²⁷ – or at least does not limit itself to this issue.²⁸ Instead, it refers to the possibility of iteration of any sentence, gesture, and text whose uniqueness must be repeated to be realized. For Derrida, fiction is closely connected with *tekhnē*, which always intervenes when repetitions are required for events to enter the cultural space. “As soon as the sentence is repeatable, that is, from its origin, the instance it is pronounced and becomes intelligible, thus idealizable, it is already instrumentalizable and affected by technology and virtuality.”²⁹ Fiction is the general name for this possible contextual displacement, which is an indispensable property of any meaning. Speaking in terms of history, which is an effect of fiction itself, or, more precisely, a process of fictionalizing, tradition is not something that comes *after* an event (neither does interpretation come *after* a text). Tradition is not a future of an event nor a future *yet* to come. It is inscribed in the very essence of an event, unmaking its closeness and opening it to the possible series of interpretations and appropriations (and misunderstandings and misreadings). No potentially significant unit assumes meaning unless translated, displaced, interpreted, or repeated. In that case, fiction may serve as the general name for this idealizing movement, without which there would be no culture. Therefore, we cannot say that nature precedes culture, which would *après coup* endow it with meanings. This distinction loses its validity as fiction penetrates both orders, deriding their supposed autonomy.

Invention

I hope we can now better understand what happened during the Last Supper. Jesus *invented the fiction of his survival to survive*. He did this by inscribing what is idiomatically unrepeatable in the series of required gestures to be performed. *Only fiction can make us survive* (or: *make our lives livable*, which amounts to the same). Regardless of what Catholic theologians would argue, the Body of Christ is not directly present in the Host but makes itself present through a system of

27. As he confessed, “I was interested by the possibility of fiction, by fictionality, but I must confess that deep down I have probably never drawn great enjoyment from fiction, from reading novels” (Derek Attridge, ed., “This Strange Institution Called Literature.” An Interview with Jacques Derrida, in *Acts of Literature*, 39).

28. Saying that fiction “suspends the referent,” Peggy Kamuf (“Fiction’ and the Experience of the Other,” 159) seems to follow Derrida, who, however, in the conversation with Derek Attridge speaks not about “suspension of reference (that is impossible) but [of the suspension of] the thetic relation to meaning or referent.”

29. Jacques Derrida, *Demeure*, in Maurice Blanchot, *The Instant of My Death*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 42.

reproducible signs, without which it would remain forever lost in an individual past. It is *made* present but does not present itself as such. If it were, we would not be pressed to invent it repeatedly.

This is why the body must be untouchable, tangible, and – at the same time – intangible. The body that would not resist a direct touch and would not flee from the empirical contiguity could not be called body at all. The body, of which the Body of Christ is emblematic through and through, is something invented, *quelque chose inventé* (as Jean-Luc Nancy said in his book on the soul) and therefore exposed to certain duplicity, to a paradoxical structure of the invention. As Derrida maintains in his essay on invention, the invention is, historically speaking, remarkably divided:

For there to be invention, the condition of certain generality must be met, and the production of a specific objective ideality (or ideal objectivity) must occasion recurrent operations, hence a utilizable apparatus. Whereas the act of invention can take place only once, the invented artifact must be essentially repeatable, transmissible, and transposable. Therefore, the “one time” or the “a first time” of the act of invention finds itself divided or multiplied to have given rise and put in place iterability.³⁰

While inventing his body, or disclosing it for the first time to others, opening it to an endless series of appropriations, Christ also precipitates death as the only way for this body to survive. *The body's disappearance as the body is the very condition of its survival*, but only under the condition that the body leaves traces. This is probably what Jean-Luc Nancy tried to explain, saying that

[c]ulture in general—all human culture—opens up the relation to death, the relation opened by death, without which there would be no relation: there would be only a universal adhesion, a coherence, and a coalescence, a coagulation of all [...]. Without death there would only be contact, contiguity, and contagion, a cancerous propagation of life that would consequently no longer be life—or rather, it would only be life, not *existence* [...].³¹

One cannot overestimate Nancy's distinction between life and existence in this passage. The invention of the body means that its singularity (*hoc est corpus meum*) must “yield up the ghost,” as The King James Version has it, which is equal to its being exposed to the others as ghosts, for whom this body was given

30. Jacques Derrida, *Psyche: Invention of the Other*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 34.

31. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Noli me tangere: On the Raising of the Body*, trans. Sarah Clift, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 45.

(*quod pro vobis datur*). The body's life, its pure live-ability, has to be contaminated by death, which opens up a relation to its other. This relation has every trait of being haunted by the "mechanical ghost,"³² which inhabits this body from the very beginning. This technical contamination made possible by repetition and, therefore, by idealization might be called *existence*. There is no such thing as pure life; life fenced off from conceptualization and from the whole edifice of *tekhnē* and *fiction*, which determine how we think and act. What makes such a life impossible are the fictions we create and from which we cannot abstain.³³

Life and Existence

Although nowhere explicitly thematized by Derrida and not developed by his commentators, the distinction between life and existence seems crucial for deconstruction. It acquires its explanation inside the frame of the logic above. Life is idiomatic and singular, while existence is technological and archival. The former nests in the element of unrepeatability and the latter is based on repetition. However, it has to be reminded that idiomatic features of what happens in life would vanish if they were not recognized and schematized through the conceptual and technical grid. Unless exposed to the technology of repetition (of which memory seems to be the most "natural" device, although it is not), life will turn into something completely foreign and inhuman that remains outside our grasp. In order to make life human, we have to turn it into existence, which is to cover it with our fictions. It does not mean that life is distinct from existence and that existence comes *after* life. If so, deconstruction would not differ from any form of Kantianism with its insurmountable difference between the pure empirical experience and the intellectual, *a priori* framing. It is important to stress that there is no clear dividing line between life and existence, as there is no clear distinction between life and death. It is obvious: what makes me alive pursues me further on the way to death. Life can only gain its meaning from an existential position, meaning that life is meaningless.

In the essay on Artaud, where "life" appears on every page, Derrida claims that "life is the nonrepresentable origin of representation."³⁴ As such, life escapes

32. "The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida," in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*. A Conversation with Jacques Derrida, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), 27.

33. Writing about Husserl, Derrida maintains that his project "appartient au mythe d'origine d'un monde inhabité, d'un monde étranger à la trace : présence pure du présent pur, qu'on peut appeler indifféremment pureté de la vie ou pureté de la mort" (Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 411. For Derrida, pure life was always tantamount to pure death.

34. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 234.

the order of representation because it withdraws itself from the realm of entities, probably like – in late Heidegger – *Das Sein* removes from the domain of *Die Seienden* and remains undisclosed. As something completely absent in our technique and cultural codes, it originates representation while defying any attempt to make it present. It belongs to our world, not belonging altogether, as Derrida would say. We have to deal with life in our fictitious performances, but life as such, just as death as such, never appears in them. To live, we must introduce life into the technological machinery of culture.

Derrida clearly describes this split character of life in one of his conversations. He calls it “un phénomène structurel du vivant.” Its main feature is not to be able to live without dividing itself. On the one hand, this ineluctable division exposes *le vivant*, the living, to unavoidable suffering (what Derrida calls Necessity), which comes from the awareness of not being able to gather and unify oneself perfectly, of not being capable of collecting oneself (another name of this incapacity of gathering oneself is death). On the other, this multiple dehiscence is the only rescue from being *completely* exposed to a menace since there are now more positions taken, more places occupied, more languages spoken, and more figures deployed.³⁵ The faster life divides itself, the quicker it approaches death. This logic can be formulated otherwise: the faster life divides itself, the vaster existence we can have. To put it bluntly: the more expansive existence we have, the more substantial death operates in us since there is no existence without repetition.

35. “La division, elle, a deux significations pour moi. La signification de la division elle-même se divise. D’une part c’est la fatalité, sous une certaine face douloureuse, l’incapacité à rassembler dans l’un. C’est la nécessité, c’est l’inévitable. En ce sens, c’est ce qui expose à la dissociation, ce qui expose à la déhiscence ; et en même temps, autre signification, la division peut être aussi une ligne de stratégie, un mouvement profond de la garde elle-même. Dès lors qu’on se divise, on garde toujours en réserve, on ne s’expose pas totalement d’un seul coup à la menace. Il y a toujours un autre lieu, il n’y a pas une seule face, un seul lieu, il y a toujours plusieurs lieux, et cette différenciation est une protection, c’est une stratégie du vivant ; ce n’est pas un petit calcul, c’est une stratégie du désir, qui se divise pour garder une réserve : je reste libre ; je ne suis pas simplement là, vous verrez que je suis aussi ailleurs, et donc que j’ai de la ressource, que j’ai encore de la réserve, de la vie, et que vous ne me tuerez pas si vite. De ce point de vue, la division, en tant qu’elle est un phénomène structurel du vivant, qui ne peut vivre qu’en se divisant *jusqu’à un certain point* (la mort c’est aussi une division, une dissociation), donc, un certain type de division du vivant est à la fois l’exposition à la souffrance, mais aussi une mesure prise pour sauver et pour garder, une manière de réserve ou de garde” (Jacques Derrida, *Points de suspension. Entretiens*, choisis et présentés. Par Elisabeth Weber (Paris: Galilée, 1992), 156.

Tradition

Now it is time to return to the scene we began with. The crucifixion, as we know, comes after the institution of the Church had taken place. I understand Church here very broadly as any institution aimed at gathering people around a first performance to be repeated. In this sense, the institution precedes a singular event like Jesus's inexpressible ordeal on the cross. The invention of the technique of preserving the Body is prior to the passion which dooms the Body to unimaginable pain. The anaphora used by Jesus is a weak repetition of the anaphora invented during the Last Supper. It is his last resort, and he must use it because he knows that salvation comes only through repetition. Unfortunately, his anaphoric invocation remains useless, the call is not returned, and he dies, having cried in a loud voice of resistance against death with no possibility of idealization and no work of archival care to be done. But this work, the consolation whispers, had been done before his death, and this is why, although Jesus dies with the feeling of being abandoned, his death lets his symbolic existence be continued. This is why tradition is unavoidable and necessary for our existence with its endless reservoir of fiction and fables. As Barthes rightly wrote in *S/Z*, "one hole in [the] cultural fabric and death can result."³⁶ Tradition is where these holes are mended, and our singular lives can be translated, transfigured, and transposed. This translation (the other name of which is existence, and another possible one – why not – church) is *the only* way of keeping what is absent alive.

Watch the Gap! – Which Gap?

Once again, we must return to the distinction between life and existence. All deconstructive impetus is directed against "the living present, of consciousness as living present, of the originary form (*Urform*) of the time we call the living present (*lebendige Gegenwart*), or of everything that assumes the presence of the present."³⁷ What Derrida has in mind is, I think, that no life would *not* be contaminated by existence. That life does not run *against* existence but is exposed to its technological machinery and "technical prosthesis,"³⁸ to all contamination, and infection,

36. Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Blackwell: London, 2002), 185.

37. Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 144. Since *De la grammatologie* Derrida has been identifying life (*la vie*), or "le present vivant," with "presence à soi" (Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, 436–437).

38. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida says about Freud that "as classical metaphysician," he holds "the technical prosthesis to be a secondary and accessory exteriority" (Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 92). If "the technical prosthesis" is an apt name for language, the classical metaphysic claims to keep language carefully separated from reality and coming "after" it. What

which comes along with the existence and its multiple figures like writing, phone calls, touching, etc.³⁹ If there were such a thing as “pure life,” it would remain “untouched, still inaccessible, in fact unlivable,”⁴⁰ precisely like Kafka’s *Castle*, which, for K. and the people from the village, remains “untouched, still inaccessible, in fact unlivable” because it is a “seeming emptiness.”⁴¹ Life can be lived through; life can be survived only when exempted from its purity and inscribed in what it does not control. Life is livable only if it transforms into existence.

Therefore, there is no gap between life and culture: the former introduces into existence its unrepresentability, and the latter gives life a predictable character. The place (which is not a place anymore) of their intersection is language, understood as “the process of production differences.”⁴² It is a language that unmakes “the living present” of life, and it is a language that grants existence with ambiguity. It is not surprising that language, mediating between life and existence, is not *outside the world* but creates the very locus of where the world unfolds itself. “There isn’t language on one side and reality on the other.”⁴³ Having said this, I have no scruples to add that the Gospels, at least with their two scenes, one included in Matthew and Mark, another one being a part of Luke, teach us no less and no more than a lesson about how language works in the world, and how the world is overwhelmingly embedded in language. This is why the Gospels may be said to inaugurate the deconstructive canon, the text to which we, the deconstructionists of all countries, have to return all the time.

Coda

It sounded like a good ending, but I must supplement this analysis with a little yet an important postscript. I cannot help thinking about this second cry of Jesus. Was it articulate? Was it in language? As Derrida, after Kierkegaard, says, “the first effect or first destination of language [...] involves depriving me of, or delivering

deconstruction is directed against is this illusion of having the demarcating line between language and reality drawn clearly and forever. The traditional reproach against deconstruction that it reduces everything to language would be valid only under one condition, namely, that the starting point was a clear cut line between language and reality, which is simply not true.

39. In *De la grammatologie*, Derrida points that “l’irruption de cette contingence absolue [which is associated with writing as contrasted with a living speech] a déterminé le dedans d’une histoire essentielle et affecté l’unité intérieure d’une vie, l’a littéralement infectée” (442).

40. Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 54.

41. Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Mark Harman (New York: Schocken Books, 1998), 1.

42. Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 150.

43. Derrida, *Paper Machine*, 146.

me from, my singularity.”⁴⁴ What if this cry in a loud voice was not human, not a linguistic utterance but an animal, brute, or corporeal roar caused by pain and thus unrepeatable since totally singular? When one speaks, one is not himself, “alone and unique,”⁴⁵ but what about when one roars? Is not roaring unique? May one understand someone else’s painful roar? Is there a future for anyone suffering from pain and immersed in his agony? Can you share your pain with others? Is pain deconstructible at all?⁴⁶ These are the questions we should ask now if we do not want to immobilize the movement of deconstruction.

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44. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 60.

45. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, 60.

46. As Derrida says, “all pain is immeasurable” (Jacques Derrida, “A Testimony Given...,” in Elizabeth Weber, *Questioning Judaism: Interviews*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 55.

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