

A (Non) Introduction to Differance. The Education of the Pagan

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This paper is a journal of my incursion into the forbidding region of "differance." It is not easy to say when one has reached it, nor in fact that one is ever in it, because every effort is made to deny it a locus, a standing, a presence. And yet it is the temper of an epoch that labels itself "post-modern" and it instills an ubiquitous suspicion for everything philosophy and life have ever stood on and invoked. Not that we have not known suspicion in the past, but this that traces out its difference is utterly sinister and cleverly scheming. When asked its name, it responds with a non-name: it can only be suggested by the silence and non-presence of that which "differs" and makes a "difference." It claims its force from the very presence that it questions and relativizes. It has been there all along, and therefore not really there!

I offer a reading of three essays: Derrida's now well-known intriguing, irritating *Differance*, Culler's lucid synthesis in *Decon-struction as a Method of Reading and of Interpretation*, and Lyotard's *Being Pagan and Being Just*. This sequence, I hope, will be useful: from wending our way through "differance," then through its practice in "deconstruction" to the problematique of being just.

This is a non-introduction, for how else should one label the effort at introducing what its ministers insist is a non-presence, and a radical questioning of the privileges of "logos"?

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Differance

The difference between sounds is not itself a sound, and yet it is that very non-audible difference – a non-sound – that allows each sound to be a distinct sound. The difference between things is itself not a thing, so that the very presence of a thing is made possible by the non-presence of that without which it would be other. The same thing can be said of conceptualizing, for it is the play of differences that accounts for the possibility of conceptualizing. The content of the concept is not all that goes into the making of the concept for it is the non-content of differing that makes possible the marking off of one thought that is not another. The present keeps within itself the non-present: the mark of the past and its relation to the future, for how else could present be? The present is a synthesis, insofar as it can be present only as retention of the past and protention of the future. Is it not then fairly clear that the present is so as marked off by the non-present? Thus insinuated is non-present and the never-presented.

To ask where to begin, and to criticize other beginnings as false starts, is to presume that there is one, univocal origin. But if presences are marked only because of a non-present, it is presumptuous to declare one starting point, a singular, unequivocal foundation which, though not yet found, must nevertheless be sought.

The seriousness of going after a declared “origin,” an “arche” must then give way to play. The maturation of post-modernism is the growing beyond a logic that opposes duplicity, equivocation and amphibology. It is the deliberate assumption of the philosophical seriousness of play, a celebration of “differance” as polysemic. It is the recognition of the fecundity of amphibology, the very recognition that allows a philosopher like Levinas to employ the language of being at the service of an “otherwise than being.”

Differance then is primordial movement, for what other way is there to protest against the aprioristic claims of Being as presence except in the language of the ancient contrast between Heraclitus and Parmenides? *Differance* is also the name of the disposition to see in every system of affirmations a “weave of differences.”

To recognize “difference” is then to concede that the questions: What differs? Who differs? What is difference? are not answered, nay, should not even be posed! “Difference” though passes judgment on any pretended rigorous and irreducible opposition: fiction. There does not seem any other way, though, except to write (to speak) fiction, and “difference” does not forbid this. It only forbids us from forgetting that it is fiction.

Central to my reading of Derrida is the persuasion that we will and must go on positing, affirming – constructing. “Difference” however is the call to courage, for it is what keeps us from resting in the comfort and assurance of a theoretical construct: a fixed opposition, a recognized presence. “Difference” is the move that causes the construct to tremble, not because it is not good enough, or because another construct might better resist the trembling, but because trembling is what must follow in the wake of every fissure that is at the foundation of every construct! There can be no anticipation of a “higher synthesis,” a superior resolution. There can only be the constant readiness – perhaps eagerness – for the disquiet that “difference” brings.

There is no metaphysics of difference, for it is the questioning of every metaphysics. It proposes no resolution of the disquiet for it is the call to persevering disquiet. It is the invitation to play – to dance not only for the moment, but whenever one stakes out a site, marks out a “here.”

Is all this perhaps a philosophical fad that will wear out in better times, a terrible epoch of trembling from which we will emerge into the light? If, as philosophers have consistently observed, Being dissimulates itself in beings, it is this very dissimulation, this very differing and deferring that is suggested by difference. “Older” than than every ontological difference, its non-presence and non-site allow it to be permanent to and situated within philosophy and more basically within thought.

Deconstruction

To speak Greek in order to undo Greek: all deconstruction is stealth because, I have suggested, it is the very movement of the fissure on which every construct rises. Every philosophy, every

theory contains its own deconstruction. Deconstruction has no rules, for only systems have rules, and deconstruction is the undoing of every system. It is giving vent to difference. Its moves though are identifiable: the subversion of a hierarchy and the displacement of a system. This is nothing more though than to say: it moves, it shakes up.

But why deconstruct? Quite simply because every construct bears its own deconstruction – a move which in naivette may be postponed but cannot be ignored. Not to deconstruct would be in bad faith to turn one's back to the richness and the challenge that the questioning have to offer. It is to hug the coast with shameful timidity and so miss the discovery!

It is necessary to posit, it is necessary to construct. Deconstruction, however, imposes an additional task: to deconstruct what has been constructed so that every postulation in its own questioning and undoing may neither claim more than it can do, nor achieve less than what it can.

If it is the effect that brings to light the cause, is not effect cause, and cause effect? And further on, what then is there to the hierarchy of cause and effect? A supplement is an addition to what is complete. But to that which is complete, what can we added? If there is addition, the complete is not complete. What then of the scheme of supplementation?

Philosophy lives by meaning. It is justified by the search of meaning. But, deconstruction shows, the meaning of "meaning" is indeterminate. This warns, humbles and excites. This obsession with meaning and the assumption that what is sought for must be something definite is but an aspect of philosophy's logocentrism. The deconstructive move shows that speech, which has been usually accorded privileged status in comparison to writing, is actually a form of the "proto-writing" – but the interplay of differences – that makes possible both speech and writing. But phonocentrism is merely a variant of logocentrism, the same syndrome evidenced by a preference for the immediacy of sensation, for demonstration and argument and for the lingering belief that truth somehow hides behind appearances. Its moves are familiar: making clear, grasping, demonstrating, revealing.

But deconstruction is unrelenting: Is not presence so only because it bears absence? Is not every attempt to found a theory of language on entities bound to fail because a system of signs is always a system of the non-signified by which each sign can be distinct?

Meaning, we find out, is context-bound. Can the challenge of mastering context be met? Did not Wittgenstein suggest that we familiarize ourselves with the game so that we can play it? But no context can ever be saturated. There is no limit to what can be a part of a context, so that in principle a context is boundless. In fact, any attempt to describe, much less circumscribe, a context always results in a new context! And this is not because we are not clever enough but it cannot be done in a manner that makes superfluous all future doing. When it is done – and this seems to be one point not sufficiently stressed – its tentativeness and artificiality must at all times be performatively conceded.

Deconstruction does not suppress the hermeneutic project. It does however constantly hold out the paltry (?) – rather salutary tenet of the indeterminacy of the meaning of “meaning.” When meaning is indeterminate, however, does this not wreck the project of justice?

Being Just

There are no metanarratives. There is no mastername. Not that there are no narratives and names, but rather that each makes as good a claim as the other. The just man cannot therefore be he who acts in accordance with a code, for no code can ever lay claim to a privilege other codes do not have. The just man is just because he acts justly, virtuously. But if he abides by no code (although he may enunciate codes and announce them), then in response to the challenge to do justice, we are not in the region of *episteme*, but of *techné* – the doing of justice. We must respond – often we will – to the demands of a situation justly, but without benefit of code, model or criteria. Justice then calls for strategy, and this does not make it any less just. If anything at all, it makes it more difficult, for it is infinitely easier to refer some fact or act to a prewritten code to which then one applies a pre-determined solution. But strategy calls for a mastery of the situation that is

courageous and admirable precisely because it cannot invoke any supporting, supplying and comforting metanarrative.

The paganism of justice does not only consist in a vagueness (or vagary) of source. The just man is, of course, pagan because he cannot (will not!) support his claims by proof-texts from some sacred scripture. He is pagan also insofar as he speaks because he has been spoken to. The just man entertains no illusions that his pronouncements mark new beginnings, lay down new foundations. Rather, he announces, he pronounces, because the anonymous spirits and deities of the field have spoken to him a message already forgotten. Once more, I find it necessary to emphasize that he does not preach some privileged message, some sacred gospel. Rather he speak in a tradition of speaking, and in a sense, his announcements continue the announcements he himself received; but in another sense, he must make up the announcements by himself because there in no one, "original" story he must just pass on. This would be easy. But philosophy was not meant to be easier than life. Rather, he must, in a very real sense "make up" the story without pretending that he founds it.

Conclusion: The Education of Pagans

It is not easy to sever ties with a romantic past. There will always be nostalgia for "natural law," for "ultimate causes," for "first principles" —for foundations. Would not in fact education be far easier if we could just set our sights on looking for the "master-name"? The education of pagans must necessarily be the education for difficulty. It must be capable of translating all claims, constructs and models into fracta and undecidables, while being ready to appreciate and to credit the contribution they make. It will, of course, foster suspicion because deconstruction is, in a very worthwhile sense, a hermeneutic of suspicion. Whatever offers the chance for an excited but determined "Eureka" is necessarily suspect.

It is education that will be respectful of the "agora," the marketplace of ideas, views and claims. Some goods may be tagged at higher prices than others, but the educated person will always deal with them as marketable, exchangeable, freely negotiable. Far from being their weakness, this will be the strength of all that is

brought to the agora, for what is offered there is all that is available! He will then pursue with great interest a study of the classics of the past, in much the same way that he will take interest in what is said and written in the present. And he will take all this seriously – as proposals.

The education of the pagan will bring to his attention the serious demand that he be just, and it will impress upon him the seriousness of the task by impressing upon him “responsibility.” He must act, and he must speak, because he has been addressed by teachers, and leaders, and elders. But when he acts and speaks, he cannot act out a script written for him, nor merely read a text prepared for him. There is none, and there will be none. To be just, he must write his own text; he must ingeniously set forth his own script. He will not, of course, pretend that he is writing for all forever. He will only be too happy to write within a tradition that has always written that makes him write in turn.

The hope that is to be encouraged is not eschatological, for we do not look forward to deliverance from “the dark night” of difference. We do not look for a messiah who will vindicate a metaphysical tale from which we can then draw every truth. In post-modern times we live by the hope that will ably see through our constructs into the deconstructive moment so that never more shall we be lulled into the rest of false securities. It is our hope that reversing oppositions and undoing hierarchies is the worthwhile thing to do, not because we have any assurance from the dispatches of an absent God that it is the worthwhile thing to do but because anything less would be puerile, naive – perhaps even dishonest. In this sense then the education of the pagan is education in integrity, the kind that nobly disclaims the grasp of wholes and the achievement of wholeness.

Education is necessarily training in agility for the post-modern person must dance, not because he is forever frivolous. On the contrary, he is serious. Because he is serious, he cannot rest in the pretense that one claim settles it all. He will forever try, and test, and search, and accept and reject – without ever the misled hope that a bright dawn of “logos” will dawn, but because life has one inescapable rhythm— the time and the measure of difference! □

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