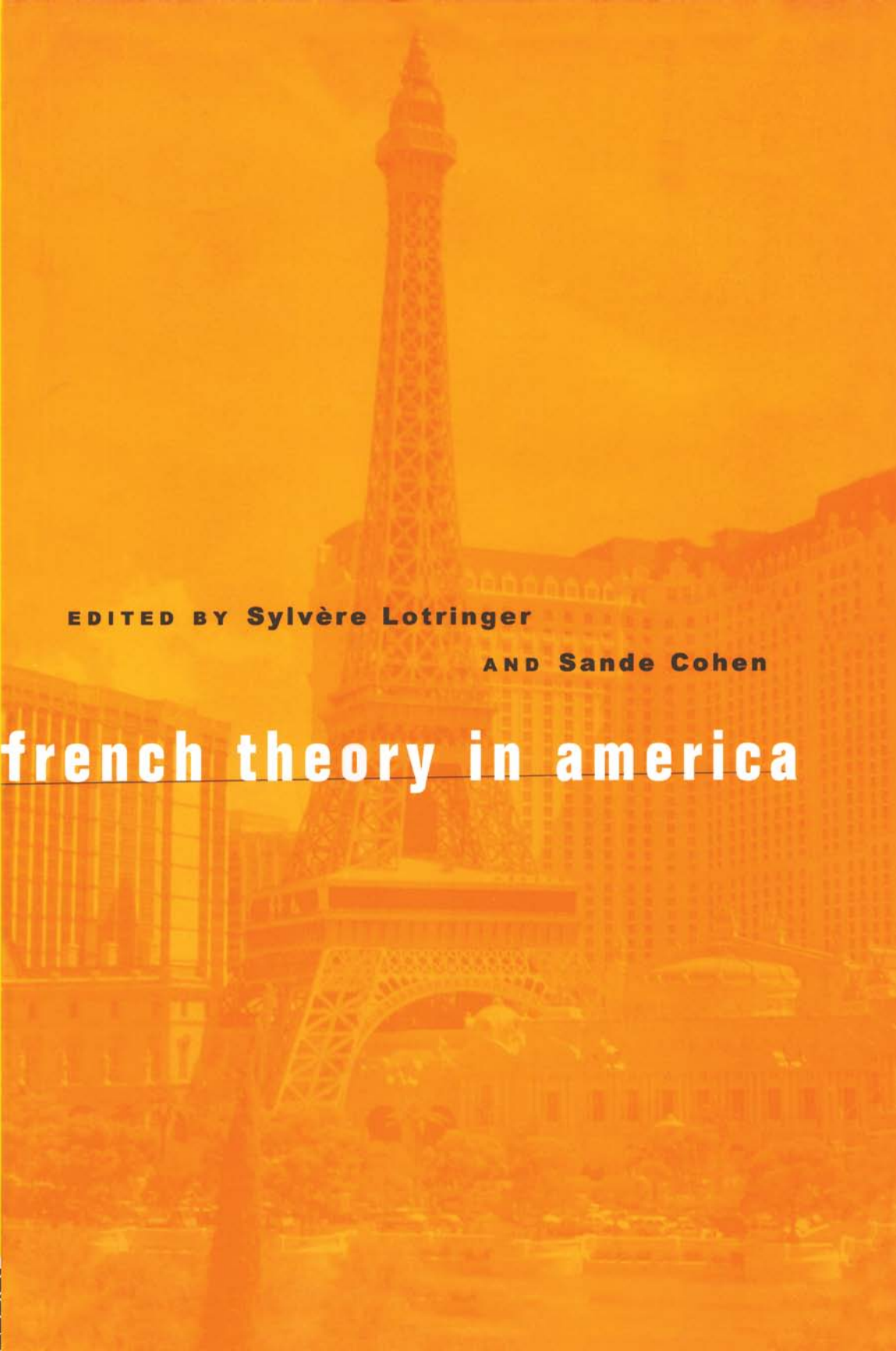
EDITED BY Sylvère Lotringer
AND Sande Cohen
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Contents

Introduction: A Few Theses on French Theory in America

SYLVÈRE LOTRINGER AND SANDE COHEN

"French theory" is an American invention, going back to at least the eighteenth century, and no doubt belongs to the continuity of American reception to all sorts of European imports, an ongoing process.

This process turns what the French call "thought" *(pensée)* into what Americans call "theory" and so pertains to strange psychopolitical facts about America. It may well be that most Americans actually believe in only two modes of thought—utopianism, expressed in versions of an "American exceptionalism" and which perforce includes "apocalypticism"; and legalism, or reliance on the intellectual patterns of law. Utopianism and legalism deny philosophy and nonlegal "theory" much leeway to arbitrate disputes, or even to address criticism; could it be that criticism, of all kinds, grafted itself to "theory" in America as a way of slipping out from under utopia and law? Be that as it may, the reception and dissemination of recent French "thought" into "theory" is irreducible to the vicissitudes of utopia and law, with their never-ending problems of discipline, boundary, propriety. In geologic terms, utopianism and legalism are like two gigantic plates tightly poised against each other, each attempting to slide past the other; French theory can be compared to the tension formed at the boundary of the two, which sometimes builds and at other times is released. As Webster's dictionary puts it, theory is something that is not "conclusively established or accepted as the law," and, in this sense, it is undoubtedly fortunate that French thought became American theory, freeing up, like faultlines, the interstices among belief, judgment, facts, and principles. The first thing to say about French theory in America is that it provides new senses of art, philosophy, and science "outside" reigning American ideas and writing.

That such theory has often been rejected by the existing disciplines of academic institutions, especially history and philosophy departments attempting to protect the archaicisms of linearity and "clear and distinct" ideas, is both a fact of recent history and evidence of a structure that French theory set out to contest. We have been saturated by the invocation of repressive ideals against French theory—the ideal

of regulative truth, the ideal of form fits fact, the ideal of metanarrative social cohesion, the ideal of language transparency. Given these ideals that derive from utopia and law, we think French theory will have a long and noble future in America.

In terms of understanding the present configuration of forces in relation to French theory, first consider the "beginnings" of French theory in America, or at least as humorously evoked in the spring of 1997 by Arthur Danto during a panel at the Graduate Center, New York. As an aside, Danto offered that the "Schizo-Culture Conference" organized by *Semiotext(e)* in 1975 at Columbia University, which included papers by Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, and Jean-François Lyotard, was an event totally out of sync with American thought:

> I was there. In fact, I was a speaker. For some reason I was put in the same slot that first evening as Lyotard, a man who has what I think of as the *true gift of incoherence.* The rest of the French have been trying to achieve it, but he was born with it, like perfect pitch.

Danto's deft aestheticization of "incoherence" is worth quoting more fully:

> Lyotard spoke in French, and there was a table with three people whose purpose was to translate what Lyotard was saying . . . and they couldn't agree! finally, they would say, "Well, we think this is what he means . . ." The three interlocutors were trying to convey to us, knowing that it was hopeless, that we should have tried to understand on our own, even if we didn't know French, what Lyotard was trying to say.[1]

Danto was boggled by the mixtures of thought that were not coded from speaker to listener ("couldn't agree . . .") and of potential misrepresentation, a disturbance of "rational" communication carried out by speakers-in-charge whose own discourse was not attributable to a subject or to any speaker's intention. In this "breakout" of discourse mixed with collective bargaining, the expertise expected of experts, a proliferation of "ex's," instead of correct attribution to intention/listeners, gave way to an *event*—the visibility of commentary "on" overt content dissolved and discourse opened onto other groups in emergence and a plethora of figurations.[2] Danto's recollection in 1997 expressed a generalized distrust of indirect free discourse, which, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari called a language that goes "from saying to saying . . . voices in a voice . . . no clear distinctive contours . . . shifting distributions within discourse."[3] The main effect of indirect free discourses: to dissolve boundaries of representation. Unable to proceed with the consumption of the purported recordings (discourse) in the *aporias* between the speaking subject (who is supposed to be epistemically

responsible: "I am saying to you that . . .") and grammatical subject (which detaches from speakers), our scholar became fettered by discourse that could not be controlled. In the 1966 colloquium at Johns Hopkins University, often said to have been the real beginning of French theory in America, Jacques Derrida could postulate that with language, repetition, not the subject who speaks, is original. A present enunciation—"I am dead"—really gives, he added, ". . . the condition for a true act of language [that] is my being able to say 'I am dead.'"[4]

We make these comments as a warning: requesting from French theory a unified, all-embracing model for criticism, especially one that would lead to a goal for discourse, is a mistake. French theorists made language and representation a problem in specifying any sort of goal. There was some consensus, however, that language is inseparable from "semantic tensions and uncertainties," to borrow a phrase from Jean-Jacques Lecercle, coextensive with language and event, connected in the most diverse ways to other collective agencies of enunciation. Paul de Man, in agreement with Deleuze over the *terror* exercised by order words that arrest, on the spot, wayward and errant sense, would have said that the discourse uttered by someone called Arthur Danto manifested the very terror it objected to, even if mixed with erudition and genuine puzzlement.

French theory in America comes with some baggage. Arguably the most intellectually stimulating series of texts produced in the postwar era, joining visible public facts (e.g., the tribulations of capitalism) with experimental criticism (e.g., *Anti-Oedipus*'s mixtures of theory, philosophy, social science, and searing polemic), French theory pressured every concept of representation, surpassing the critiques made by existentialists, structuralists, Marxists, feminists, and multiculturalists. This French theory is also now both being absorbed and being disdained.[5] We worry about the academicization of French theory, achieving some dominance in one area, derided in others—the kind of sorting-out processes keenly examined by Bruno Latour (see Elie During's and Mario Biagioli's essays in this volume on questions of disciplinary identity, on French theory's provocation of boundary questions). History, economics and political science have labored to make themselves immune from theories that criticize capital, just as in the areas of art and film, as covered in this volume by Sylvère Lotringer's, Kriss Ravetto's, and Alison Gingeras's essays, French theory has been welcomed and sometimes turned into an exclusion discourse (the case of Lacan). It may turn out that in the arts one can most acutely perceive the tribulations of French theory in America. Why? As other writers in this volume suggest, the contemporary fury over the writing of art history, with all sides having dovetailed on *recoding* or *capturing* art history for a number of purposes (commercial, academic), indicates that French theory intersected with the postwar expansion of the *concept of culture*,

especially signaled in America by the intractability of capital combined with the emergence of pop culture. The concept of culture has expanded to the point where it doesn't mean anything. The arts, including the "fate" endlessly pronounced on literature, have proliferated exactly at the same time that French theory took up the challenge that culture itself was veering toward extinction, a thesis propounded by Claude Lévi-Strauss and others in the 1930s and '40s. One of the most well-known books of French theory, Lyotard's *The Post-Modern Condition,* gave a technical analysis of the concept of postmodernism and concluded that information was more politicized than ever, but that the arts, or language games without end, "deny the solace of good forms" and so might enjoy a proliferation of new effects that would render a sense of *making culture* in the face of the dissolution and shattering of "the modern."

Perhaps we can suggest the following theses about French theory. We understand the synthetic "point" of this theory/thought as the *permanent suspension of representation* (see the essays by Derrida, Gaillard, and Cohen, herein). Most often, to represent means to settle, answer, resolve, and control the represented—the experiences of the world put in their "right" place. Instead, representation as conceived by French theory was turned to entirely critical and productive purposes—to make thought experiments. Instead of treating writing and books as conclusive models, books and writing were encouraged to support the idea that "there is no difference between what a book talks about and how it is made."[6] This first thesis can be stated as follows: Where modern communications theory has incessantly postulated positive outcomes from its models (consensus, agreement), in essence promoting social reconciliation, French theory subsumed concepts of communication in notions of *signification* and *contestation.* As there are no metanarratives that can be appealed to without becoming ideological, the turn to signification and contestation involved analysis of society's modes of writing, its ability to, as Barthes put it, "naturalize the unmotivated," tying the economic to the psychological ("doxa"), linking the academic to the represented as one variegated semiotic machine, some parts of which work, some of which work by not working (e.g., psychology and its subjects). In America, criticism and construction of models of language edged out questions of historical consciousness, at least for a while (Andrea Loselle gives a strong reading of this in her essay here on "new historicism"). Theories of signification sprouted, each moving aside the primacy of consciousness. This explains how, for example, Merleau-Ponty's work, with its emphasis on phenomenology and gestalt psychology conceived as the road to sensory and cognitive security, came to be considered dated. As Donald Theall points out in his paper here, McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* (1951) and Barthes's *Mythologies* (1957) helped to inaugurate semioclasm and undo the phenomenology of perception. Merleau-Ponty's belief that

"lived experience" was "present" in Cézanne's paintings—"the impression of an emerging order, of an object in the act of appearing, organizing itself before our eyes"—was perhaps the last attempt to connect presence and sense.[7] Phenomenology, existentialism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis failed to give what language cannot give—a condition of security for meaning. There are meanings whose foundation is so *genealogically* complex that it is not possible to speak of language as the proper mode of representing *the everything* (see Baudrillard's essay, herein). Collectively, what French theory said was that meaning is probably a red herring, a repressive ideal, as signification is local, partial, precise; neither language nor consciousness can be relied upon to achieve understanding of totalities that are themselves always partial and fragmented. So while "meaning" remains the object of the goal of possessive understanding, other types of writing and thinking cleared the way for other goals. In this sense, many French theorists were read in America as abandoning enlightenment and utopia, since these theorists emphasized tactics and strategies of representation that are not based on the resemblance of representations to what they represent—the opinions of passive habit, transcendental stupidity, and subject/institutional mergings. If the earliest writings of French theory focused, then, on language, where Barthes could insist on the proximity of language as such to fascism, later writers such as Baudrillard and Virilio took this to heart and argued that only writing that itself becomes radicalized has any chance to offset the pull of institutions and reliance on a few super-words, invariably misleading. Such words as *truth*, *history*, and *value* may well be indispensable, but French theory tried to do without them as much as possible.

In short, what French theory brought to America was a politics in *language*, famously borrowed from Bakhtin and so many others. Politics in language means the scuttling of any discursive mode that refuses to account for its "implicit presuppositions," its despotic significations turning language into a command system that keeps saving representation despite the latter's ceaseless dissolution—books, newspapers, radio, TV, Internet: each plays the role of simplifying. What Foucault called the "discursive regime" (big or small, local or not) always opposes proliferation by discourses that might disorganize the going "common" and "good" sense; hence Deleuze could argue in *Difference and Repetition* that the only "proper" response to the proprieties of representation was *superproduction*, or writings that strive to change the very function of concepts from integrative devices to concepts that add onto other concepts at places and junctures that simply make more thoughts. It seems to us that the American style of *discounting* language is itself already "French," although we acknowledge a high degree of ambiguity about this phenomenon.

A second thesis concerns subjectivity. Beginning in the late 1960s, the writings of Lukàcs and the hegemony of Frankfurt-style criticism inadvertently made

for a positive reception in America to some aspects of French theory. By the time of *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), the Frankfurt school reliance on refurbishing subjectivity from the rubble of Nazism and Fascism came to be a forum of *political correctness* and was seen by some American and French writers as obsolete, even reactionary. The synthesis of Marx and Freud, emphasis upon political consciousness and the ego-in-resistance, proved unworkable, a throwback to conditions of criticism already surpassed by capitalism. Here the American writer Norman O. Brown foreshadowed American receptivity to French theory (and which Donald Theall brings out in his essay on McLuhan, or the case of Canada). His *Love's Body* (1966) argued for a different sense of subjectivity, not riveted to representation or the politics of the "good image."[8] French theory broke apart the previous Americanization of German synthesis, in which negation of the existing realities was to lead, through self-consciousness, to political import and sense. A way of gauging this change is to note that recent French theory, Jacques Lacan excepted, turned away from all *theories of lack* (and law and signifier, as *Anti-Oedipus* stressed), shifting from what Terry Eagleton called the very job of (politically correct) criticism: "to explain the ideological necessity of . . . *the unconsciousness* of the work [text, object]—that of which it is not, and cannot be, aware." Criticism leads to a higher moralism because criticism is *corrective*[9]—the unconscious vanquished. French theory set these ideas aside. Instead, pursuing what the literary critic Gérard Genette called "an active disavowal and an immanent refutation of the insipid—and impotent—aesthetic of resemblance," it did not try to salvage or rehabilitate the subject, especially the subject's capacity for identification. Rather, French theory pursued the idea of *moleculating agents* who "remain in disjunction," affirmatively, as in Beckett's *Molloy*.[10] It seems to us that many American writers and artists wanted to increase their distance from the demands of resemblance; in place of a better historical self-consciousness that would dovetail with an equally improved subjective moral sense, French theory moved to Nietzschean paths, suspending identity whenever it showed itself, insisting on readings and interpretations that are less *accumulative* (of sense, of history) than they are *incessant* in posing problems. Hence the accusations that French theory is "scientistic and aesthetic." Lyotard's emphasis strikes us as appropriate—the way to suspend binarism and the logic of the least negative (affirmative based on a silent negation) is to make writing itself "a mask without a face," more like a precise and analytic hit-and-run activity than a monument to representation.

In relation to language and notions of the subject, our third thesis concerns negative schizophrenia as a general social condition. This concept means negations of all kinds are interpreted into the System, all of life capitalized. New collective agencies have been unable to productively change the language or any-

thing else. The behaviorism (e.g., demands for security) associated with capital is more "natural" than ever, making French theory dissident in relation to ordinary cultural and political criticism. Deleuze and Guattari turned capitalism into the triumph of zombies. "Writing has never been capitalism's thing," they wrote, for capitalism "is profoundly illiterate . . . [it] overcodes . . . and induces a fictitious voice from on high . . . transcendence of the despotic signifier . . . axiomatic . . . and regulated."[11] Lyotard rendered capital in the anti-identity of voracity, an appetite, as in this blast:

> Capital makes us tell, listen to and act out the great story of its reproduction, and the positions we occupy in the instances of its narrative are predetermined. [Capitalism] is subtle. It does not just stamp out little stories; it also asks for them. It does not automatically send innovators into exile; it sometimes grants them patents and subsidies . . . And whilst it is true that it puts us under house arrest in its narrative instances, it is also true that it requires us to change places.[12]

Baudrillard rendered capital as extermination of difference, and its endless reproduction as simulacra. All in all, French theory asks us to consider capitalism as both "normal" and "schizo," asocial and nihilistic to be sure, and here Foucault's work infuriated everyone in the 1960s because it was both anti-Marxist and anticapitalist. Foucault never ceased arguing that the labor of criticism and art had to rise to the occasion of capitalism's challenge and thus conceive of criticism and art as an event in and of itself; to the terror of capital, words and subjective feeling, the contemporary writer/artist had to be a constructivist, an inventor of relations on-the-spot, making events or what Deleuze and Guattari might have called "joy-flights" of critique, texts that managed to work up the normal schizophrenia of us all into celestial, celibate and paranoid documents that allow new moves. In short, the subtitle of Deleuze and Guattari's major work—*Capitalism and Schizophrenia*—managed to help Americans understand that the dominant modes of conceiving history and subject were inadequate to the violence and terrorism of capitalism.

Our fourth and last thesis has to do with the reception of Nietzsche's texts in America, traveling on a French ticket. The French didn't effectively turn to Nietzsche until they were finished with Hegel, who had reentered modern French thought with the writings of Alexander Kojève in the early 1930s. After making the concept of a historical dialectic murky and opaque, which it properly is, Kojève wagered that the master-slave couple would retain its governance as a model for intersubjectivity. The French Nietzscheans, notably after the publication of Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962) and *Semiotext(e)*'s 1978 issue on

"Nietzsche's Return" (as well as essays that appeared in *Boundary* 2, et. al.), set aside the master/slave model with its mutually assured destruction in the form of a competition over recognition. They opted for an intellectual "emancipation from the law."[13] Nietzsche was invoked to contest the *antiproduction* of recoding and reterritorialization, which today effectively means the university's (museum's, etc.) affirmation of negation (what one lacks, what one needs, what one has to have, etc.). To the linearity of historicism, which turned existence as such into the evolution of survival and recognition, endowment and debt, Nietzsche's texts came to America already quasi-antihistoricist. It may well be that one of the great effects of French theory in America will have been making belief in the autonomy and majesty of history, metanarratives, anarchistic.

All in all, from Jacques Derrida to Helène Cixous, ideas and texts that were nearly eliminated in the American political correctness of the 1970s and after, ideas that asserted the *inseparability* of politics, writing, and representation, were reinstated by the French use of Nietzsche. Many intellectuals, writers, and scholars still find this horrifying.

Finally, some remarks are in order on the false impression of "unity" to French theory. We are well aware of right-wing uses of Baudrillard's arguments. It is a short step from some of Baudrillard's provocations to intellectual deep freeze, but that also makes his work provocative and dangerous. One also notes that at the 1975 conference mentioned above, Lyotard publicly asked Deleuze and Guattari as well as Foucault, present in the audience, to take up the questions posed by his *Libidinal Economy*, soon to be recast as *The Differend*, questions as to how intellectuals could adhere to a "master discourse" and still claim to offer alternatives to writing's inclusive disjunctions (e.g., adherence to unexamined concepts). Lyotard challenged how any "magisterial discourse" can do anything but externalize itself in concepts. At the time, these thinkers demurred and walked away from the room: there was never any "unity" to such French theory, even among those who were close to each other. Foucault, for example, did not go in for direct critiques of institutions, but he did analyze power transformation that used institutions. And yet in some academic quarters his writings are associated with a version of the will to power that reduces both concepts, will and power, to "arbitrarily . . . engage in the invention of 'truth'" a serious reduction and misrepresentation of Foucault's position. There is too much such misrepresentation or politics already lodged in writing, as writing.[14] Further, Deleuze and Guattari always emphasized a *generosity* of critique, often forgetting a critic's reductive arguments if they could extract a bit of a concept for more intellectual labor. Thus, neither in France nor in America is there "unity," but there are a number of astonishingly smart readings of the most diverse "plateaus" or interconnections

of word/thing mixtures. We believe, in this regard, that the last French theorists will be American because we are convinced that Americans will keep finding in the overall unpacking of "differences" provided by French theory powerful means to counter law and utopia, or other such satisfactions of negative schizophrenia.

Some of the papers in this volume were first given as conference papers in the fall of 1997, one at New York University, the others at the Guggenheim Museum and at the Drawing Center, New York. We hope these essays addressing the legacy of French theory in America will go some way toward raising problems that are as undeniable as they may be intractable. We wish to thank Tom Bishop of New York University, William Germano at Routledge (nice cover, too), Ann Philbin at the Drawing Center, and everyone who encouraged this project. Sande Cohen wishes to thank F.S. Chang for her generosity.

Notes

1. *Theatre*, v.8, #1, 1997.
2. For the notion of event as used here, see Tom Conley's essay "Afterword: The Events and Their Erosion," in Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 177.
3. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), pp. 76–79.
4. Jacques Derrida, discussing Roland Barthes' essay "To Write: Intransitive Verb?" in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), pp. 155–56.
5. Sometimes French Theory induces apoplexy. See the nearly hysterical rejection of it in J. Appleby, M. Jacob, and Lynn Hunt, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994), pp. 209–10.
6. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 4.
7. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 14.
8. Norman O. Brown, *Love's Body* (New York: Vintage, 1966), p. 109.
9. Stanley Aronowitz's *The Crisis in Historical Materialism* (New York: Praeger, 1981), p. 262, was an American version of Eagleton's assertions; in Aronowitz's terms, French theory might help with "self-critique by the artist" while "real theory" belongs to Marxism.
10. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 77.
11. Ibid., p. 240.
12. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader*, edited by Andrew Benjamin (London: Blackwell, 1989), p. 140.
13. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 136.
14. Allan Megill, *Prophets of Extremity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), p. 192.

1

Some Views From France

Deconstructions: The Im-possible

JACQUES DERRIDA

Perhaps this time I will add an English subtitle to my French title, which Tom Bishop just pronounced for this conference whose posters have advertised, with a remarkable painting by Mark Tansey, that it would be given in French. The English subtitle will be the following. I pronounce it as best I can and you will understand it how you will: *Falls.* Or to return to French at its most untranslatable: *comment tirer un trait.*

It is autumn. Autumn for me is the season of the gracious hospitality of NYU, which always welcomes me "in the fall" and always welcomes a visitor immersed in his own gratitude. Last spring, in Paris, once again in friendship, Tom Bishop extended an invitation to attend a conference here, and he made it clear that my proposal, whatever freedom he would grant me, as he always so generously does, should be inscribed within a series of retrospective, if not melancholy, reflections on so-called French theory in America over the last twenty years. This is the theory that has, and I quote, "massively penetrated the American university and the American art-world"—thus runs the beautifully illustrated poster that I will shortly say a few words about. Well, last spring, before I answered Tom, I must have said to myself, someone in me must have instantly said: *impossible.* I will not talk on this impossible subject, whether because it is not feasible in an hour, or because, in a thousand different ways, here and there, and here often enough, we have already said so much about it. This inexhaustible subject has exhausted even us. It is becoming more than a *topos* or a common place: it is becoming a genre. It has its rites, its theater, its unavoidable characters, its laws, its law of genre. And since we mention law of genre and French theory over the last twenty years, allow me to remind Tom, and myself, that twenty years ago, in 1979, I think, the first conference that I attended here was entitled "The Law of Genre." Already there was a superb poster, which you can admire in the French department. At that time, the poster did not yet show me in the process of getting ready for a fall, on the point of sinking into some abyss, mimicking a scene from the well-known detective novel *The Death of Sherlock Holmes:* Moriarty connected

by some dance to a well-known partner, "Derrida queries de Man," whom I am dragging or who is dragging me toward, toward what? The falls, precisely, in the fall. But a fall at the edge of a waterfall, a torrent. Falls. A fall at the edge of falls in the fall. As you have noticed, the landscape, the rocks are saturated with inscriptions, letters, hieroglyphs, a sort of text in stone: a somber and autumnal landscape, waterfalls like Niagara Falls. All of that is falls, false. This is the subtitle that I would give to the painting. Falls in the fall of the falls which remain at the edge of the falls, thus at the edge of itself, transfixed, photographed as in freeze-frame, in the imminence of a fall that does not come to an end, that in the end does not take place. Falls. Thus the fall will not take place, you see, there it is still. In any case, by all appearances, we are surely at the edge of the fall, as ever, as we have been from the beginning, but gripping the edge just enough to provoke the impatience, or the desire mixed with concern, of those observing this bizarre ballet, a dangerous *pas de deux*, and who no longer even know what they want. Like graffiti on the wall, this painting remains unreadable, somber as an autumn night, blue, blue-black, in the fall. For if in the end we ended up falling, things might fall out right. And no one knows who might get the upper hand, indeed raise himself up in the fall, from the very fall. Falls. I do not know what Mark Tansey meant to tell us; perhaps he himself does not know, and the only time we met, during a breakfast at the French Embassy, we hardly said a word to one another; I forgot to ask him what he meant to say, what he expected from all these Frenchmen that he puts on stage. In the shadow of this painting, next to Barthes, another representative of French theory, who they will talk to you about on October 27—next to Barthes I appear on this other painting entitled *Mont Sainte Victoire*. Because of this title and, to be sure, because of the fact that I find myself between Barthes and a bearded French veteran of the last war, we are in the French memory of Cézanne; the word *victoire* belongs to a landscape of war, but a war of the past, the first World War, and this surpassed war of the past, this victory both archived and pregnant with catastrophes to come, from the Treaty of Versaille to the Second World War, is perhaps an allegory of French theory in America. A victory pregnant with a menacing future. In any case, already or once again in *Mont Sainte Victoire*, whose reproduction you have just seen, I am put or see myself put on stage at the edge of an abyss, but this time a little like a tree at the edge of a river or lake, a reflective watery surface, wherein my image seems to have fallen to reflect itself before me, while I remain still on the edge, like a tree whose branches continue to grow. But the image that is reflecting me in the water is deformed, deforming: I am an other. You see, I would have preferred to run away or to talk around Tom Bishop's impossible proposition. And instead of talking to you about French theory in America over the last twenty years, I would have preferred to spend more than an hour

reflecting on the desire and the work of Mark Tansey, who has me either dancing dangerously at the edge of a waterfall, or growing like a tree, but still at the edge of somber and menacing water, to the bottom of which, in the autumn, in the fall, I could sink. In the fall, into the falls, falling down into the false. Of course I will not do so, I mean, I will not speak of these simulacra any longer.

I could have, because this painting—seen in a certain light, of course—these paintings say everything, metonymically, that there is in my opinion to say, think, interpret, or overinterpret, about French theory in America over the last twenty years, at the edge of which all the equivocations and ambivalences can transfix or immobilize themselves as in a freeze-frame. Naturally, when I foolishly proposed the title in the plural, "Deconstructions: The Im-possible," I did not just let speak, like a symptom, the spontaneous recoil that the program inspired in me: talk on this subject, pretend to talk on it? Again, no, impossible. Rather, I meant something else that I will try to explain.

After the fact, thus after having improvised this title, "Deconstructions: The Im-possible," in my proposal to Tom Bishop, I realized that—so as not to play, not to deceive, once again at the edge—I had inscribed the word *deconstruction* in a title, undoubtedly for the first time in my life, in more than thirty years. And for the first time I had announced that I was going to talk, without subterfuge, about this thing and this name, this name in the plural of course, and in quotation marks, mentioning the name rather than using it, referring to it: to the effects of this name rather than to some improbable thing itself. Deconstruction in the singular does not exist and has never presented itself as such in the present, and the plural signifies first and foremost this: the open set of effects that one can, here or there, in the world and in America, associate *with*, invest *in*, love or hate to death under this name. The impossible is already this: identifying in the singular something that may present itself, that may be accessible as deconstruction. But I thought that, out of courtesy and a taste for hospitality and gratitude, I should talk as directly as possible, straightforward, without ruse or subterfuge, about this word *deconstruction* and what has happened to it, what has happened through it, with it, in spite of it, in this country and, above all, over the last twenty years.

First, allow me another preliminary reflection on this number, this sequence: twenty years. Why not thirty years, why not ten? I take this number quite seriously. Why twenty years? Twenty years ago the massive penetration that the poster mentions had already begun. It had been going on already for at least ten years. Ten years of penetration before twenty more years of penetration, that is a long time. It is long for a pleasure or for a suffering, or for a suffering at the edge of pleasure, or the opposite, and yet it is indisputable. Things had begun around October 1966, in the autumn, the fall, the date that classic historiographers gen-

erally record. In October '66, the marker, the quasi-event, would be, would have been the famous autumnal conference in Baltimore at Johns Hopkins University that some have interpreted as the end of structuralism and the birth of poststructuralism, a purely American notion, moreover, as you well know, which I do not care for, and which I am eager to maintain as suspect and problematic; nevertheless, more than thirty years ago, the symbolic or symptomatic moment of this conference of 1966, in which I had the privilege of participating with my elders—Hyppolite, Lacan, Barthes, Vernant, Goldman, et cetera—will have marked the beginning of what some will call, depending on the figure, the desired trope: penetration, invasion, reception, welcome, alliance, assimilation, incorporation, injection, grafting: the transformation in America of this thing come from France and for which one created the name and the concept of "theory," yet another purely American word and concept. In France, "theory" does not have an accredited conceptual equivalent any more than poststructuralism does. So why point out this difference of a decade between the thirty years I have just recalled and the twenty years alluded to in the title of this series, French theory over the last twenty years? Because from the beginning of the nineteen seventies, as far as deconstruction in the plural is concerned, they were already beginning the prognosis, indeed the diagnosis of the fall, its decadence and decline. They were already saying that it was damaged, that it was going over the dam. Falls, falling down, dead. The word they used was *waning*, on the wane. This was the mantra or the wishful thinking of the times. Falls: is that not the fall, decadence from the start, already in the nineteen seventies? In German *fall* means "case." Fall, such is the case. Make no mistake. It is over.

The end is approaching, the time of the end keeps approaching, but that was already yesterday. And it has not stopped. This diagno-prognosis has not stopped resounding and echoing. I could give you a thousand examples, exhibit an entire dossier of references, but we do not have the time, and what is the point? In any case, it was and still is for me a source of astonishment and endless entertainment, as well as a subject for historical reflection, from at least two points of view: that of the diagno-prognosis, that is, the death notice, and from the point of view of the thing whose fall and then death one announces.

First, from the point of view of the diagnosis and prognosis. What happens when a fall does not stop? Falls and falls and falls in the falls from the beginning. Isn't this just like an inaugural fall or an original sin? The origin of sin or evil begins with the fall. And what happens when a death notice is rehearsed day after day for the same death in the same newspaper? Even for Diana it did not last so long, a week, two weeks (already an exception), and then it's over. What is dead is dead. The fall takes place once, and it's over. But when it comes to the end of deconstruction, of French theory, the fall lasts, it repeats itself, it keeps insisting,

it keeps multiplying. Falls. Perhaps it is this suspended imminence, this suspense of the fall, the fall into the falls, that Tansey wanted to represent or immobilize or transfix in his painting. Like an instrument panel, perhaps he wanted to register the fall or the imminence of the fall, or the desire for the fall, in the spectator. It lasts and lasts endlessly. And the spectator, the one who watches without exerting any effort, and who grows impatient, who would like to get on with it, who wants it finally to fall, will say to himself: How long can this last! And the longer it endures, the harder the fall. But it lasts too long, it's not possible, it's intolerable, unbearable. It's impossible.

Secondly, from the point of view of the thing one is talking about, for example, a moribund deconstruction, we can ask ourselves what it means to begin, when all is said and done, from the very start by declining and deceasing, by wearing the joyful color of mourning, mourning for oneself, as the best protection against aging, even to the point of appearing invulnerable to the usual rites of fashion, the rites of passing, that the sociologist and historian of ideas or intellectual fads know so well. Regarding the question of fashion, longevity, or death, the question of an originary fall, I was saying to myself a little while ago as I came here that perhaps I envied the few French compatriots who have recently been shelved and swiftly classed in what one calls "the new French thought." You know, the incredible artifact, editorial or academic, that they swiftly immortalize on the market after having announced in advance that this *bricollage* was *new* in order to ensure that the advertisement escape no one. At all costs, this novelty should become the new fashion. Well, I confess, I envy the ins and outs of this new French thought, for I am just about sure, and I am ready to bet on it, that they would not announce, that they will never announce the death of some new French thought. It will have been born immortal, deprived of any possibility of dying from its very first day. So, what can this mean: to be immortal from birth? You can perhaps guess. It is quite the opposite of the decompositions that would threaten the French theory associated with the deconstructions that I would like to speak to you about this evening.

Perhaps it is a certain impatience with the rebounding longevity of this thing that does not cease to fall and fall out so well, perhaps a feeling of impatience or resentment, that makes so many academic spectators sigh, so many idle passers-by, feeling annoyed, say: This is not possible. There, again, impossible. But it is these people who are impossible. That would thus be one possible sense of the word *impossible*, but it does not interest me very much, and as you suspect, it is something else that I have in mind by the title "Deconstructions" in the plural and "the Im-possible" as two words.

I fear that I will disappoint those who in reading the title may have come, mouth watering, to see someone contritely admit to the failure of a whole proj-

ect, a whole lifetime, and confess with a tear in his eye:, "Contrary to what I had thought or tried to make others think, I must recognize that deconstruction is impossible. Please forgive me, that was a faux pas." I just asked for a grand pardon, and now I must beg your pardon for not begging pardon.

I thus arrive at my subject. And instead of yielding to the temptation, a legitimate one, moreover, of a history, a sociology of ideas or currents or modes, I still have the desire to work and to speak to you about what is at work, hard work, about what endures, in the way of deconstructions, and about what works deconstructions through and through, in the very body, at the very brink, of the impossible—or through the impossible. The preceding remarks were not intended to speculate in specular or narcissistic fashion, self-indulgently, in a watery mirror, on the indefatigable longevity of deconstruction, which I never did believe in. I believe only in death and in death precisely as impossible, for which reason I am obsessed with, curious about, and convinced of mortality. Rather, it was a matter of preparing a reading of this dash that I thought it necessary to draw right in the middle of the word "im-possible," of the im-possible. Perhaps there we find the reason for signing this autumn evening with the word *falls*, and of giving to a painting as blue as the falling of water its true title, *falls*. It is not a question of crossing out deconstruction with one stroke, nor of finding in deconstruction or deconstructions features tired and drawn from a too long career, over the course of which one would have taken too much pleasure in penetrating a culture. Rather, it is a question of doing justice to a trait, a hyphen, a joining and thus a separation, a dash drawn in the heart of the impossible. In other words, this im-possible is everything but impossible; in any case, it calls for an other reflection on what possible, power, potentiality, dynamic, *dynamis*, "I can," "I can be," and "maybe" all mean. And the entire business of deconstruction seems to me more and more concerned precisely with deconstructing, with all its consequences, this semantics of the possible inherited from Greco-Christian, indeed biblical, thinking: the possible opposed to the impossible, the possible as virtual opposed to the actual or the act, the possible versus the real, *dynamis* opposed to *energeia*, and so on. There you go, and so now I begin, and since I have been invited to, I will improvise a historical periodization.

From the beginning, from the first decade, of which I spoke a little while ago, there existed a certain Americanization of a certain deconstruction, the one in any case that I was trying to put to work by that name. By Americanization I mean a certain appropriation: a domestication, an institutionalization, chiefly academic, that took place elsewhere in other forms as well, but here in a massively visible fashion, I mean, in this country. What they asked me to speak about tonight is this Americanization. From the first decade, it rested on the supposition of what I would call the becoming-possible of that which was already tak-

ing the form of the impossible. What does this mean? That often, here and there, most notably in the domain of literary theory and literature departments preoccupied in the first place with the concerns of reading and interpretation, with the method and epistemology of literary criticism, in all these places critics took pleasure in drawing on these texts or discourses that had apparently come from France and were identified as examples or paradigms of deconstruction—in drawing from these texts, borrowing from them, translating, transporting *possibilities* and *powers*. That is to say, organized bodies of rules, of procedures and techniques, in a word, *methods*, know-how applicable in a recurrent fashion. One could even formulate or formalize (and I applied myself in this way at first) a certain consistency in these laws which made possible reading processes at once critical and critical of the idea of critique, processes of close reading, which could reassure those who in or outside the wake of new criticism or some other formalism who felt it necessary to legitimize this ethics of close reading or internal reading. And among the examples of these procedural and formalizing formulae that I had proposed, and which were circulating precisely as possibilities, new possibilities offered by deconstruction, there was the reversal of a hierarchy. After having reversed a binary opposition, whatever it may be—speech/writing, man/woman, spirit/matter, signifier/signified, signified/signifier, master/slave, and so on—and after having liberated the subjugated and submissive term, one then proceeded to the generalization of this latter in new traits, producing a different concept, for example, another concept of writing such as trace, *différance*, gramme, text, and so on. Or to take another example: the privilege granted to the self-contradictions or the performative contradictions of a discourse, contradictions that could furnish a strategic lever in the consideration of marginalia, a minor text, a brief essay, a bizarre footnote, a symptomatic phrase or word, in order to dislocate and destabilize the autointerpretive authority of a major canonical text. For example, Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language*, or the word *pharmakon*, the "supplement," "hymen," or a minor text of Kant such as the *Parergon*. Although I am the last to find this useless, illegitimate, or contingent, I would say, nevertheless—I was already saying—that this slightly instrumentalizing implementation tended to reduce the impetus or the languages, the desire, the arrival so to speak, the future, of deconstructions, and might well arrest them at the possible: that is, at a body of possibilities, of faculties, indeed of facilities, in a word, a body of easily reproducible means, methods, and technical procedures, hence useful, utilizable; a body of rules and knowledge; a body of theoretical, methodological, epistemological knowledge; a body of powerful know-how that would be at once understandable and offered for didactic transmission, susceptible of acquiring the academic status and dignity of a quasi-interdisciplinary discipline. For deconstructions migrate, hence the plurality, from philosophy to literary the-

ory, law, architecture, et cetera. From this standpoint, although this movement, contrary to what its enemies have always claimed, remained in the minority and under attack, deconstruction was becoming or risked becoming not only possible in the sense of "feasible" but practical: a practical theory, a practical praxis, giving rise to instructions, evaluations, legitimizations, and to signs of recognition. *Possible*, deconstruction was becoming not only an act, an activity, a praxis, but it was becoming practicable, and, as they say in French, practical, in the sense of easy, convenient, and even salable as a commodity, as merchandise. Editors and university presses never spat on it, even at the most difficult moments, even at the most reactionary universities such as Cambridge, where an entire pack of dons, foaming at the mouth, spat on the deconstructionists; moreover, the word *deconstructionist*, yet another American invention, designates precisely this adaptation of deconstructions to a possible praxis, a quasi-doctrine that is teachable, institutionalizable and reproducible. And that is the case most often made against deconstruction, either from the point of view of a frightened conservatism, or from the point of view of a leftist activism that had an interest, to be sure, in leaving a certain political code undisturbed. The paradox of this situation or this phase that began, I repeat, after the first decade, is that what we were then trying to appropriate by making it possible, that is, functional and productive, was in any case that which had already shown itself explicitly as impossible, as the im-possible, in discourse, writing, or teaching that interested me personally and in which I found myself involved. I could show you, but I can develop this topic no further on account of time constraints and because I want to get beyond this phase we have come to.

Here are three brief and schematic arguments on the topic of this phase, which was more than a phase and which was already resistant to periodizations. First, very quickly, it was shown that *deconstruction*, if this word has a sense that does not let itself be appropriated, was indissociable from a process and a law of expropriation or ex-appropriation proper that resists in the last instance, in order to challenge it, every subjective movement of appropriation of the following sort: *I* deconstruct, or *we* deconstruct, or we have the *power* and the *method* that make it possible. Deconstruction, if there be such a thing, happens; it is what happens, and this is what happens: it deconstructs itself, and it can become neither the power nor the possibility of an "I can." I insist here on the "it happens" because what I would like to make clear later on is this affirmation of the event, of the arrival or the future at the beating heart of a reflection on the im-possible.

Second, early on, all the motifs that we tried to possibilize or make possible, but only to a certain point, and this success is not negative—all these motifs became reading techniques or techniques of interpretation, such as *différance*, the undecidable, the supplement, the pharmakon, the parergon, and so on. These

are not only names, but if we wanted to nominalize them, there would be fifty or so of them. All these motifs became possible and made many decodings and many texts possible. But these motifs also mark, precisely, the impossible, the limit of the possible. And this appeared quite clearly from the beginning. All quasi-concepts or quasi-transcendentals at work in deconstruction are inconceivable impossibilities, inconceivable concepts of neither/nor: the trace is neither present nor absent, the specter (which appears much earlier than *Specters of Marx*) is what is neither living nor dead, the parergon that is neither sensible nor intelligible, neither/nor, et cetera.

Third: already, from this quasi first decade, it is often literally a question of the conditions of possibility as conditions of impossibility. A law of contamination compromises and renders impure, without absolute rigor, the very thing that it makes possible. It is everywhere insistent, particularly in *Signature, Event, Context*, or in *Limited Inc.* concerning the performative. What makes a performative possible, what makes it successful or felicitous, as they say in the language of speech act theory, what makes the performative possible is that which threatens it, which threatens its possibility, and thus which renders its purity impossible. And the risk of the unfortunate case, of infelicity, a risk that must remain always open, this is what makes possible and gives the performative event a chance, but instantly renders its purity and its pure presence as performative impossible. This schema was in fact already generalized, but I cannot develop it further here for lack of time. This recurrent expression of the conditions of possibility as conditions of impossibility did not fail to signal some major stakes, namely the shock delivered to hardly calculable consequences. Naturally it is a question here of the calculable and the incalculable. Shock, indeed a trauma, which it is necessary to register within the classical philosophical concept of possibility, in the style of the Kantian transcendental critique devoted to the search for the conditions of possibility, in the canonical expression of Kant. For all these reasons, what thus was happening in the so-called first decade should or should have resisted, did resist in fact, a sort of possibilization, this facilitating practice which was a certain, particularly American, institutionalization. Luckily, in this country and elsewhere, there were studies that measured up to this resistance, and in paying them tribute I would very much like to avoid reducing, simplifying, or homogenizing them as their detractors have all too often done.

I am now going to try to deal more directly with my subject and take up the sequence of the last twenty years from the point of view of this possibility of the impossible. It just so happens, and this is no coincidence, that all my work these last two decades have made of the impossible their privileged theme, and of the very experience of the event—the sense of "possible," "experience" and "event" being different, having evidently changed—the very focus of their formalization.

Since I cannot here reconstruct all the *topoi* and movements of these demonstrations over the last twenty years, you will allow me to propose, hypothetically, an emphasis and a taxonomy. The emphasis would concern a past periodization that I don't quite believe in, that lacks rigor in my opinion, but is not totally insignificant. In other words, it would possess, without being rigorously either true or false, a certain appearance in its favor, and an appearance that we should take account of. It just so happens that what some—not myself, above all not myself—have thought to fix or actively identify by the name of "ethical or political turn" in deconstructions in fact dates from the time when this thematics of the impossible became preponderant or massively insistent. The timing of this supposed, presumed turning point is not by accident and should give us pause. Now of course I do not believe, and I explained why, that there ever existed such an ethical, political turn: in the first place, because what others find reassuring in texts thus designated (e.g., but allow me not to list them all here: *Force of Law, Ethics of Discussion, Other Heading, Specters of Marx, Politics of Friendship*) had been in the works for a very long time; in the second place, these texts that people like so much to read and think about, and the concepts therein of responsibility, decision, justice that organize them, are anything but reassuring to those who wish to reassure themselves in ethics and politics. That said, it is not entirely false, if it is not true either, that the explanation with these classical figures of ethics, law, politics, responsibility, decision, and so on begins to gain a kind of immediate visibility, a kind of pedagogical insistence, that they did not before possess to the same degree. Above all, and here are the principal stakes of the conference I have been wanting to get at, this ethico-politico-juridical, indeed religious, phenomenality, this opening is indissociable from its very key, namely the urgency to reflect otherwise on the impossible. There you have it as for the emphasis or periodization.

As far as the taxonomy is concerned, the classification of themes and concepts, I am going once again to pretend to paint them before your eyes and to disentangle them from each another when they are inexplicably intertwined and in motion: they are just so many figures of the impossible. There you have the essence of what I wanted to say tonight: figures. These figures, I give them a few names, about a half-dozen names, in a list by definition open-ended. They are the figures of invention, the event, the gift, the pardon, the aporia of decision, and the "perhaps."

In the brief analysis that follows I will content myself with running along the edge that forms the union and the separation of the possible and the impossible, the dash between them—the im-possible as possible or the possible as im-possible—a hyphen, an impossible that is not simply negative and that questions the *as*, the phenomenological *als*, possible as impossible.

I begin with invention, invention in art, in literature, as well as technical invention, technoscientific invention or the invention of the other. For it is by working through this terribly equivocal concept of invention that I attempted, more than fifteen years ago, to formulate this intriguing intrigue between deconstruction and the possible as im-possible. The only quotation I will allow myself this evening comes from an essay on invention, "Psyche or the Inventions of the Other," and reads as follows:

> Deconstruction at its most rigorous has never presented itself as a stranger to literature nor, above all, as something that is possible. It loses nothing in admitting itself to be impossible, and those who would too quickly rejoice over it lose nothing for waiting. The danger in the task of deconstruction would rather be its possibility, the danger of becoming an available body of regimented procedures, of practical methods, of accessible paths. The interest of deconstruction, of its force and its desire [and I underline the word *desire* for reasons which will become apparent later], if it possesses any, is a certain experience of the impossible, experience of the other as invention of the impossible, in other words, as the only possible invention.

What is the aporia here in its driest, most abstract form? Well, in whatever domain it may be, an invention that could only invent what it is possible to invent would invent nothing. Let's suppose the historical analysis of a paradigm in the sense of Kuhn or an episteme in the sense of Foucault, some "themata," or as they say, an historical analysis of givens, a configuration that explains that at a certain moment an invention was made possible, that it became practicable under certain conditions, technical, economic, social, psychological, scientific, et cetera. According to this analysis that I hold to be necessary and, to be sure, legitimate, and which we must push as far as possible, the invention of this possible will have done nothing but make explicit, reveal, deploy that which was already there, potentially, programmatically in reserve. And of course what then appears as an invention whose responsibility and initiative are attributed to the creativity of the inventor or inventors, this "invention" will have invented nothing. In other words, for an invention worthy of its name to be possible, it must invent the impossible, that which appears as impossible. And to invent the impossible, it must do otherwise than deploy the potentialities that a subject or a community of subjects could posit as properly their own: their powers, their know-how, their force, their *Vermögen*, their *Möglichkeit* proper. I use these German words because I would like to come back to them at the end. Hence the conclusion I thought it necessary to draw in "Psyche or the inventions of the Other," namely that invention, if there be such a thing, must always be inven-

tion of the other; a double genitive. That invention may not be possible except as impossible and come from the other, indeed from the other irreducibly other than myself, does not mean that the aporia prohibits invention and that there does not exist such an event worthy of its name. To the contrary, this means that the event of invention, if there be such a thing, can never present itself as such to a theoretical or observing judgment, to a historical judgment of the observing sort, a determining judgment, permitting itself to say: invention exists, it presents itself, it falls to this subject, to this community of subjects capable of claiming it as their own, of reappropriating it for themselves. Invention as the invention of the other is not possible except as impossible, as exceeding the observing reappropriation of whoever would be tempted to say: I, we, have invented this or that. And to paraphrase what I was at that time trying to show, I would say that if invention is of course still possible, if it is the invention of the possible, then invention would conform to its concept, to the dominant traits of its concept and word, only insofar as invention, paradoxically, invents nothing: when the other does not appear in it, when nothing comes to the other and from the other. For the other is not the possible. It would thus be necessary to say that the only possible invention would be the invention of the impossible. "But the invention of the impossible is impossible," objects another. Indeed. But it is the only thing possible, it is the only possibility. An invention must announce itself as the invention of what did not seem possible, without which it does nothing but make explicit a program of the possible, in the economy of the same.

In the seminars or texts that began exactly twenty years ago in 1978, even if some of them were not published until later, I had tried to formulate an analogous aporia on the topic of the impossible possibility of the gift or the pardon. To put it once again in the driest, most formal, most economical way possible, a gift must break precisely with every economy to be possible. It must remove itself from every horizon of exchange, restitution, and retribution, and even from any recognition, any gratitude. Which means that if the gift appears, if it is determined as gift, whether from the side of the receiver or the side of the giver, if it presents itself phenomenologically as gift, as such, it is instantly destroyed. For then, no matter how symbolically, it is dragged into the circle of exchange, into compensation, reciprocity, et cetera. Thus the gift can never be possible as present. There is never anything that can represent itself as gift to consciousness, to the determining judgment or some such teleology. This does not mean, as some have too hastily concluded, that I do not believe that gift giving ever takes place. I say only that these events, if they take place, must appear as impossible, must exceed in any case any possibility of appearing and of presenting itself in the present as such to a consciousness or even to an unconscious. In other words, here we see the introduction to an unparalleled aporia, an aporia of logic rather than

a logical aporia; here we see an impasse of the undecidable through which a decision cannot not pass, through which a responsibility must pass, and which, far from paralyzing this new thinking of the possible as impossible, rather puts it into motion. This aporia ensures it its rhythm and breathing, systole/diastole, syncopation, pulse of the possible/impossible, of the impossible as condition of the possible. And from the very heart of the impossible, one would thus hear the pulsing drive of what is called deconstruction. The condition of possibility would thus give one chance as possible but by depriving it of its purity. And the law of this spectral contamination, the impure law of this impurity, is what one must never cease reelaborating.

For example, a promise must be able not to be kept. And this in the end concerns the means of the performative, too—well, the possibility of failure, of infelicity, is not only inscribed in the preliminary risk, not only in the condition of possibility of the success of a performative (and the gift is also a kind of performative). A promise must threaten not to be kept, to become a threat even to be a free promise and even to be successful; it must continue to mark the event, even when it succeeds, as the trace of an impossibility, sometimes its memory and always its haunting. This impossibility is not the simple contrary of the possible. It supposes and also gives itself over to possibility, traverses it, and leaves in it the trace of its removal. There is nothing fortuitous about the fact that this discourse on the conditions of possibility, at the very place where its claims are haunted or tormented by impossibility, can spread to all the places where performativity, indeed pure factual history (beyond every performativity or performative power), would be at work: the event, invention, the gift, the pardon, hospitality, friendship, the promise, the experience of death, et cetera. By contagion and without limit, it contaminates in the end every concept and undoubtedly the concept of concept.

To give without the hope of knowing, recognizing, seeing my gift recognized or reciprocated by some sign of recognition or gratitude, I must do the impossible without knowing it, without knowing, beyond all knowing. The event, this event here, if there be such a thing, is not the actualization of a possible, a simple passing to the act, a realization, an effectualization. It is more than a performative. The event must announce itself as impossible or its possibility must be threatened.

When I say *must* it is meant to indicate that there exists here as well a necessity, a law. We must rethink this relationship, this hyphen or union between the possible and the impossible. You have seen that this impossibility of the gift is not negative. In spite of its terrifying aporia, it seems to prohibit any gift from presenting itself or appearing possible, to give itself up to be known; well, the desire of the gift, the thinking of the gift, beyond the knowing of the gift, does

not give up, and does not give up on the impossible. It is the experience of the impossible that makes it so that I never give, that I can never say with assurance or complacency: I give, it is I who am giving. But what I give is in a way given always as the event of which I spoke a moment ago: in the name of the other, as the gift of the other. And I am trying at this very moment to deploy the same logic on the topic of the pardon, which moreover it is already a question of at the end of *Given Time: Counterfeit Money* concerning Baudelaire.

I purposely more than once underlined the word *aporia* in the exposition of the two examples I just gave: invention as event, the gift. I did so for several reasons: first to indicate, I cannot do more here, that this thinking of the aporia, the nonpassive endurance of the aporia—which I systematize, recall and also project in the book bearing the title *Aporias*—shows the affinity between the possible and the impossible, the principle of ruin and chance, a chance that is given, but also the forms and the political stakes of this aporia. Second, this reflection on the aporia is very different, to say the least, from that of Paul de Man who often uses the word *aporia* and predicament, but in a space much more linguistic or rhetorical than I do myself: the reflection on the aporia as aporetical experience of the event that I propose remains marked by this questioning of logocentrism, liguisticism, and rhetoricism, which was the ABC of deconstruction thirty years ago. I mark this difference from Paul de Man and do so today mostly because I did not want to do so at a time when it would have been indecent and overinterpreted by de Man's pack of enemies that I wanted nothing to do with. Finally, the choice of Tansey's painting, *Derrida Queries de Man*, marks an apostrophe of this genre on the edge of the abyss. And if the aporia was not circumscribable as an effect of language or rhetoric, the same question, the same query could be addressed to Lacan precisely on the topic of the impossible, of what he himself calls the impossible. The book that bears the title *Aporias* extends the possible as impossible also to love, friendship, the gift, the other, witnessing, hospitality, and so on.

In recalling its many stages, it is undoubtedly here that the logical trajectory of this deconstruction of the possible is assembled or formalized in the most explicit fashion. But in questioning the Heideggerian discourse on death, on its possibility as *(als)* impossibility, this trajectory is closest to a meditation of death. Thus Heidegger defines death: the possibility of an impossibility. The analysis then leads one to call into question the phenomenological authority of the *as such*, precisely, concerning the possible *as* impossible. The as, the *als*, signifies that possibility is *at the same time* unveiled and penetrated by the impossible. This is not merely paradoxical possibility, a possibility of the impossible: it is possibility *as* impossibility. This possibility as impossibility, this death as the most proper possibility of Heidegger's *Dasein* as much as its most proper impossibility, there

we see it at the same time "unveiled" and unveiled by Heidegger's "penetrating" advance.

But here at least we have the schema for a possible/impossible question. What difference is there between, on the one hand, the possibility of appearing *as such* of the possibility of an impossibility and, on the other, the impossibility of appearing as such of the same possibility? And it is in the aporetical logic of this necessity that we thus come to think a kind of law of impossibility. For example, if one must endure the aporia, if such is the law of every decision, of every responsibility, of every duty without obligation, then the aporia cannot ever be simply endured *as such*. The ultimate aporia, I would say, is the impossibility of the aporia *as such*, the impossibility for it to appear *as such*, phenomenologically. And the reserves of this statement appear incalculable: it is uttered and reckoned with the incalculable itself.

I come now to our last theme, decision, without which indeed there would be neither responsibility nor ethics, neither rights nor politics—with or without an ethical or political turn. The aporia of which I am speaking, the non-passive endurance of this aporia—well, not only is it not negative, not only is it being in paralysis at an impasse (for the etymological figure of *aporia* seems to say "dead end," "nonpath"), but it is, when understood in a certain way, the condition of possibility of everything it seems to make impossible. How does one schematize the possible decision as impossible, such as I try to elaborate it in diverse places and above all in *Specters of Marx*, *Politics of Friendship*, most notably against the decisionism of Carl Schmitt? A decision, as its name indicates, must interrupt, cut, rend a continuity, the fabric or the ordinary course of history. To be free and responsible, it must do other and more than deploy or reveal a truth already potentially present, indeed a power or a possibility, an existent force. I cannot decide except when this decision does more and other than manifest my possibilities, my power, my capacity-to-be, the predicates that define me. As paradoxical as it may seem, it is thus necessary for me to receive from the other, in a kind of passivity without parallel, the very decision whose responsibility I assume. What I decide for the other, he decides as much for me, and this singular substitution of two or more than two irreplaceable singularities seems at the same time impossible and necessary. This is the sole condition of possibility of a decision worth its name, if ever there were such a thing: a strangely passive decision that does not in the least exonerate me of responsibility. Quite the opposite.

And you have undoubtedly noticed that for all these "impossibles"—invention, the event, the gift, decision, responsibility, et cetera—I always cautiously say, "if there be such a thing." Not that I doubt that there ever were such a thing, nor do I affirm that it does not exist, simply if there be—this is why I say *if there be* such a thing—it cannot become the object of an assertive judgment, nor of

an observing knowledge, of an assured, founded certainty, nor of a theorem, if you like, nor a theory. There is no theory on this topic. It cannot give rise to a theoretical proof, to a philosophical act of the cognitive sort, but only to testimonies that imply a kind of act of faith, indeed an act of "perhaps." Perhaps. Nietzsche says, and I quote him in *Politics of Friendship*, that the philosophers of the future will be the thinkers of the "dangerous perhaps." Philosophy, in its Hegelian form, has always tried to disdain or ridicule the category of "perhaps." The "perhaps" would be for the classical philosopher an empirical and approximate modality that the philosopher should begin by being right about. It would be incompatible with the thinking of the necessary and the law. Now without wanting to *rehabilitate* this category or this modality of "perhaps"—I say *perhaps* rather than *maybe* in order, precisely, to liberate this reference to the event, the happening, from the thinking of being—I would be tempted to see in it only the element itself in which a possible/impossible decision always takes place, if it takes place. A decision must be exceptional and incalculable; it must make an exception; a decision that does not make an exception, that does nothing but repeat or apply the rule, would not be a decision. And perhaps the haunting of the incalculable exception could here indicate the passage, if not the way out. I say *the haunting* because the spectral structure is here the law both of the possible and of the impossible, and of their strange intertwining. The exception is always required. And the same goes perhaps for this stubborn "perhaps" in its modality, which is elusive but irreducible to any other, fragile and yet indestructible. Reflecting on the "perhaps," a reflection on the "perhaps," perhaps gets under way the only possible reflection on the event.

When the impossible is made possible, the event takes place—possibility of the impossible—and here it is, incontestably, the paradoxical form of the event. If an event is possible, that is, if it inscribes itself within the conditions of possibility, if it does nothing but make explicit, unveil, reveal, accomplish what is already possible, then it is not an event. For an event to take place, for it to be possible, as event, as invention, it must be the arrival of the impossible. There we see a poor proof, an evidence that is nothing less than evident. It is this evidence that will have never left off guiding us here between the possible and the impossible, and that often drove us to speak of conditions of impossibility.

Without concluding, I conclude on a note that might seem slightly theological if one lends his guard to it, but which is intended here to call upon, for thinking, the impossible possible and the more than impossible, and more than a language. Already the word *fall*, *Fall*, resonated in more than one language, and deconstruction has always been defined precisely in its irreducible plurality—"Deconstructions: The Im-possible"—as more than a language. I recall having said one day that if, God forbid, I had to provide a minimal definition of decon-