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Immanence, Transcendence and the Trace:
Derrida Between Levinas and Spinoza

Pierre Macherey once remarked that “no philosophy is ever innocent of its effects,”¹ a statement that captures something of what Derrida would later call spectrality. Not only is the meaning of a philosophical text not confined to an instance in space and time, but it lives on beyond itself, beyond its borders. In this sense, philosophical texts not only linger on after their time, haunting that which supposedly succeeds them, but they themselves are reciprocally haunted by the very forms of their after life, not only reproduced but remade, rewritten as something other than they originally were. This dissemination of effects (to link Macherey, Althusser and Derrida), however, is not the spontaneous generation of something new (something of which the text would therefore be “innocent” in Macherey’s terms), but rather a reordering of the diversity of the text itself, of the precise arrangement of this diversity, the relations of domination and subordination between the forces of which it is composed. We can speak of a text as a singular being insofar as its parts combine to produce effects, without this singularity in any way denoting a homogeneity or anything other than an encounter of forces that enter into a certain combination which in no way negates or overcomes their diversity.

With this in mind, we can perhaps turn to a specific text by Derrida in which he undertakes one of the first attempts to think the very notion of spectrality through the concept of the trace. The trace was, of course, a concept designed to problematize the notion of origin: the trace is the mark of that which has never been present. In the case of the opposition of writing and speech it is the letter before which there is nothing, no spirit or mind to function as its origin or as the repository of its meaning. In the same way, Derrida reminds us in *Specters of Marx* that in the *Communist Manifesto*, communism first appears in the text and in history as a specter, as that which has already and simultaneously not yet been. The trace allows us to think the conjunction of the always already and the not yet, which is the defining characteristic of the spectral as Derrida understands it.

When we move, however, from this general consideration of the trace to

the specific textual form in which it is “embodied,” we find, (and this really shouldn’t come as a surprise) that the writing of the trace in *Of Grammatology*² is itself “haunted.” The sentence by Macherey with which I began may prove very useful in this context: the spectrality of the text is not the preservation of its meaning or the persistence of an identity after its time, but the dissemination of effects whose divergence cannot be transcended, the effects of the way in which the text both is and is not itself. In this way it is worth recalling the absolutely opposing readings of the trace by Althusser and Foucault:³ what is it, in Derrida’s text, that allows the trace to be read as a resolute materialism of the letter and the ultimate ruse of a theological transcendence? Macherey’s approach rules out any dismissal of these interpretations as “misreadings.” By holding the text responsible for its readings (which become not subjective interpretations, more or less adequate to the objective reality of the text, but effects), he compels us to determine the way and by what the text is haunted.

In order then to consider the spectrality of Derrida’s own text, I want to turn to a particularly difficult passage in *Grammatology*, namely the conclusion of the text’s most extended treatment of the trace. Derrida begins this section by asking “Why the trace? What has guided us in the choice of this word?”⁴ His answer to these questions initially takes the form of a general observation about philosophy: “The justification” of the term trace “can therefore never be absolute and definitive. It responds to a state of forces and represents (*traduit*) a historical calculation. Thus, apart from those we have already defined, a certain number of givens pertaining to the discourse of the epoch have progressively imposed this choice on us.”⁵ This understanding of philosophy as consisting of a relationship of forces in which one must calculate one’s intervention (a notion shared with if not derived from Althusser), necessitates a thinking through of the struggle and an inventory of forces in order to determine one’s potential allies, not in some abstract sense, but in the present theoretical conjuncture (an Althusserian phrase that Derrida himself would use in “Structure, Sign and Play”). The word “trace” allows him to ally himself with some of the most effective theoretical forces currently in play, even as he maintains his theoretical independence.

There are a number of identifiable sources of Derrida’s concept of the trace: Husserl’s notion of genesis, Heidegger’s “*Spur*” as developed in “*Der Spruch des Anaximander*,” Freud and Nietzsche (among others): in fact, he will discuss these sources elsewhere⁶. In *Grammatology*, how-

ever, he singles out one figure whose use of the trace summarizes and surpasses that of all the others named above in its radicality: Levinas. The privileged relation between the two philosophers is well-known and documented : moreover, each has written about the other. The subsequent history of their philosophical relation has, however, contributed to a generalized overlooking of an essential problem in the genealogy that Derrida constructs: for Levinas the trace is the trace of absolute alterity disrupting the identity of the I (*le moi*), while for Derrida the trace is the trace of writing that precedes speech. Commentators have tended to stress the affinities between the two thinkers, overlooking what might be dismissed as the obvious. Levinas's text is "theological" in the sense that Derrida gives the term in *Grammatology*, a defense by means of the trace of an irreducible transcendence, while in Derrida's text (and in the texts of this period), the terms "theological" and "transcendental" (whether in the phenomenological or other senses) function in a way that closely resembles Althusser's use of the term "ideology" in the same period: the terms are negative, denoting not merely error or illusion, but entire systems of error and illusion that themselves more or less directly serve political or at least strategic purposes. I want to argue that in addition to what became a theoretical rapprochement between the two (with Derrida moving closer to Levinas's positions), the "overlooking" of this discrepancy takes place first of all in Derrida's text and that the critics' oversight is an objective effect of the text. Of course, the Derrida-Levinas alliance has the effect of demarcating them from those who do not belong to their camp: the enemy.

For Derrida, in *Grammatology*, the enemy is two thousand years of metaphysics and theology, the age of the sign, of logocentrism and onto-theology, an enemy so ubiquitous that it can only be attacked from within, using its own resources against it.⁷ There are names and texts in this tradition that are marked as particularly important: Plato and Aristotle, of course, the Scholastics, Descartes, Hegel, as well as certain moderns, such as Saussure and Levi-Strauss. Still others are distinguished from the first category by virtue of their deliberate questioning of this tradition, although they cannot escape it, lapsing back into metaphysics at the very moment that believe themselves free of it, because perhaps they believe it possible to free themselves: Husserl, Nietzsche, even Heidegger. It is in the critique of this second camp, the camp of metaphysics dissimulating itself as other, as its own critique, and which is thus the most powerful form of metaphysics, that Derrida begins to approach Levinas, even if they have

arrived at a certain position from opposite starting points. Thinking “the presence-absence of the trace” forces us to confront all “the problems of letter and spirit and body and soul” which the trace “bears within itself.”⁸ If the entire history of metaphysics “has necessarily tended toward the reduction of the trace,”⁹ this metaphysics has not only taken the form of the “dualisms” and “theories of the immortality of the soul or spirit” in which the material trace would be reduced to an immaterial originary presence, but also of “monisms, spiritualist or materialist, dialectical or vulgar”¹⁰ that seek to reduce absence to the plenitude of a present. Thus, logocentrism does not simply take the form of a philosophy that begins with the origin of the world in God (or spirit or mind), that is, a moment of creation, no matter how secularized, but may also appear in the form of a philosophy that refuses every notion of creation and thus every origin as source and guarantee of meaning and truth. Derrida argues that the latter are nothing more than “Infinitist theologies” which are “still logocentrisms, whether they are creationisms or not.”¹¹ He seems in part to be indicting a certain materialism, a philosophy of matter that is nothing more than an inversion of spiritualism, in that it puts matter in place of logos while leaving the metaphysical system intact. “Infinitist theologies” which may not be creationisms, would appear to point elsewhere. A first time reader might at this point expect the reference to be to Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity* (1961), in which the concept of totality is subjected to a critique from the perspective of infinity, a critique along the lines of Derrida’s earlier essay “Violence and Metaphysics.” Instead, as becomes immediately clear, Derrida is referring to another philosopher, and not only any other philosopher, but the other, Levinas’s other, his nemesis, a philosopher inassimilable to the tradition that Levinas invokes and therefore marked by the irreducible alterity that defines the trace as understood by Levinas: Spinoza, that other thinker of the primacy, of *écriture over parole*.

And, as Levinas argued in “*Le cas Spinoza*” (1956), it was precisely Spinoza’s writing on Scripture that made him an “anti-Jewish” thinker, guilty, in Levinas’s eyes, of a certain “treason” against his own people. It is not that Spinoza became a Christian or even that he embraced Christian theology; Levinas is clear that this is not the case. On the contrary, Spinoza believed that Christianity had to be surpassed in favor of a universalist rationalism. This argument itself, however, was based on the construction in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (hereafter *TTP*) of a rigorous teleology in which, just as Christianity is a stage on the way to

reason, so Judaism is a stage on the way to Christianity, which must be superior to Judaism insofar as it is closer to the universalist rationalism in which all philosophy must culminate. The significance and importance of Judaism is therefore exhausted and surpassed and so, claims Levinas, Spinoza “subordinates the truth of Judaism to the revelation of the New Testament.”¹² Let us leave to the side for the moment the fact that this is hardly a defensible reading of Spinoza’s text and that Levinas’s Spinoza sounds very Hegelian. Levinas will take the argument further and in a way directly relevant to the concerns of *Grammatology*.

In “*Avez-vous relu Baruch*” (1966),¹³ a review of Sylvain Zac’s magisterial study, *Spinoza et l’interprétation de l’Écriture*, Levinas reveals himself to be a very perspicacious reader of the *TTP* not in spite of his animosity towards the “anti-Jewish” philosopher, but precisely because of it. He saw, as Althusser did nearly contemporaneously, that Spinoza’s account of the ceremonies and rituals that gave the Hebrew state its longevity was a description of the most effective forms of servitude, those that work on the mind and body simultaneously, a description in which, moreover, there was no place at all for a freely willed and disinterested obedience, or even for any spirit at all. Spinoza had reduced the originary Spirit to what were only its expressions. In the same way (and here the irony of Derrida’s use of Spinoza and Levinas becomes explicit), Spinoza had reduced Scripture to a mere text, renouncing the “millennial effort” (Levinas is particularly critical of Spinoza’s disregard for the Talmud) “to surpass the letter of the text and even its apparent dogmatism in order to recover the completely spiritual truth”¹⁴. The essential dividing line for Levinas (and this shows the extraordinary, although negative, importance of Spinoza for Levinas, as if he were almost the organizing principle for Levinas’s theologico-political positions) is not between the “believing and unbelieving”¹⁵ Jew (one might well question the use of this alternative in place of the more traditional opposition of the observant and the non-observant), but between “those who take the Scriptures – whether they are judged genial or naïve – to be texts among others and those who take them, despite the trace of history (*devenir*) that they bear, as an essential form of the spirit.”¹⁶ In a striking about-face, Levinas has thus made Spinoza the thinker of the trace and of the scandal of the irreducibility of the trace as originary non-origin, the thinker, then, of a grammatology of the Scriptures.

All of this is held in abeyance, as Derrida moves from the name Levinas to the name Spinoza, in an interval of a single page. The approach to

Spinoza is indirect, but not at all gradual; in fact it is abrupt and elliptical. Even before Derrida introduces the proper name a few lines later, the spirit of Spinoza has already made its presence known. We can hear in Derrida's indictment of "infinetist metaphysics" as carrying out "a reduction of difference in presence" the very terms of Hegel's critique of Spinoza's infinite substance as an "Oriental Theory of absolute identity" in which "all particularity and individuality pass away in the one substance."¹⁷ For Hegel, substance was a bad infinity in which all particularity and difference were negated. In Derrida's terms, positive infinity is the means of a "sublimation" and "translation" of the trace of difference. Thus, one cannot properly speak of a "theological prejudice" that may or may not contaminate "infinetist" philosophies: the fact that they, in all their variants, function to reduce difference, means that they are all "logocentrism, whether they are creationisms or not"¹⁸ Before one can object that Spinoza is perhaps, above all, the thinker of singularity, going so far as to introduce the concept, which would appear to be deconstructive in precisely Derrida's sense of "singular essence," Derrida concretizes his charge in a single sentence that is part citation, part summary. It will be necessary to examine this sentence in some detail:

"Spinoza himself said of the understanding (*l'entendement*) – or logos – that it was the immediate infinite mode of substance, even calling it its eternal son in the Short Treatise."¹⁹

Let us begin with "Spinoza himself" (*Spinoza lui-même*): what is the rhetorical function of "himself?" Does Derrida mean to suggest that Spinoza is the perfect example of the "infinetist metaphysics" he has just discussed? Or, on the contrary, does "Spinoza himself" signify "even Spinoza," as if one would have expected Spinoza to be above any suspicion of "theology?" In this connection, we might recall the singular place of Spinoza in the work of Derrida's colleague, Louis Althusser. It was Althusser who declared in *Reading Capital* (1965) that Spinoza was "the first man ever to have posed the question of reading, and in consequence, of writing,"²⁰ – suggesting at the very least a certain relevance for a grammatology. But more than that, Althusser argued that "Spinoza's philosophy introduced an unprecedented theoretical revolution in the history of philosophy, probably the greatest philosophical revolution of all time," but that this revolution was subject to "a massive historical repression."²¹ This repression, far from being a detail or an episode, was constitutive of the subsequent history of philosophy which henceforth suffered from the reminiscence of a "repressed Spino-

zism.”²² Set in relation to Althusser’s text, Derrida’s statement appears precisely as an attempt to negate Spinoza’s difference and to reduce his philosophy to a relation of identity with the very metaphysical tradition that it was thought to subvert. In addition, it appears as an endorsement of Levinas’s anti-Spinozism, insinuating with the phrase “even calling it its eternal son” Spinoza’s supposed positing of Christianity as superior to Judaism in the teleological movement towards reason.

Those familiar with Spinoza will undoubtedly experience a certain defamiliarization in reading this passage: Derrida’s rendition of Spinoza is at odds with anything to be found in *the Ethics*. Indeed, the exact source of Derrida’s Spinoza is strangely obscured by the syntax and punctuation of the sentence itself: “Spinoza himself said of the understanding (*l’entendement*) –or logos – that it was the immediate infinite mode of substance, even calling it its eternal son in the *Short Treatise*.” It is difficult not to read the sentence in such a way that only the “calling it its eternal son” is found in the *Short Treatise*, while the remainder of the sentence refers to Spinoza’s doctrine more generally. Perhaps the omission of a comma after “son,” which would have the effect of attributing the entire doctrine to the *Short Treatise* (“Spinoza himself said of the understanding (*l’entendement*) – or logos – that it was the immediate infinite mode of substance, even calling it its eternal son, in the *Short Treatise*”) was accidental or inadvertent, even a printer’s error unnoticed by Derrida. Nevertheless, it serves to call attention to the fact, not only that the Spinoza Derrida reduces to a theological tradition is the Spinoza of an unfinished early work that is widely recognized to contain neo-Platonic elements not to be found in any of the later texts, but that Derrida has eliminated even from his summary of this passage from the early *Short Treatise* the positions that make it impossible to situate Spinoza in this tradition.²³ Even the verb tense, “Spinoza said” (*Spinoza disait*) is relatively unusual in *Grammatology*, where Derrida commonly uses the present tense to describe the activity of philosophers: “Heidegger le rapelle,”²⁴ “Rousseau répète”, and “Comme Husserl, Saussure détermine.”²⁵ The effect is both to consign Spinoza to the past and to generalize that which so consigns him as if he persisted in what he said throughout his work.

In any case, Derrida’s summary is extracted from Chapter 9, Part One of the *Short Treatise*. Here Spinoza seeks to explicate “those modes or creatures which immediately depend on, or have been created by God.”²⁶ Of these, “we know only two:” “motion in matter” and “intellect” (usually

rendered in French, as in Derrida's text, as "*l'entendement*").²⁷ Readers of the *Ethics* will immediately recognize the description of the attributes in the later work. In the *Short Treatise*, Spinoza goes on to describe the two modes, beginning, significantly, not with the intellect, but with matter in motion, which is infinite and eternal, "a Son, product or effect, created immediately by God."²⁸ Only then does he go on to discuss intellect, arguing "this too is a Son, product or immediate creature of God."²⁹ The context of the passage Derrida summarizes is thus important: in particular it allows us to see what Derrida has been forced to suppress in order to assimilate Spinoza into the logocentric tradition. The suppression, as might be expected leaves a trace, the trace, as Levinas put it, left by someone attempting to cover his tracks or traces, the trace of removing the trace. Derrida uses the definite article: the intellect is the immediate infinite mode of the divine substance, its eternal Son. In Spinoza's text, the intellect cannot be the mode, the Son, since it is preceded by another mode, one of an infinite number, but only "*een Zone*"³⁰ (one Son) among an infinity of others. Moreover, Spinoza immediately redefines "Son" by making it the first term in a series of equivalents: Son, product or effect. This in turn confers considerable interest on Derrida's rather Spinozist turn of phrase, "*L'entendement – ou logos*," the intellect – or logos. Derrida's equation of intellect and logos effects the disappearance of matter in motion which, in fact, precedes rather than follows the intellect in Spinoza's exposition and further reduces the infinite diversity of attributes or, in the *Short Treatise*, modes, to the univocity of the logos. Here, as elsewhere, Derrida follows Hegel's reading of Spinoza quite closely: the thinker of an Orientalized neo-Platonism for whom all difference and particularity are subsumed in the One from which they emanate. However, if we adhere to the letter of Spinoza's text, to declare the equivalence or identity of intellect and logos compels us simultaneously, to posit not the logos, but an infinite diversity of logoi, given that the intellect is only one of an infinite number of modes (to employ the language of the *Short Treatise*).

Further, there is the question of Derrida's (unexplained) italicizing of "immediate" in his definition of the Intellect as "the immediate infinite mode of substance." In *Grammatology*, of course, the term immediate applied to the relation between substance and its modes suggests precisely the presence of the Transcendental Signified to its signifier as the guarantee of its meaning and truth: God must be present to his creation to confer upon it its meaning. The notion of emanation in its Neo-Platonic sense

would appear to offer a privileged example of the necessary presence of the Origin to that which, even in its “fallen secondarity” (*la sécondarité échue*)³¹ and exteriority, expresses it. Spinoza does, in fact, employ the term “emanative” (Curley’s translation of *uytvloehende*) in the *Short Treatise*: “we say that in the God is the emanative or productive (*daarstellende*) cause of his works (*werken*).”³² He immediately qualifies this statement by adding “He is an immanent not transitive cause.”³³ It is the very notion of immanence that is suppressed in Derrida’s dismissal of Spinoza as the practitioner of an infinitist theology that may also be Christian. The idea of the immanent cause as developed in the *Ethics* would appear to be extremely relevant to the project of a grammatology, insofar as it marks an attempt to think without transcendence and beyond the categories of inside/outside that for Derrida permit the “debasement” of writing. In fact, certain of Derrida’s formulations at the beginning of *Grammatology* are startlingly appropriate to Spinoza’s notion of the immanent cause. We might consider, for example, Derrida’s description of “the movement of language:” if we can continue to speak of an origin, it is an origin that “effaces itself in its own production,”³⁴ effacing itself as outside of and prior to that which it produces in the very process of production itself. Is this not an accurate description of the movement of substance itself as understood by Spinoza? Substance is nothing other than and outside of the infinity of attributes that it produces which, by that fact cease to be secondary expressions of a more primary present, a creation that only dimly reflects its creator. In the same way, we can imagine re-writing the phrase: “the speech that is already in itself a writing,” as the creator that is already in itself creation, God, who by virtue of his very perfection, is already in himself nothing other than the nature he has created. With these indications in mind, we may perhaps be permitted to cite another of Althusser’s observations on the repression of Spinoza: “We are familiar with enough historical examples, beginning with that of Spinoza, where men have worked furiously to wall up forever and bury deep in the earth the sources made to quench their thirst, but intolerable to their fear.”³

Thus, the importance of the sentence concerning the *Short Treatise* in *Grammatology*, one of the very few places in the entirety of Derrida’s voluminous oeuvre in which Spinoza is even mentioned, is not that Derrida, intentionally or unintentionally, has misread Spinoza: this would hardly render him unique in the history of philosophy. The point is rather that Derrida had to have searched long and hard to find in Spinoza a passage

that would place him at such a distance from Derrida's own project and then only at the expense of a summary that is incompatible with what Spinoza actually says. If, as I have argued, this sentence from *Grammatology* is not merely a curiosity or a momentary lapse in an otherwise rigorous chain of arguments but possesses the value of a symptom, we can now begin to specify what it is that makes Spinoza, otherwise an available "source" and resource for Derrida, intolerable, a figure evoked only to the extent necessary (a single sentence) to demonstrate his "complicity" (a Derridean term whose function merits some scrutiny) with a theological tradition and thereby justify his exclusion. But what is it that makes Spinoza intolerable? It is certainly not because his thought is so distant or "other" in relation to Derrida's. On the contrary, Spinoza is intolerable to the extent that his thought is already in Derrida's text and its arguments, and set in inescapable and insoluble conflict with another tendency that traverses *Grammatology*: it is not only possible but necessary to attach a name to this tendency, which is as fiercely sought out and uncovered as Spinoza's is buried: Levinas. Derrida's text is marked by the conflict between Levinas and Spinoza, not insofar as these proper names represent opposing doctrines themselves incarnate in two distinct sets of texts to which Derrida would be only extrinsically related, but rather as signs of irreducibly antagonistic tendencies within *Grammatology* itself, the alternatives that it poses without recognizing them as such, two forces separated by a gap that widens even as the text appears to close upon itself in its coherence.

At no point is this gap clearer, the antagonism that haunts the text more visible, than in Derrida's exposition of the trace. It is here, in some of the most important passages in the text, that Derrida expresses a certain anxiety about the possibilities of a misreading of the trace, and not just any misreading but a misreading that would mistake for "metaphysical" or "theological" what in fact is, Derrida insists, "the contestation of metaphysics itself." In the section "The Outside is the Inside" ("is" is crossed out in the text), Derrida argues, as we have already noted, that, "speech is already in itself a writing."³⁶ There exists a certain materiality of speech, a materiality of which the graphic nature of writing would be but one modality, in that before the voice itself we can discover no origin no matter how far back we inquire, no origin present to the voice, the ideality of spirit or consciousness that would confer meaning upon speech. Speech is therefore itself a trace, mark, sound, force, vibration before

which there is nothing. This absence of origin suspends any possibility of the overcoming of difference and its reduction to identity:

“One cannot think the instituted trace without thinking the retention of difference in a structure of reference (*renvoi*) in which difference would appear as such and thus permit a certain freedom of variation between full terms. The absence of an other here and now, of an other transcendental present, of an other origin of the world would appear as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence in the presence of the trace, is not a metaphysical formula substituted for a scientific concept of writing.”³⁷

Although Derrida will take this argument quite a bit further, it is worth examining this complex passage in some detail before we continue to follow his path. Only the absence of another transcendental presence will permit the appearance of difference as such, of difference that by virtue of the absence of any origin to which all differences could be referred and reconciled into ultimate identity, becomes irreducible. But at this point, we must heed his warning: there exists a danger that “the ultra-transcendental text will still resemble the precritical text for which it is mistaken”³⁸ To simply abolish the transcendental origin would be to lapse into a theory of the plenitude of the present, a present identical to itself. Thus the next sentence: the absence of the origin, of another presence, must be preserved, must be made present and recognized as “irreducible” for the critique of transcendence not to become “precritical.” This very sentence, however, is structured as a denial: the exposition of this irreducible absence which must be allowed to stand, reminding us, never allowing us to forget, that absence which allows the present to be what it is, is “not a metaphysical formula,” but on the contrary, Derrida hastens to add, “the contestation of metaphysics itself.”³⁹

At the risk of being labeled precritical, one might well ask why Derrida would assume that the declaration of the absence of origin would be taken as a metaphysical formula. After all, it could be argued that from a strategic point of view, that is, as an intervention in a certain theoretical conjuncture, to use Althusser’s phrase, it is necessary to mark the place of the absent origin as the site of an absence which must be vigilantly guarded, and in fact occupied in order to be kept absent because, to cite Althusser again, “in philosophy, every space is always already occupied.”⁴⁰ New origins, new forms of transcendence as secular and as “scientific” as one could imagine will fill the void, operating all the more effectively to transmute difference into identity. Indeed, this would appear to be

the strategic function of the concept of the archi-trace, designed in some way to prevent the emergence of other versions of the origin and thus to forestall the reduction of the trace proper to metaphysics. Why then the assumption that the trace could be read as “metaphysical?”

The answer is to be found a few lines later, in a passage in which Derrida repeats the gesture of denial or negation we just noted: “this formulation is not theological, as one might too hastily believe” (*comme on pourrait le croire avec quelque précipitation*). What is this formulation that we might be precipitated to read, and that therefore might precipitate us into reading it as theological? It is a formulation in which the absence of the other here and now, the absence of an other world, becomes itself an other, or, in fact, the other. This other is before and determining as other not only the existent (*l'étant*) but even the Being of the existent (*L'Être de l'étant*):

The trace in which the relation to the other is marked articulates its possibility over the entire field of the existent (*le champ de l'étant*) which metaphysics has determined as being present on the basis of the concealed movement of the trace. It is necessary to think the trace before the existent. But the movement of the trace is necessarily concealed, it produces itself as concealed. When the other announces itself as such, it presents itself in its own dissimulation. This formulation is not theological . . .⁴¹

The juxtaposition of these two passages, apparently similar in content as well as form, each concluding with a denial, reveals quite clearly the stakes of the opposition between Spinoza and Levinas for Derrida's text. For, if we might too hastily take the last citation as theological, it is certainly because Derrida has moved from the absence of other to the other beyond not only the existent (*l'étant*), not only beyond presence-absence and therefore beyond Being itself, but to the other of Levinas whose essay, “*La trace de l'autre*,” Derrida finds to be one of the most “efficacious” uses of the concept of the trace in contemporary discourse. Significantly, the discussion of Levinas's work is as abbreviated as that of Spinoza's: Derrida arranges an encounter between the two that places their opposition at the heart of the philosophical present without in any way transcending this encounter in order to be able to adjudicate or even really describe it. Spinoza or Levinas: their conflict in *Grammatology* takes the form of two mutually exclusive notions of the trace. On the one hand, the trace of the absence of any other, the trace that renders impossible any evocation of the other and thus of any transcendence: the trace as mark of immanence, a concept whose absence from this text allows for the fictive resolution of

irreducibly antagonistic conceptions of the trace. On the other, the trace of the other, an irreducible transcendence that forever disturbs immanence and prevents it from closing upon itself. To use the terms “immanence” and “transcendence,” as I have done in order simultaneously to connect and differentiate Spinoza and Levinas requires that we note at the outset that the immanence of which Levinas speaks has nothing in common with that found in Spinoza’s text but the name. One could, of course, offer a theoretical justification for the movement from the trace of the absence of any other to the trace of the other as it takes place in the section of *Grammatology*. In fact, an explanation of this displacement is absolutely necessary if one is to avoid the risk of fatally compromising the very notion of the trace, thereby rendering it inoperable. Derrida’s discounting of the theological appearance is a gesture in that direction, signaling that Derrida is aware of the problem; moreover, the gesture alone probably sufficed for a certain period, in a certain conjuncture, in an objective alliance with certain other texts and other forces. Today, however, the sense in which *Grammatology* is haunted, differing from itself in its very movement, appears and is inescapably present.

Let us, however, begin with that gesture and the passage in which it is inscribed. What is the formulation that one might too hastily believe is theological, but in fact is not? “It is necessary to think the trace before the existent (*l’étant*). But the movement of the trace is necessarily concealed (*occulté*), it produces itself as self-concealment. When the other announces itself as such, it is present in the dissimulation of itself.”⁴² The too hasty assumption that this passage is theological would itself be based on a series of questions Derrida never acknowledges or addresses: what other does he refer to? Of what is it the other? We know from the previous passage the other is not an other world or presence to which writing could be reduced, and still less is it an idea or ideal. Why then are we enjoined within a few lines to imagine writing as the trace of the other? What is the function of the other of which writing would be the trace? Why does the trace require an other, even an absolutely absent other, when in a certain sense the trace prevents any positing of an other?

The reference to Levinas to whose “Trace of the Other” we are directed does nothing to resolve these difficulties but on the contrary multiplies them. Although contemporaneous with Derrida, Levinas writes from within a problematic whose terms cannot easily be translated into the idiom of *Grammatology*, except at the cost of ceasing to mean what they mean

for Levinas. “The Trace of the Other” begins with a critique of Western Philosophy as moved by a fundamental “horror of the other,” to the extent that the other cannot be reduced to the “immanence” of consciousness. And immanence has no meaning for Levinas apart from the interiority of an autonomous consciousness which attempts to establish itself as absolute. The very philosophy of being (and here Levinas takes Heidegger as representing the most developed form of this philosophy) remains committed to the idea that the consciousness to which being discloses itself acknowledges being by overcoming its alterity. Western philosophy has from its origins, or at least from Aristotle, tended to atheism, understanding God only insofar as he “would not trouble the autonomy of consciousness,” which even in seeking him would always return to itself. The only transcendence that such a philosophy can imagine is its own transcendence of being. Derrida goes so far as to call Levinas’s critique of the autonomy of “*le moi*” a “deconstruction of presence” which operates through “a deconstruction of consciousness,”⁴³ when in fact, “*La trace de l’autre*” can be read as a defense of a certain humanism in which the other can be no more than a “hole” in being as I live it, a fact that gives my ethical commitments their pathos and grandeur.

There have existed, however, other philosophies and other ways of thinking transcendence. In opposition to consciousness as the highest form of the being it transcends, there is “the enigmatic message of the beyond of Being.”⁴⁴ Here, Levinas invokes a philosopher who arguably does not belong to the Aristotelian-Scholastic tradition that culminates in Husserl and Heidegger: Plotinus. In opposition to Heidegger’s concept of the Being of beings which superficially resembles Plotinus’s One, Plotinus explores that which is beyond Being, that which is “foreign to definition and to limit, to place and time, foreign both to identity with the self and to difference in relation to the self.”⁴⁵ The One as understood by Plotinus is “absolutely other,” “absolutely other than being.”⁴⁶ It is also thus absolutely transcendent in relation to consciousness whose inner tranquility it can only disturb and disrupt. The absolutely other is also the face, the visitation or epiphany of the face that is already a dissimulation of the irreducibly other, whose comprehension would be “a hermeneutics and an exegesis.”⁴⁷ The activity of interpretation, however, would only discover that there is “no other world behind the world” (note Derrida’s assimilation of this phrase). “The beyond is precisely beyond the world,”⁴⁸ any world, and therefore beyond any unveiling or any signification. In this sense, the other can never

be the object of knowledge or thought (both of which operations reduce the other to the knowing consciousness or thinking thing and in so doing, reduce the other to the same), but rather of experience. It is here that the ethical dimension appears indissociable from Levinas's theorization of the ground of the relation between "*le moi*" and the other. The other presents itself in the opacity of the face by which it is occulted or the trace of that which will not only never be, but has not ever been present to leave the trace, which it has nevertheless left behind. This otherness is in fact so absolute that Levinas is able to move freely between the absolute otherness of the other person who transcends the immanence of my consciousness, and "a certain idea of God." To speak to or act towards the other is to give oneself or to leave oneself without the possibility of return. The opacity of the face, of the body, of the act, renders it impossible even to know if the gift was received. I (Levinas uses the first person) desire the other and desire to give to the other not because I am lacking: the self is full and complete. Instead the desire for the Other, "calls me into question, empties me of myself."⁴⁹ Desire thus conceived does not then fulfill the self but brings it new hunger. The self's discovery of an unknowable and unassimilable Otherness overturns its egoism and subverts any notion of the intentionality of consciousness and its adequation to being. The trace of the Other disrupts the immanence of consciousness, appearing to it as a commandment and a call to responsibility that cannot be ignored. It is the trace not of another world or another mind, but a "beyond" that is beyond world, beyond signification, absolute otherness and absolute absence beyond transcendence itself. The trace is the trace in this world of what is absolutely outside and irrecoverably absent, of an origin that never took place in that it is beyond place and time.

What is at stake in the conflictual development of the trace in Derrida's text, as well as the very antagonism that remains unresolved in his text now becomes clear. If the trace is the trace of the other, how are we to understand this other? Levinas asks us to abandon the oppositions of presence and absence, being and nothingness, which prevent us from comprehending the absolute transcendence of the other. Derrida summarizes his critique of ontology as the postulation of "the alterity of a past that has never been and could never be lived (my emphasis) in the originary or modified form of presence,"⁵⁰ neglecting perhaps to add that neither can this past be thought as absence, if we follow Levinas's argument. But Derrida has introduced a term here that is not to be found in Levinas's text: origin.

Does this mean that Levinas has freed himself of any metaphysics of the origin (or of metaphysics at all, for that matter)? On the contrary: we might go so far as to argue that the absence of the term is itself the effect of the presence of the concept. That absolute transcendence is beyond presence and absence, that it is “the beyond” of presence and absence, to use Levinas’s own terminology, hardly prevents it from functioning as an origin. The fact that it lies beyond time and space, beyond being itself, preserves it in its transcendence, prevents it from becoming confused with the world in relation to which it must always be the other, the irreducible other which, even in the form of a mere “hole” in being, irreversibly transforms the otherwise inescapable solitude of individual consciousness and its ethical correlate, egoism, conferring upon it the responsibility that is the mark of the human. This is Levinas’s critique of ontology: without the absolute transcendence of the absolutely other, being threatens to settle into itself and individuals remain imprisoned in their individual consciousness, neither caring for nor even really knowing others. Levinas posits a presence beyond presence, a presence that, however, cannot be “lived” (to use Derrida’s Husserlian phrase) as such, that is, reduced to a simple datum of consciousness, but can only be lived as other, or, more precisely, as the trace of the other.

Is Derrida’s concept of the trace Levinas’s? A single sentence provides the beginnings of an answer: “The trace is not simply the disappearance of origin, it means here – in the discourse we have upheld and in the path we have followed – that the origin has not even disappeared.”⁵¹ To stop here, that is, before the end of the sentence, is simply to repeat the terms of Levinas’s argument as sketched out above: the other is beyond presence/absence, appearance/disappearance, but is at the same time precisely the beyond (*l’au delà*). To say that, like Plotinus’s One, it exists beyond presence, that it is in a certain sense then present beyond presence/absence leaves the theoretical edifice intact. The origin is a void or an abyss that is by that fact no less an origin: it is precisely constitutive of the world.

To stop our analysis of the text at this point would be to allow Derrida’s theorization of the trace to be read as an opening to transcendence, precisely the devaluation of this world in favor of the absolutely other that he himself denounces as the theological strategy par excellence. The remainder of the sentence, however, abruptly breaks with Levinas’s notion of the trace or rather turns it against itself: “The origin is only ever constituted by a

non-origin, the trace, which becomes the origin of the origin.”⁵² At this point in Derrida’s text, absolute transcendence becomes absolute immanence, making visible a danger that haunts Levinas from start to finish, a disavowed Spinozism that must remain unthought and unthinkable for the text to be what it is. It is the movement of thought away from the One, from any monism or monotheism, and towards the infinite, towards God or Nature producing itself in its irreducible diversity without beginning or end, existing neither before nor outside of its creation, the thing and the idea that are one and the same, the origin that exists in and only in the trace of itself.

In these two pages of *Grammatology*, an encounter takes place: texts, propositions, words collide and from the collision a new composition emerges, irreducible to those that existed previously. Derrida insinuates himself between Spinoza and Levinas, holding them apart only to become the medium of a conjunction, the point around which a new singularity converges, composite and irreducible, an indelible trace without origin. The spirit that cannot exist outside of the bodily form it must adopt discovers that there was never a time before embodiment, not even the time of an absence, that the memory is an effect of the embodiment itself. The specters of Spinoza and Levinas, communicating outside of time as only specters can, haunt each other and haunt Derrida’s text, disturbing it, preventing it from settling upon itself. A singular thing breaks free: what is this reading, these words, but this composite being striving to be what it already is, persisting through new encounters and new conjunctions?

Notes

- 1 Pierre Macherey, “In a Materialist Way,” *French Philosophy Today*. Ed. Alan Montefiore. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) 136-154.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, *De la Grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967); *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).
- 3 For a discussion of the divergent readings of Derrida by Althusser and Foucault, see Warren Montag, “Specters Armed and Unarmed,” *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 68-81.
- 4 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 102.
- 5 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 103.
- 6 See Jacques Derrida, “La différance,” *Marges de la Philosophie* (Paris: Minuit, 1972), 3-29.

- 7 This marks a shift away from the positions outlined in "Violence and Metaphysics," *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and towards Levinas's more critical reading of Occidental philosophy.
- 8 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 104.
- 9 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 104.
- 10 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 104.
- 11 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 104.
- 12 Emmanuel Levinas, "Le cas Spinoza," *Difficile Liberté* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1976), 155.
- 13 Levinas, "Avez-vous relu Baruch?," 158-169.
- 14 Levinas, "Avez-vous relu Baruch?," 165.
- 15 Levinas, "Avez-vous relu Baruch?," 167.
- 16 Levinas, "Avez-vous relu Baruch?," 167.
- 17 G.W.F. Hegel. *Lectures in the Philosophy of History*. 3 vols. (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1974), 3:254.
- 18 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 104.
- 19 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 104.
- 20 Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: New Left Books, 1969), 16.
- 21 Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 102.
- 22 Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 102.
- 23 *The Short Treatise* presents other difficulties. The sole extant version is in Dutch (see Baruch Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925), 1:3-121) although it is almost certainly a translation of a Latin original. Moreover, Spinoza himself is not likely to have been the translator. Further, the text contains a number of editorial notes, written in the third person, marking certain passages as unsatisfactory and needing to be revised. Interestingly, the sentence singled out by Derrida is from one of these passages. See Edwin Curley's editorial note in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 46-53.
- 24 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 34.
- 25 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 60.
- 26 Gebhardt, *Opera*, 48, Curley, *Collected Works*, 91.
- 27 Gebhardt, *Opera*, 48, Curley, *Collected Works*, 91.
- 28 Gebhardt, *Opera*, 48, Curley, *Collected Works*, 92.
- 29 Gebhardt, *Opera*, 48, Curley, *Collected Works*, 92.
- 30 Gebhardt, *Opera*, 48.
- 31 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 16.
- 32 Gebhardt, *Opera*, 35, Curley, *Collected Works*, 80.
- 33 Gebhardt, *Opera*, 35, Curley, *Collected Works*, 80.
- 34 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 16.
- 35 Althusser, *Reading Capital*, 31.
- 36 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 16.
- 37 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 68.
- 38 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 90.
- 39 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 68.

- 40 Louis Althusser, *The Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists* (London: Verso, 1999).
- 41 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 69.
- 42 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 69.
- 43 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 103.
- 44 Emmanuel Levinas, "La trace de l'autre," *Tijdschrift voor filosofie*, September 1963, 608.
- 45 Levinas, "Trace," 608.
- 46 Levinas, "Trace," 608.
- 47 Levinas, "Trace," 613.
- 48 Levinas, "Trace," 617.
- 49 Levinas, "Trace," 612.
- 50 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 103.
- 51 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 90.
- 52 Derrida, *Grammatologie*, 90.