

# Interpretative violence and Jacques Derrida's professed love of ruins

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In this paper I examine two texts by Jacques Derrida, written at the beginning of 1990s, his "Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority" and *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins* written on the occasion of the exhibition Derrida curated at the Louvre. In the first text Derrida claims that deconstruction is justice because it is associated with the quest for reinterpretation of all criteriology, including all rules, associated with law. He goes on to explain how implementing the law in the name of justice is a violent procedure and necessarily entails at times a reinterpretation at other times a suspension or even destruction of law. I analyze his reading of *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self Portrait and Other Ruins* in the context of the preceding arguments about the force of law. Placing blindness at the origin of all drawing, favoring memory and not perception and arguing that sight and eyes are meant for crying, rather than seeing, Derrida promotes a violent reversal of values in art theory, in the name of justice. Promoting the marginal and the repressed is a result of an interpretative violence: Derrida puts at the highest rank of values criteria which are in a state of ruin, after years of repression and marginalization. Our filiations with them are consequently impure, contaminating, negotiated, bastard and violent. However, the ruin is not meant as a negative thing but as an index of mortality and an object of love.

**Key words:** interpretation, violence, law, art, ruins, Jacques Derrida

## Ερμηνευτική βία και η αγάπη του Jacques Derrida για τα ερείπια

Στο κείμενο αυτό εξετάζω δύο κείμενα του Jacques Derrida τα οποία συντάχθηκαν στις αρχές του 1990, αφενός το «Ισχύς του νόμου. Η μυστική θεμελίωση της εξουσίας», αφετέρου το *Μνήμες τυφλών. Η αυτοπροσωπογραφία και άλλα ερείπια* που γράφτηκε με αφορμή την έκθεση που επιμελήθηκε ο Derrida στο Λούβρο. Στο πρώτο κείμενο ο Derrida ισχυρίζεται ότι η αποδόμηση είναι δικαιοσύνη διότι συνδέεται με το αίτημα για επανερμηνεία όλων των κριτηρίων και κανόνων που σχετίζονται με το νόμο. Ο Derrida εξηγεί πώς η εφαρμογή του νόμου στο όνομα της δικαιοσύνης είναι μια βίαιη διαδικασία που απαραιτήτως συνεπάγεται τότε μια επανερμηνεία του νόμου τότε μια αναστολή και καταστροφή του. Προβιβάζω σε μια ανάλυση του κειμένου του *Μνήμες τυφλών. Η αυτοπροσωπογραφία και άλλα ερείπια* βασιζόμενος στις αναλύσεις του Derrida για την ισχύ του νόμου. Θεωρώντας την τυφλότητα ως την καταγωγή του σχεδίου, ευνοώντας την μνήμη έναντι της αντίληψης και προβάλλοντας το επιχείρημα ότι η όραση και τα μάτια δεν είναι για να βλέπουν αλλά για να κλαίνε, ο Derrida ουσιαστικά επιχειρεί μια βίαιη ανατροπή των μέχρι τώρα αξιών στη θεωρία της τέχνης, στο όνομα της δικαιοσύνης. Προάγοντας ό,τι μέχρι τώρα ήταν στο περιθώριο και είχε υποστεί καταπίεση είναι το αποτέλεσμα μιας ερμηνευτικής βίας: ο Derrida βάζει στην κορυφή, αξίες και κριτήρια που είναι σε κατάσταση ερειπίου μετά από χρόνια καταπίεσης και περιθωριοποίησης. Οι ίδιες οι σχέσεις μας με τις αξίες και τα κριτήρια αυτά, δεν είναι ως εκ τούτου αμιγείς αλλά είναι μολυσματικές, διαπραγματεύσιμες, μπασταρδεμένες και βίαιες. Ωστόσο το ερείπιο δε νοείται αρνητικά αλλά ως δείκτης θνητότητας και ως αντικείμενο αγάπης.

**Λέξεις κλειδιά:** ερμηνεία, βία, νόμος, τέχνη, ερείπια, Jacques Derrida

**M**eaghan Morris claims that "we live in an obscene world of 'hypervisibility: the terror of the all-too-visible, the voracity, the total promiscuity, the pure concupiscence of the gaze.'" (Jay 1994: 544, footnote 6). Reality has been transformed into images, Fredric Jameson asserts and Scott Lash contends that reality is "a figural, as distinct from discursive regime of signification" (Jay 1994: 544). At the same time, thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas and Jean Francois Lyotard advocate "an ethics of blindness" as Martin Jay states in his seminal *Downcast Eye: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* (Jay 1994: 543) wherefrom all the previous citations originate. One way to read Jacques Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins* (henceforth MOB) (Derrida 1993) is to examine this long exhibition catalogue essay in the broader context of its intellectual production, in which

Martin Jay allows us quite a valuable insight. Putting Derrida in context is a very useful way of approaching his work whose density and complex rhetoric makes it famously difficult to read.

However, this is not the course I shall follow here in this paper. I am more interested in an immanent reading which will give me the opportunity to clear my own standing and comprehension with regard to the aforementioned text by Derrida which I plan to examine together with his “Force of Law: ‘The Mystical Foundation of Authority’” (henceforth FOL) (Jacques Derrida, 1992). It is not only that both texts were originally written in the years 1989 and 1990 and thus encourage this joint examination. It is also and more importantly, perhaps, that for many Derrida scholars, these two texts mark a turn in his career towards an explicit thematization of an ethicopolitical agenda, which, according to him, has always been there, in his work, anyway. I shall begin by examining a number of subjects from both MOB and FOL for my task is to examine how they bear on Derrida’s work and elucidate the structural role they occupy in his thinking. It becomes therefore clear that I am interested in Derrida’s method of thinking and writing.

The subjects I would like to dwell upon are violence, particularly that violence which relates to interpretation and the ruin and more concretely Derrida’s professed love of ruins, i.e. of metaphors. I think that it is important to indicate at the outset that for Derrida, violence and ruin along with several other important notions of his work under consideration, like justice are not themes upon which reflection rests for a while but occupy a structural role in his work, that is to say, they contribute to its genesis and articulation. Derrida thus claims that deconstruction does not seem to foreground justice as a theme (Jacques Derrida 1992: 7). He gives a great emphasis to the fact that this is only seemingly so. For, in fact, many texts as well as many discourses on double affirmation, the gift, the undecidable etc., concern justice, even if they do not name justice as such (Jacques Derrida 1992: 7). It is very interesting that despite Derrida’s general precaution against thinking of themes, namely against that thinking which only superficially dwells upon issues and ignores their great ramifications and consequences in the very writing itself, towards the end of the essay FOL, he returns to the theme of responsibility. Such a return is interesting because Derrida is fully aware that this return may seem like a contradiction and this is the reason why he makes sure that the reader does not miss it, by putting it in brackets “(yes, the theme)” (Jacques Derrida 1992: 63). My understanding is that while he counters thematic readings, in the superficial sense mentioned before, he does not exclude themes when these mean an explicit encounter with an issue, like responsibility. However his strategy of denial and espousal of thematic readings at the same time, needs to be further qualified but I hope to do this at a later stage.

### **Reversal as a deconstructive strategy**

The strategy that Derrida follows in MOB is that of reversal. Reversal is a prominent deconstructive strategy and of course it is not the only one. According to his FOL:

Deconstruction is generally practiced in two ways or two styles, although it most often grafts one on to the other. One takes on the demonstrative and apparently ahistorical allure of logico-formal paradoxes. The other, more historical and more anamnestic, seems to proceed through readings of texts, meticulous interpretations and genealogies (Jacques Derrida 1992: 21).

Indeed, Derrida’s gesture in MOB follows both ways or styles while grafting one on to the other. It suffices for a moment to consider the facts: one of the greatest museums of the world, the Louvre, an enormous depository of artworks celebrating vision as the noblest of human

senses and the privileged way to aesthetic admiration and knowledge, asks Derrida to curate an exhibition. He responds by proposing an exhibition about memory and blindness, rather than perception and vision. He furthermore claims that the eye is destined to weep and not to see because tears and imploration obviously blur vision (Derrida 1993: 126, 122, 127). Finally, he examines all those cases in which blindness plays an important role in the production of drawing: either because the hands and fingers direct drawing and produce a tactile image (Derrida 1993: 9), or because some draftsmen aim at capturing the condition of sight which is invisible (Derrida 1993: 16) or even because the intoxication of the pencil or the brush amount to a frenzy that makes the draftsman look at the lines and not at the model and thus distracts him/her from vision (Derrida 1993: 36, 48). Derrida supplements his analysis by proclaiming that “the fidelity of faith matters more” than the fidelity of representation (Derrida 1993: 30). “And faith is blind. It sacrifices sight” (Derrida 1993: 30).

Derrida obviously reverses the logic and form of the museum convention to the extent that usually museums tacitly privilege vision and perceptual knowledge to the detriment of blindness, memory and faith. These latter are arguably ascribed a secondary status in the institution of any fine art museum. Derrida’s logico-formal reversal creates a paradox for what was hitherto marginalized suddenly comes to the fore, is given a voice and is assigned a place. Nietzsche has been famous for the reversals to which his thinking aspired, the most celebrated of which must perhaps be the reversal of Platonism (Nietzsche 1990: 31, 32).<sup>1</sup> However Derrida’s reversal does not aim at putting what was previously marginal in the center and casting aside in the margins what was hitherto in the center. His reversal is one that seems to aim at dissemination, at a diaspora of voices without aspirations for hierarchical replacements. According to Derrida:

This question [of the rhetoric of the trait] does not aim at restoring an authority of speech over sight, of word over drawing, or of legend over inscription. It is, rather, a matter of understanding how this hegemony could have imposed itself (Derrida 1993: 56).

Therefore Derrida’s strategy of reversal aims at a greater understanding and at an increased consciousness about hegemonic regimes. It would however be wrong to assume that Derrida’s deconstructive reading does not aspire to something more consequential than an increased understanding. For, according to Derrida,

They [people like Stanley Fish, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Drucilla Cornell, Sam Weber and others] respond, it seems to me, to the most radical programs of deconstruction that would like, in order to be consistent with itself, not to remain enclosed in purely speculative, theoretical, academic discourses but rather (with all due respect to Stanley Fish) to aspire to something more consequential, to change things and to intervene in an efficient and responsible, though of course always very mediated way, not only in the profession but in what one calls the *cit *, the *polis* and more generally the world. Not, doubtless, to change things in the rather na ve sense of calculated, deliberate and strategically controlled intervention, but in the sense of a maximum intensification in progress, in the name of neither a simple symptom nor a simple cause (other categories are required here). In an industrial and hyper-technologized society, academia is less than ever the monadic or monastic ivory tower that in any case it never was (Jacques Derrida 1992: 8, 9).

Derrida’s reversal of museum values is the product of an interpretative violence: what was previously neglected suddenly and by an interpretative coup de force comes to the fore and acquires a voice. I would like to argue that this reversal takes place in the name of justice. For Derrida, by this reversal apparently deconstructs the museum apparatus, its concomitant values and established hierarchies. Deconstruction is justice and justice is “the possibility of deconstruction” (Jacques Derrida 1992: 15). Precisely because Derrida attempts to address the other, i. e. memory rather than perception, belief rather than knowledge, blindness rather than

vision, that is those values situated at the very opposite end of established museum values, this is the reason why his attempt takes place in the name of justice (Jacques Derrida 1992: 17). I think that the question is neither to bring to the center what was hitherto marginalized, nor to leave it in its margin but rather to change the concepts of the margins and the margins of the concepts towards the direction of a more open society.

### **The impossible totality of the ruin as the agency of deconstruction**

The question of the subject of deconstruction, who is that who deconstructs, has always been intriguing for those studying Derrida's writings. Although Derrida, in the entirety of his late writings, always and persistently comes back to this question, the two texts under consideration treat the problem in a different way. In MOB, a performative together with a theoretical answer are furnished while in FOL the subject of the agency of deconstruction is treated on the level of the text alone. In MOB the text is organized as a dialogue between two voices, the one more conspicuously narrative than the other, the other casting doubts, asking questions and offering remarks and objections. It seems that the first is a man's voice and the second a woman's. Then, Derrida refers to the many blind men in history and to the subject of tears that is usually attributed to women in art history (Derrida 1993: 5, 17, 18, 127). By siding with tears and claiming that eyes are there to weep rather than see, by stating that "only man knows how to go beyond seeing and knowing because only he knows how to weep and this is what distinguishes him as rational animal (Derrida 1993: 126), Derrida makes a gesture towards women in his essay: he grants to their condition a priority for humanity.

Furthermore, Derrida's intimations about his accident that almost blinded him and took place at the time when he had to write his essay (Derrida 1993: 32) for the Louvre as well as his several memoirs involving his family, his mother, his jealousy towards his brother's talent in drawing (Derrida 1993: 37) make clear that the person who is writing is a contingent person who feels pain, hunger and sleep, is torn by passions and goes to the bathroom. The subject of writing, the agency of deconstruction is therefore not a transcendental ego: it is rather an ordinary person like most of us. Derrida's autobiographical strategy was inaugurated by Søren Kierkegaard who rejected Hegel's systemic totality and abstract spirituality in favor of the incommensurable truth of the individual. I think that Derrida consciously aligns himself in the Kierkegaardian tradition of indirect communication with his reader which however makes this reader directly involved in his thinking.

Besides sexual difference and autobiography, providing the coordinates of the agency of deconstruction, Derrida introduces one further strategy. He attempts to reflect upon the animal in itself but most importantly upon the Aristotelian designation *animale rationale*, ζῷον λόγον ἔχοντα, which has steadily been exerting a very long fascination on him throughout his texts. There are several indications from Greek mythology that the question of the animal, its ontology and its relation to humans has been a perennial issue for thinking. This is apparently the reason why the Greeks devised creatures in between the states of animalism and humanity, like Gorgons and Cyclops that Derrida mentions (Derrida 1993: 56) but also Medusas, Sphinxes and Centaurs. In his reading of Martin Heidegger's famous dictum from *Being and Time* that man alone dies and animals only perish (Heidegger 1962: 291), Derrida asks how Heidegger infers such a conclusion after having argued that each and everyone of us dies on his own and there is no access to the other's death (Derrida, *Aporias*, 1993: 75, 76). Furthermore, Derrida continues, one does not have a proper access to the animal world in the first place and is therefore obliged in both cases, in the death of a human and in the death of the animal to be based on indications

alone. If this is indeed so, then we also have several indications that animals as well die, that they are capable of death, like humans (Derrida, *Aporias*, 1993: 75, 76). By this argument, Derrida blurs the distinction between animalism and humanity. And yet, in MOB, Derrida brings up the difference between animals and humans again, pushing this time not to the direction of contact but to the opposite end of separation. He thus claims that animals have sight and not a gaze, as humans have (Derrida, *Aporias*, 1993: 75, 76). Furthermore, he states that only man, apparently in contrast to animals, knows how to go beyond seeing and knowing because only he, knows how to weep (Derrida, *Aporias*, 1993: 126). Finally, in FOL Derrida claims that justice concerns only humans and not animals and what

we confusedly call “animal,” the living thing as living and nothing else, is not a subject of the law or of law (*droit*). The opposition between just and unjust has no meaning in this case. As for trials for animals (there have been some) or lawsuits against those who inflict certain kinds of suffering on animals (legislation in certain Western countries provides for this and speaks not only of the rights of man but also of the rights of animals in general), these are considered to be either archaisms or still marginal and rare phenomena not constitutive of our culture. In our culture, carnivorous sacrifice is fundamental, dominant, regulated by the highest industrial technology, as is biological experimentation on animals—so vital to our modernity. As I have tried to show elsewhere, carnivorous sacrifice is essential to the structure of subjectivity, which is also to say to the founding of the intentional subject and to the founding, if not of the law, at least of law (*droit*), the difference between the law and law (*droit*), justice and law (*droit*), justice and the law here remaining open over an abyss (Jacques Derrida 1992: 18, 19).<sup>1</sup>

But who is finally we? Derrida claims that “we men, means we adult, white male Europeans, carnivorous and capable of sacrifice” (Jacques Derrida 1992: 18). The human subject, including the subject and agency of deconstruction is “preferably and paradigmatically the adult male, rather than woman, child or animal” (Jacques Derrida 1992: 19). And yet, precisely because the human subject is a ruin i.e. in a state of a ruin, it leaves open space for other voices to express themselves through its worn out conceptual basis and those voices are exactly those of woman, animal, and child, the latter not being thematized in the texts under consideration.

I think that the question of the animal remains open by Derrida in the texts under consideration, for he seems to wish to maintain and cancel the separation between humans and animals, at the same time. What remains is “the reverberation of several voices” (Derrida 1993: 64) more in Derrida’s MOB, less in FOL. What is also interesting is that some of these voices may not be human. The agency of deconstruction in Derrida is a fragmented and contingent individual, conscious of the other and dependent on her/him, to the point of lending her/his voice to women and animals. Therefore, the agency of deconstruction is an open totality. But any open totality lacks integration and specificity precisely because its openness defies its total character. As a consequence, it would be more correct and closer to Derrida’s spirit, to say that the agency of deconstruction is “an impossible totality” (Derrida 1993: 68). This is precisely how Derrida defines the ruin, as an impossible totality. The agency then is a ruin.

The ruin, as the specter, are terms to which Derrida returns now and again. What they have in common is their intermediary status between fiction and reality, between memory, delusion and perception, between past and present. They have an undecidable ontological status and a strong transitional character. All those concepts which belong to the philosophical apparatus and deconstruction finds wanting, incomplete and precarious, are in a state of ruin. However, the ruin is not solely something coming after the fact, after a certain philosophical apogee in 19<sup>th</sup> century or at some other time as much as it is true that Derrida alludes to this very employment of ruin. Derrida privileges the more structural concept of the ruin that he situates at the origin of all things (Derrida 1993: 65). “For the incompleteness of the visual monument comes from the

eclipsing structure of the trait” (Derrida 1993: 68). The trait, the sign of all things, human and inhuman, withdraws or retreats without being sensible or intelligible (Derrida 1993: 55). What I think that Derrida means is that the trait is both sensible and intelligible but neither purely sensible nor purely intelligible. The condition of the trait calls for and forbids representation, i.e. it places representation within certain limits. Therefore in Derrida’s universe, in his cosmos, navigation is not solely a matter of perception and knowledge but also a matter of memory and faith.

I do not see the ruin as a negative thing. First of all, it is clearly not a thing. And then, I would love to write, maybe with or following Benjamin, maybe against Benjamin, a short treatise on love of ruins. What else is there to love, anyway? One cannot love a monument, a work of architecture, an institution as such except in an experience itself precarious in its fragility: it hasn’t always been there, it will not always be there, it is finite. And for this very reason I love it as mortal, through its birth and its death, through the ghost or the silhouette of its ruin, of my own-which it already is or already prefigures. How can we love except in this finitude? Where else would the right to love, indeed the love of right, come from? (*D’où viendrait autrement le droit d’aimer, voire l’amour du droit?*) (Jacques Derrida 1992: 44).

In conclusion, the ruin is a metaphor. However, Derrida’s metaphorical way of expression has caused a lot of turmoil and has been considered an anathema by established, academic philosophy. As mentioned in Derrida’s *Margins of Philosophy*, metaphors, since they admittedly cannot be exorcized by philosophical discourse, ought to be multiplied, so that we may finally sort them out and evaluate them for what they are (Derrida 1982: xvii). Besides this explanation however, metaphors encourage interpretation and capture the reader’s attention as they promote a freer and less rigid philosophical style, akin to literature. Metaphors also allow the reader a greater liberty in interpretation than what is usually permitted in philosophy. Metaphor therefore and the taste of it, contribute to Derrida’s Kierkegaardian indirect communication with the reader. Thus Derrida’s interpretative violence does not aim to restrict the viewer but honors as well as addresses her/his individual capacity for interpretation.

## Notes

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| 1 | It is Gilles Deleuze who actually coined the phrase <i>reversal of Platonism</i> and whose reading makes explicit Nietzsche’s polemic against Plato (Deleuze 1969: 292-307). | Heidegger. If indeed there is no privileged access to the animal world by us, humans, there is no way in which we can defend Derrida’s theses that animals do not have a gaze, that they do not know how to weep and more importantly that justice does not concern them. It is difficult not to address to him the very question that he, himself, addressed to Heidegger: how does he know? |
| 2 | It is however difficult to accept these last qualifications of Derrida regarding the separation between humans and animals, if one takes seriously his own critique against  |   |

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