

WORDS AND BOARDERS

The experience of strangeness in Derrida

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Abstract

In this short lecture I want to underline the very postmodern feature of Derrida's thinking that makes it particularly appropriate for showing off the social, communicational and moral problems of globalization, through the combined strategies of criticizing metaphysical tradition and ethics.

Derrida calls our present a „nuclear epoch/era” which is threatened by the promise of an unprecedented war and which is essentially defined by being threatened this way. Nevertheless the nuclear crisis itself is especially suitable for deconstructive reading even because of this „un-exampld” nature, as it only has textual reality.

In his radical critics of modernism and metaphysics Derrida raises the following problems: 1. the history of western civilization can be described as the history of „paternal mind”, 2. this history is also the history of logos, therefore is the direction of civilization process is dictated by the principles of „fallogocentrism”. This means the priority of mind against sensation, of ideal against real. With the help of the conceptual triplet „identity-ipseity-power” I try to sketch the outlines of the interpretational sphere within which the problems of globalizing world, society, language and culture could be de-constructed.

Key-words: „différance”, „fallogocentrism”, strangeness, selfhood, responsibility, hospitality.

Outline of Article

1. The meanings and uses of the term „différance”.
2. The characteristics of „nuclear crisis”.
3. Apocalyptic, eschatology, apophasis – the speech of the experience of the impossible.
4. Intentionality and desire.
5. „Khora” – the space of reception.
6. The questions of witness, the critics of „fallogocentrism”.
7. Reception, selfhood and Justice – Derrida's interpretation of Lévinas.
8. Hospitality, friendship and politics by Derrida.

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Derrida should undoubtedly be ranked among the hardly explainable thinkers. We usually mention three main periods among his oeuvre. For me the most important is the last one, which embraces the last two decades of his life. Since the end of the 80s Derrida became even more popular, exerted a huge impact on public life both in culture and in politics. He stood up for the ridden and professionals forced to emigrate, spoke out concerning the Balkan Wars and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the forefront of his thinking was then the experience of encountering the Other and the ethical-political relevancies of this encounter. My aim is to prove that the deconstructive method is naturally applicable in the ethical-political dimension for what Derrida devoted himself to in his last decades.

First and foremost let me draw your attention to the fact that the term 'différance', originally coming from the field of critique of metaphysics and playing a significant role within the vocabulary and specific logics of deconstruction, could be - without being stretched or overmentioned - transferred to the ethical-political

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scene. The term coming from Derrida himself is gained by altering the spelling of the French word 'difference' changing the second 'e' for an 'a'. The two words are phonetically the same, should be spelled the same way as well, but when writing and reading them a remarkable difference comes out which alters the meaning at the same time. The French term 'différer' mostly means 'differ from' in the sense of 'being different' or 'being identical as Different'. As for Derrida the word 'difference' written with 'e' can only express this usage, the term 'différance', with 'a', contrarily, is accused with the extra senses of 'delay', 'retardation' or 'intermittence'.

Différance is prior to the metaphysical difference between presence and absence since that is a priori possible through a différance. Beyond criticizing the oppositional vocabulary the term 'différance' has an outstanding importance in another sense. As Derrida says logocentrism, the ideology announces the priority of logos, of mind, intertwined with presentism, the principle of pure and direct presence, and this connection is expressed by the so-called phonocentrism, which proclaims the priority of the unmediated inner voice against writing. Nevertheless this leads to the deprecation of non-phonetic - mainly non-Western or non-European - scripts, or in other words to ethnocentrism. Assuming a pure origin results in all cases in distinction in the sense of opposition, which is, ultimately, discrimination. As follows this paper deals with two questions which, in my view, summarize the main social and cultural conflicts of our globalized world. Such a problem is nuclearization which can be observed parallel with globalization, and the other one is the experience of encountering the Other, the different one.

Derrida calls our present a 'nuclear era', which is threatened by the possibility of a war never seen before and which is inherently defined by this threat. We only know the nuclear war as a phantasy, structured by speed and acceleration. The nuclear crisis is, however, especially suitable for deconstructive reading just because it is never-been and never-seen, before, it has an unprecedented nature, as it only has textual reality. The accelerating speed-race going on today brings about nuclear strategies, also in the field of human sciences, matching this essentially fabulous and textual situation, of which we could only speak in the language of doxa. It is about a speed race, and the main characteristic of speed is permanent acceleration, therefore the nuclear crisis has no real, present representative or accountable truth. Thus technologies are sophisticating, the war is taking place on the field of rhetoric's, the main strategy of nuclear politics is deterrence and persuasion at the same time. „The anticipation of nuclear war – Derrida says – places humanity in between rhetorical conditions, moreover, through varied mediations, defines the essence of modern humanity.” (DERRIDA 1993b: 125.) The nightmare of total destruction, however, threatens the objective memory (or in derridean terms 'the archive') with cessation. This is just the moment approximating nuclear crisis and deconstruction: the previous one makes that absolute epoch possible which is the main condition of possibility of the latter, in so far as we mean the private truth of an apocalypse under the term 'absolute knowledge'.

The essay „Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy” both in its title and regarding the suggested problem quotes Kant, who blames the high-toned discourses declaring the end of philosophy that they hope to gain somehow through this declaration. Derrida is interested in this particular gain, as according to him behind every eschatological announcement some secret works, which should be hidden by the apocalyptic movement of declaring – so that the gain resides in the unveiling itself. High-toned speech always refers to some miracle, a secret hidden under the surface, its strategy is finally no other than „criptopolitics”, or, so to say, misuse of the secret. (cf. DERRIDA 1993a: 65-70)

The main characteristic feature of each and every type of experiences and discourses main characteristic is apocalyptic, or like Derrida calls it, 'the ace unveiling', the desire towards the end, which is actually the final manifestation of longing for completeness, longing for ourselves. The apocalypse addresses us, it calls us somewhere beyond everything, to something, whose coming is always in coming – the catastrophe of apocalypse lies even in its unrealisation. Within this paradox we can identify another one: the paradox of the trace which is emergent in its own abolition, of the movement of différance, which, according to Derrida, constructs the inner movement of every text – by the word 'text' we mean a thought, a literary text or the history itself. The writing, the text can't do anything else but – with the help of the economics of the différance – hold over and delay the encounter with the very other, of what it always tries to be about, that is why it is always about something else... (cf. DERRIDA 1993b:138.) So if speech has always been eschatological, a speech of final things, then apocalypse lies within the Name itself. Saying 'It is', saying this very moment is always saying the apocalypse, of what we have always been inside, but still haven't been inside, not yet though.

We came to the problems of naming and identity, the latter of which, as we will see, moves increasingly towards the matter of ipseity parallel with the opening of the playing field between the ethical dimension and deconstruction. Derrida claims apocalypitics, ie. 'the ace unveiling', unveils that inherent desire within every

experience and speech, which is finally no other than longing to saying the name, longing to say ourselves. Desire is basically a subject-object assignment, but in such a double genitive whose origin and goal is undecidable. If the voice of the desire bears witness to the desire itself, there must be somebody who listens to this witness, there must be an interlocutor before the discourse. The apophysis, which is the voice of negative theology always manifests the invisible Other, who has always been there though. In the structure of apophatic writing we can recognize again the operation of trace, which follows the movement of towards-turning. The trace in its presence always refers to something absent, and is constituted as itself even through this towards-turning, back-leaning reference. In apophatic discourse becoming writing and becoming essence are the same: birth and change, life and death, identity and alterity thickening into the same, unprecedented moment. Derrida grabs the essential similarity between apocalyptic and deconstruction in this very moment: the criticism of the statement, that is the criticism of „It is”, more precisely the deconstruction of that is nothing else, he says, but experiencing the possibility of the impossible, the most impossible (impossible)”. (DERRIDA 2005b: 63.) Every writing, every language follows the movement of the hyperbole, which is the movement of transcendence, taking us beyond being or beingness. Drifting beyond, openness always gives the sensation of nonfulfillment, ordering to accomplish the impossible. The place of the impossible is the non-place, the hyperbolic movement discredits presence, name and identity. Only through the resignation about the sense of power inherent in naming and in the name itself can we rescue everything and anything which bears the name, ie. the infinite. This resignation is the love manifesting through the towards-turning to the Other, which makes me stop at the trigger, respecting the inaccessibility of the Other.

So where could that „non-place” be „placed” then, where the event of the most impossible takes place? The place of which Derrida says it is „everything’s place instead of everything, interval, space, becoming spatial”, which is „over there, but, at the same time, which is »here«, more than any other »here«”? (DERRIDA 2005c: 76.) Derrida borrows the term „chora” from Plato’s *Timaios*, where it expresses the fluctuation between the two types of the fluctuation (neither... nor, both... and) between the two types of substantial (sensible, apprehensible/recognizable). Accordingly „chora” is a third type compared to the other two types of being, upsetting thereby the order of polarity, while „chora” itself is beyond this polarity. „Chora” as „non-place” and „non-time” is indeterminacy itself, giving place to every determination. Thus we have already disclosed the sexual gender of „chora”: she’s the par excellence recipient, the Mother herself. „Chora” means the place lived or occupied by somebody, she is, however, different from everything within her. That is why the speech about her is about the place of politics and the politics of places.

Timaios also touches on the question of fatherhood when emphasizing the picture of the ideal state with the help of fiction. While poets and sophists treat myth as „speech without a legal father” as reality, real philosophers teach the logos, which has „a father responsible for and about it”. The father is the symbol of justifiable origin, of the memory of the City, compared to the memory of the Other. According to Derrida, the whole of European thinking bears this „phallogocentric” stigma of platonism. Since Plato philosophy has no longer been able to speak about the mother only about the father and the son, he says, it doesn’t say a word about that necessity beyond any philosophy, which actually receives and bears the philosophy. Therefore deconstruction intends to be a speech about the pre-original, but not in the sense of temporal antecedence. The speech regarding „chora” or the „non-place” is not preventive compared to other discourses in time, but gives them place by herself never being present.(DERRIDA 2005d: 116-150.)

Let’s stop for a moment at the questions of mother and father, the question of their relation. Criticizing metaphysics and modern Derrida suggests the following: 1) the history of Western civilization could be described as the history of „paternal reason”, 2) this history of reason is also the history of *logos*. The civilizational process is directed by the principles of „phallogocentrism”, the priority of reason against sensation, of the father against the mother, of the ideal against the real. Investigating the issues of testimony, secret and responsibility Derrida sets out from the Freudian hypothesis which effects that the procession of human progress is determined by the conversion from patriarchy to matriarchy. Preferring the hypothetical, supposed, paternal testimony instead of sensual evidence, instead of the mother as present witness, it is a structural-theological, moreover, civilization leap forward. What’s more, this leap forward is civilization *itself*. The history of humanity turns to the history of testimony right through this conversion, says Freud, as fatherhood is always hypothetical, always calling for life the dimensions of testimony and responsibility, underlining the basic difference between reasonable and sensible. Derrida sharply criticizes the phallogocentric belief of progression rooted in the platonic tradition. In his understanding the mother is manifestation of the living and vivid present, she is the „present witness” of identity and authenticity, being sensitively present when and by giving birth. By emphasizing the priority of the paternal, hypothetical or „bearing” testimony we admit the primacy of reproducibility and replaceability. The revolution of *techne* is thereby also the revolution of „multi/more-mother”, as at the moment the „bearing witness” replaces the

„present witness”, the mother loses her singularity, playing only a „distributive” role, deprived from the experience of bearing witness and also responsibility. But, Derrida says, since the idea of the living present becomes outdated that way, „deconstructive genealogy” becomes „possible and necessary”, which should be „expanded even onto the notion of genealogy itself”. (DERRIDA 2005d: 43.)

Derrida reckons the primeval experience of testimony manifesting in the experience of the absent parent, which brings the non-present into the living present, opening space for doubting in general – and for deconstruction. Nevertheless the question emerges, if through the resignation of experiencing testimony we won't risk the possibility of personality and identity as well. It seems the problem of origin finally culminates in the question of reproducibility of the un-reproduceable, which, in the ultimate sense, is based on the opposition between sensible and recognizable. However, as soon as we begin to use the themes of testimony and responsibility while investigating this basically epistemological problem, we're already in the field of ethics and politics. Giving a striking summation of this border crossing Derrida says: „there isn't a consistent nationalism which is able to resist the consistent, ie. deconstructing idea of the „distributive” mother, unless the breaking loose of nationalism itself is a reactive respond to the unbearable possibility of the „distributive” mother as well”. (DERRIDA 2005d: 43.)

Next I would like to link the question of origin to the question of stranger, and the frequent repetition of the word „question” is not at all contingent at this stage. In Derrida's approach question is always a question of the stranger, since a question as such is always asked about the stranger / of the stranger. On a conference held to commemorate the one year anniversary of Emmanuel Lévinas' death, Derrida in his lecture payed tribute to Lévinas' doctrines of „reception” and „hospitality”. By reception Lévinas reception always means „didactic reception”: encountering the Other, talking to the Other I receive the Other, who comes from outside, bringing inside something brand new. To be able to receive the Other I must be at home, separated, but it is only this future reception of the Other that makes it possible for me to be myself. Lévinas reckons Speech is manifestation of Justice, the latter being the witnessing third when two individuals encounter. The epiphany of Justice turns my responsibility for the Other from ethical to legal-political nature, as it's coming breaks the ethical immediacy. As we could see, before any reception the host is received in his/her own home, as to be a host you, first of all, need a place to open. Hospitality therefore is „prior to propriety”, since the host is, first and foremost, always a guest and should be received first. However, such a pre-original hospitality is beyond the ethical-political dimension, as the conditions of its possibility is aspiration for the Other, and the radical separation from it when being-home. Politics abuses this separation by abolishing the 'I' and the 'Other' in 'We', melting singularity into generality. The major problem here is how could the etchisc of hospitality become politics? And the answer is: when the third one arrives, at the birth of the question, at the moment of Justice. This moment is no other than the silence of the decision, when only the promise of the respond could be heard, when I am the one supposed to respond addressing the Other. Intentionality always has spoken the language of ethics, it is even the self-interruption manifesting itself when opening up and giving in to the Other, which opens the space for the arrival of the third one, of the fulfilment of responsibility.

Another aspect of hospitality was raised by Derrida during his seminar lectures in 1995, when investigating the question of the identity of the host. „Myself” constituted by the – notice that: differ-ing – movement of turning towards the Other, however, is not at all an identity or self-consciousness, but ipseity. This is „the self of myself”, which becomes my-self through leaning from and back to myself.(DERRIDA 2005e: 61.) Offering hospitality lies in my power, I am a host in such a capacity, but I could not be at home at myself without the guest. Derrida vows: „the two notions, of hospitality and of power mutually incorporate each other; both are subject and attribute, and interpreter and interpretation of the other at the same time”. (DERRIDA 2005e: 73.) Thus the capacity of self-being is not given without the capacity of hospitality, and there isn't any power without responsibility – neither over ourselves, nor over the other.

But who could this stranger, the Other be, to whom we have to open up, to whom we could not do other than open up unless risking our self-being? What's in this Other which makes us, even before it's arrival, offer our hospitality to? According to Derrida the question of hospitality is basically the question of question, since we could see the question always comes with the Other, moreover from the third one looking at us from the eyes of the Other. It's the stranger who makes everything questionable and who brings the question to life, that is why xenophobia is based on the feeling of being threatened in our self-being. Nevertheless it is needed that the stranger is not radically strange, an absolute newcomer, who, like Oedipus, speaks as a stranger, to the unknown, being in a strange land. The expression „right of hospitality” is a paradox, because, on the one hand, as hospitality becomes a right, it implicates exclusion, that is injustice, and, on the other hand, we can't even call a guest „guest” who we should receive without the right of hospitality. So what is it that determines who the guest is and who we should receive? Derrida writes: „hospitality comes to the

stranger, for sure, but hospitality, as well as a right, stays conditional, depending on the absolutism of what establishes right. (...) The relation to the stranger is ruled by the right, when justice becomes a right". (DERRIDA 2004: 29.)

Justice seems to be the unconditional base the Other could refer to when asking for admission, and through which we ourselves could be safe at home, by ourselves. However, we still can't really see from where Justice gets its coercive force. From where does it gain the power to become right? The answer here comes as an answer indeed: without the response of the Other we only had stillness without silence, in Derridean terms „the groundless base of solitude”, but it is this „groundless base” which causes that addressing could only address and could only hear itself by the promise of respond. (cf. DERRIDA 2000: 42-43.) The issues of responsibility and of response could only emerge together, Derrida says in his lectures about *The Politics of Friendship* back in 1993. We can respond to the Other, he says, when the response bears witness of the identity of the responder; we can give a response *in front of* the authority of the Other, recognizing him/her as the Other. But in its most significant sense response is directed to the Other: to the request, the address, the prayer or the question of the Other. The friend is always the third one who protects the discourse from sinking into the depth, into the ground-less, Nietzsche's Zarathustra sings. The friend is, Derrida says, the third one looking at me from the eye of the Other, witnessing my responsibility for the Other. (cf. DERRIDA 1988: 638-644.) Justice witnesses responsibility in the sense of duty without any debt, a duty which is „practiced in my name as in the name of the Other”. (DERRIDA 2005a: 19.)

When it's about the question of encountering the other we must at least shortly concern the issue of translation. One of his lectures held to commemorate Paul de Man Derrida revealed: if we wanted to give any accurate, economical, „slogan-like” definition of deconstruction, we could say without any excess, that there is „more than one language”, „no more of one language”. Derrida's thinking focuses on the problem of translation in many senses, eg. in his early works he identifies logocentrism as the dream of founding the universal language. However, language as such is manifested even in its otherness, through the plurality of languages. Metaphysical tradition has always understood translation as a secondary operation compared to the original, while deconstruction starts up from such an unthinkable notion of „original translation”, which precedes any difference made between the original and the translation. However this not only means that the translation should be meant in a different way in the sense of translating a thought to another language. We should pay attention to the meaning of the prefix 'trans': the motion of thought from the origin to the arrival between two points, which always defer and differentiate each other. Accordingly deconstruction is the use of a theory of translation which brings philosophy to challenges, and on the other hand, a practice of translation which rather demonstrates than hides its own limits. (cf. KAMUF 1991: 241-242.) The Babel maze was a divine retribution of stuck-up people, and the shuffling of languages not only tumbled the order of rationality and perceptibility, but also broke up linguistic imperialism. God doomed mankind to translation, when ensured the generality of reason by means of His translatable but still untranslatable name, however, at the same time also restricted this generality: His name is „forbidden transparency” and „impossible univocity”. „Translation becomes law, duty and debt – Derrida says -, but the one that can no longer be discharged.” (DERRIDA 1991: 253.)

In November 1993 at the Janus Pannonius University of Pécs, Derrida made a speech on the occasion of being awarded with the title 'doctor honoris causa'. He spoke as a „stranger”, as an invited one, addressed and received stranger, in the name of thousands and millions of strangers who were not that lucky. He said, for him deconstruction ultimately means nothing else than affirmation beyond criticism, „respectful and careful loyalty to a responsibility meant in a different way”. (cf. DERRIDA 2005f: 97-99.) Approached in this way deconstructing involves responsibility, turning respectfully and positively towards tradition. As Derrida says: „inheriting does not mean possessing or getting this or that – it means, strengthening, interpreting and deploying in an active, critical and selective way the order, which is always younger and older than us at the same time, as if somebody else's law whom we will never be contemporary with”. (DERRIDA 2005f: 99.)

Conclusion

Derrida's main question is that how the ethics of hospitality could become – politics. And the answer is: at the time when the third one arrives, when the question born, in the very moment of Justice. Intentionality always already speaks the language of ethics, even through opening up and subjecting ourselves to the Other. This makes us self-interrupted, and this interruption opens space for the arrival of the third one, the fulfillment of responsibility, that's what lets Justice to be law.

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