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## A CONSERVATIVE READING OF JACQUES DERRIDA

*Il faut pousser les questions aussi loin qu'il est possible.* Such could be the starting point for *une lecture déconstructrice* of a text by Jacques Derrida. The task is difficult if not impossible, because it is not easy to start a dialogue with “L’avenir de la profession.” As Derrida himself argued some fifteen years ago, “un texte ne saurait appartenir à aucun genre” (*Parages*. Paris: Galilée, 1986, 264.). His admission towards the end of the text he has kindly sent us for discussion is in perfect harmony with his earlier statement: “Je ne sais surtout pas quel est le statut, le genre ou la légitimité du discours que je viens de vous adresser” (41). Our difficulties may be related to Derrida’s deconstruction of the dichotomy of speech and writing. “On m’associe souvent à la théorie de l’écriture,” he warns us in an interview, “mais je suis un homme de parole” (*Points de suspension: Entretiens*. Paris: Galilée, 1992, 9.). *L’attention portée à la langue* is so conspicuous that the reader can hear a *ton* while reading this text. Needless to say, this is not an authorial but an intertextual voice. That is why the text is hardly decipherable (*déchiffrable*). *On sent un plaisir de parler une langue qu’on peut interpréter comme littéraire et philosophique. En tous cas je lis Derrida comme je lis Montaigne ou Rousseau. Chaque texte de Derrida appelle, si on peut dire, une autre ‘oreille’.* Before making any comments, let me stress the strict limitations of my reading. I am not a systematic reader of Derrida’s works. He has published a great number of works – *qui prétend les avoir déjà lu?* – on a wide range of topics which are beyond my competence. Some of the issues tackled in “L’avenir de la profession” have to be addressed by professional philosophers. As for myself, all I can say is that as a literary scholar I have found Derrida’s works a constant source of inspiration. The strong reservations he expressed about Comparative Literature many years ago have become a point of reference for me in my criticism of the discipline I am supposed to represent. In an address to the Hungarian Academy in the early 1990s I compared Derrida to Glenn Gould (“*Minta a szönyegen*”: *A műértelmezés esélyei*. Budapest: Balassi, 1995, 19–20). Some blamed me for being too sympathetic to what

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they regarded as Derrida's anarchism. My impression is that the comparison reveals my conservatism. I feel more at home with Edwin Fischer's traditional than with Gould's postmodern reading of the *Appassionata Sonata*. Heidegger used a pencil; Derrida is a public figure in a jet age. A couple of decades ago Derrida represented opposition vis-à-vis cultural institutions. By now he himself has become institutionalized. Subversiveness or conservatism is a matter of perspective. The composer of *Elektra* was an avant-garde musician; that of *Vier letzte Lieder* was a conservative artist. I would apply Derrida's own thesis to his work: "Nous avons reçu plus que nous ne croyons savoir de la 'tradition', mais la scène du don oblige aussi à une sorte d'impiété filiale, grave et légère à l'égard des pensées auxquelles on doit le plus" (*Points de suspension*, 139).

Thanks to Derrida, logocentric oppositions are now in thorough disrepute. One of the most thought-provoking parts in his lecture is the ambiguous characterization of "Geisteswissenschaften": he desires to deconstruct the concept and to cultivate the tradition behind it. He seems to adopt a position that I find even a shade conservative when he refers to the established canons "dont je crois néanmoins qu'ils doivent être protégés à tout prix" (7). Since canons are linked to power, I sense a slight contradiction between the desire to deconstruct the concept of humanities and the preservation of "leurs anciens canons" (7).

In any case, I would place a high priority on the transformation of "Geisteswissenschaften". Here Derrida's own activity can give us invaluable support. He has done more than anybody else for undermining the institutionalized distinctions (oppositions reçues) between philosophy and literature, essay and imaginative (or creative) writing, text and metatext (commentary), concept and metaphor, logic and rhetoric, nature and culture/artifice/convention/technique, experience and experimentation, emancipation and alienation, public and private, etc. It needs to be remembered that his intention was never reduction but the reinterpretation of the relations (une autre "logique" des rapports) between these terms.

I hope it is not impolite to ask a question at this point. The word "tradition" occurs several times in the text. Could it be that today Derrida is slightly more sympathetic to Gadamer's emphasis on tradition than he was at the time of their debate? Or should the expression "la tradition classique-moderne" be taken as another example of deconstructing binary oppositions? The word "classique" may suggest permanence of values, whereas modernity involves teleology, even progress and the mutability of values. One of the features common to Paul de Man and Derrida may be the inclination to focus on canonized texts. As Derrida remarked in an interview published in *Le Monde* in 1982, "j'ai toujours le sentiment que, malgré des siècles de lecture, ces textes restent vierges [...]. D'où la nécessité d'une interprétation interminable" (*Points de suspension*, 88). While finding his readings of Plato, Descartes, Rousseau, Kant, Shelley, Nietzsche, Joyce, Heidegger, Celan, Blanchot, Genet, and others both refreshing and illuminating and the insistence on interpretation as an infinite process absolutely legitimate, I miss the analysis of less well-known, if not marginal texts. I may be wrong, but I have to admit that while I find the distinction between "clôture" and "fin" admirable and the claim that "la tradition n'était pas homogène" absolutely

justifiable, I look forward to seeing more evidence of the “*intérêt pour les textes non canoniques*” (*Points de suspension*, 237).

Derrida’s works have strengthened my belief that all texts are not only intertextual but also multilingual. “On n’écrit jamais ni dans sa propre langue ni dans une langue étrangère” (*Parages*, 147). Of course, what are called multiculturalism and globalization – I tend to view such fashionable clichés with suspicion – are mutually interdependent. “Nationalisme et universalisme indissociables” (*Parages*, 140), Derrida says and I can accept this as a starting point. What I regret is that Derrida seems unwilling to elaborate on this thesis. Since “la mondialisation” is taking place irrespective of our desires, it seems a bit pointless to insist on a “résistance inconditionnelle au pouvoir de l’état-nation”. I agree that a nation state is tied to a “fantasme de souveraineté indivisible”. My impression is that in 2000 it is too obvious that this “fantasme” belongs to the legacy of the past. By now many nations have disintegrated in the sense that each consists of several interpretive communities with radically different value systems. No less obvious is that the word “university” suggests cosmopolitanism. My only complaint – the word may be too strong – would be that Derrida lumps together different kinds of power. Of course, nationalism is far from being extinct, but the nations which I would call tentatively and with much hesitation more civilized seem to move towards diversity on the one hand and “mondialisation” or “Americanization” on the other. To take Hungary as an example, the people living in this country are so divided that it would be misleading to attribute any national identity to them. At the same time, they are on the way of being assimilated to an international community dominated by the United States.

What Derrida calls “pouvoirs économiques” and “médiatiques” are different from the power of the nation state, since they are far from being incompatible with “mondialisation”. I would even risk the hypothesis that while in the 19th century it may have been difficult for a Western university to resist the power of the nation state, today it is virtually an illusion to believe that the institutions of higher education can oppose economic power and the power exercised by those who control the media. Needless to say, I would love to teach at a university that can assert “le droit principiel de tout dire, fût-ce au titre de la fiction et de l’expérimentation du savoir, et le droit de le dire publiquement, de le publier” (4). For more than fifteen years I have been teaching at a large state university in the U. S. and at a major university in the Hungarian capital. During these years my North American university has moved further and further away from the ideal of “l’université sans condition,” “la liberté prise de tout dire dans l’espace public” (6). My American students, even the most brilliant among them, are forced to think in terms of vocationalism and the rules of the job market. As for Hungary, it is true that today I can teach Nabokov, praise Beckett, and neglect Marx without running the risk of punishment from the Politburo. Still, I would be reluctant to argue that Hungarian universities are moving in the direction of “cette liberté prise de tout dire dans l’espace public” (6). I have two reasons for skepticism. On the one hand, totalitarianism has had such a deep impact on mentality that it will take a longer period to improve public spirit. On the other hand, Hungarian universities are being transformed in harmony with the American model. “L’université sans

condition et sans pouvoir propre” – our distinguished visitor will correct me if I am wrong – conforms to the ideals of Wilhelm von Humboldt rather than to the living reality of the American university.

The idea that a university should be “le lieu dans lequel rien n’est à l’abri du questionnement” (4) is very attractive but it is easier to declare such openness than remain faithful to it in an institution that has teaching as one of its activities.

Deconstruction has been associated with the distrust of certain logocentric oppositions. This time Derrida returns and makes much of Austin’s distinction between constative and performative. In what sense is this distinction more legitimate than the one, say, between literal and metaphoric? Of course, it is true that at the end of the text Austin’s distinction is mentioned as one “à laquelle nous avons jusqu’ici feint de faire confiance” (34). These words may express some reservations. I detect a similar ambiguity in the approach to tradition, *le rapport que vous indiquez à la tradition*. Undoubtedly, *une certaine position double* was never absent from Derrida’s works. Let me quote an earlier statement on tradition: “la volonté de ne renoncer [...] ni à la fidélité, ni à une certaine infidélité [...]. Il n’y a pas d’équilibre [...]; chacune séparément est une espèce de folie, de mort” (*Points de suspension*, 161).

Is it possible that Derrida’s dream of “une université sans condition” is the reincarnation of an ideal inherited from the past? If this is true, his thought is much closer to a conservative tradition than some may believe. Conservatism is inseparable from a desire to preserve, and Derrida frequently requests his Hungarian translator to preserve French words or expressions. Has he looked at the English versions of his works? For me Jacques Derrida is a French writer. I would like to know what he thinks of the English translations of his works. Is it not true that more people have read him in English than in French, and if so, is it possible to argue that there is a gap between the fashionable theoretician and the fine artist in the French language? I would like to raise this question in the belief that Jacques Derrida postulates a close link between philosophy *et la langue dite naturelle*.