Derrida’s *Destinerrance*

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[. . .] une lettre peut toujours ne pas arriver à destination, et [. . .] donc jamais elle n’y arrive.

—Derrida, *La Carte postale*

What is destined to happen to the corpus of Derrida’s works? What fate will befall them? As I have shown in another essay, Derrida was anxious about what would happen after his death to his “remains,” in the double sense of his dead body and the body of his writings. This anxiety is expressed both in *A Taste for the Secret* and in the long amazing reflection on death, apropos of Robinson Crusoe’s fear of it, carried on from seminar to seminar in his last seminars (2002–03). Derrida elsewhere put the reasons he had for worrying about what would happen to his legacy after his death under the aegis of a striking neologism: *destinerrance*.

What is *destinerrance*? Discussing it fully would be a virtually endless task. It is a concept, or better, motif, or, better still, spatio-temporal figure, that connects intimately with the other salient spatio-temporal figures in Derrida’s work. I call *destinerrance* spatio-temporal because, like most of Derrida’s key terms, it is a spatial figure for time. It names a fatal possibility of erring by not reaching a predefined temporal goal in terms of wandering away from a predefined spatial goal. *Destinerrance* is like a loose thread in a tangled skein that turns out to lead to the whole ball of yarn. It could therefore generate a potentially


endless commentary. Destinerrance is connected to différance, that is, to a temporality of differing and deferring, without present or presence, without ascertainable origin or goal; to trace, iterability, signature, event, context, play (jeu: in the sense that one says, “There is play in this machine”); to Derrida’s anomalous concept of speech acts; to the future or the “to come” (l’à venir); to the democracy to come in that avenir to come; to decision, obligation, responsibility, and, in another of Derrida’s neologisms, irresponsabilisation (Derrida, Donner la mort 89); to interruption, dissemination, the wholly other; to expropriation, adestination, justice, law, right, the gift, the secret, hospitality, testimony, sendings or dispatches (envois); to the messianic without messianism, as developed in Spectres de Marx and elsewhere; to the specter, singularity, the apocalyptic, the apotropaic or, in John Leavey’s coinage, the apotropocalyptic (Leavey); finally, always and everywhere, to “l’impossible possibilité de […] mort” (Derrida, Spectres de Marx 187). Each motif is connected in one way or another to destinerrance, in fulfillment of Derrida’s claim, in A Taste for the Secret, that his works are not a heterogeneous collection of occasional essays, but that portentous thing, an Œuvre, an organic corpus (Derrida, A Taste for the Secret 14–15).

The word or the notion of destinerrance appears in a large number of Derrida’s works, early and late. It appears in the contexts of quite different topics. The word, or sometimes the concept without the word, appears in “Le Facteur de la vérité,” in La Carte postale (441–524), in “Envois,” also from La Carte postale (7–273), in “Télépathie,” in “Mes Chances,” in D’un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie, in “No apocalypse, not now (à toute vitesse, sept missiles, sept missives),” in “Mes chances: Au rendez-vous de quelques stéréophonies épiciuriennes,” and in L’Autre Cap. These uses, the reader will note, include psychoanalytical and political contexts, as well as the question of letters in the epistolary sense and also the question of the subject or ego. No doubt destinerrance appears in other places too that I have not identified. For lack of space, I must postpone to another essay discussion of the explicitly political uses of the word (or the concept) of destinerrance.

La Carte postale is a novel in letters about the way those exposed letters called postcards deconstruct (if I may dare to use that word)

2 Leavey’s essay is the best discussion I know of Derrida’s destinerrance. I am grateful for his help and for help from Julian Wolfreys in tracking down Derrida’s uses of the word or, sometimes, the figurative idea without the word.
sender, message, and addressee, all three, divide them from within and scatter them. In *La Carte postale* Derrida uses the alternative neologism, *destination* (35). The notion of *destinerrance* was already present in Derrida’s putdown of Lacan in “Le Facteur de la vérité.” It appears in the powerful investigation of telepathy as *destinerrance* in “Télépathie.” *Destinerrance* underwrites the discussion of Greek atomism and Freud’s notion of chance and the aleatory in “Mes chances.” Speaking there of the *clinamen* or unpredictable deflection of atoms falling in the void in the atomism of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius, Derrida says: “Seule cette déviation peut détourner une destination imperturbable et un ordre inflexible. Une telle errance (je l’ai appelé ailleurs ‘destinerrance’) peut convenir aux lois du destin, aux conventions ou aux contrats, aux accords du fatum (fati foedera [Lucretius, *De natura rerum*, 2: 254])” (Derrida, “Mes chances” 24). I shall return to this essay.

A peculiarity of many places where the word or the concept, if it can be called that, of *destinerrance* appears is that they tend to say, in an act of *différance*, something like: “as I have elsewhere explained, with examples.” I have not yet found, in the labyrinth of Derrida’s writings, what might be called the “mother lode,” the place where the word appears for the first time, with full explanation, though the concept without the word is perhaps first developed in the essay on Lacan, “Le Facteur de la vérité.” Perhaps no such origin for the word exists. Perhaps the word itself is the consequence of a *destinerrance*, a wandering from locus to locus that to some degree takes for granted its meaning as something always already established somewhere else.

Each of the essays or books I have mentioned is characteristically intricate. Each is a brilliantly innovative argumentation. Each calls for an extended commentary. In a short paper, to avoid an interminable accounting, I must necessarily be brief, whatever injustice to the tangled skein that leads me to commit. I want to look with a sharp eye at a number of the passages where the word or the concept appears, in order to see if I can identify just what Derrida is saying. I want then to speculate on just what *destinerrance* might mean for the destiny of Derrida’s own writings, now that he is dead.

The logic, if it can be called that, of *destinerrance* seems straightforward enough. It is a small bomb that is one of the chief weapons in some of Derrida’s most exuberant acts of deconstruction. In calling it a bomb, I am thinking of Derrida’s fantasy, expressed in *A Taste for the Secret*, of blowing up a railway during the Resistance and of his connection of that fantasy with deconstruction. This confessional passage
is strange enough and disquieting enough to justify citing it here. It is particularly disquieting when juxtaposed to today’s roadside bombs set by “insurgents” in Iraq. What right-minded person, however, could be against the terrorist acts performed by the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation? Make what you will of this passage, dear reader, as it makes its way to you by destinerrance and expropriation:

Naturally my heroic phantasms [. . .] usually have to do with the period of the Resistance, which I did not experience firsthand; I wasn’t old enough, and I wasn’t in France. When I was very young—and until quite recently—I used to project a film in my mind of someone who, by night, plants bombs on the railway: blowing up the enemy structure, planting the delayed-action device and then watching the explosion or at least hearing it from a distance. I see very well that this image, which translates a deep phantasmic compulsion, could be illustrated by deconstructive operations, which consist in planting discreetly, with a delayed-action mechanism, devices that all of a sudden put a transit route out of commission, making the enemy’s movements more hazardous. But the friend, too, will have to live and think differently, know where he is going, tread lightly. (Derrida, A Taste for the Secret 51–52)

I take that last sentence as a warning. It warns friends of deconstruction, such as me, that deconstruction is dangerous for them too. We too must tread lightly or we may set off an improvised explosive device placed discreetly by Derrida, for example in those passages about destinerrance I am reading in this essay. Our transit routes too, such as mine here from citation to citation, might be out of commission.

Destinerrance arises from the feature of iterability that Derrida associates with any sign, trace, or mark, even prelinguistic marks. Destinerrance is, however, especially a feature of performative utterances or of the performative dimension of any utterance. Iterability is explained most elaborately in “Signature événement contexte,” Derrida’s initial challenge to orthodox speech act theory (Derrida, Limited Inc. 17–51, originally published in 1972). Careful explanations recur, however, for example in “Mes chances” (Derrida, 1988, 31). Iterability means that the same sign, set of signs, mark, trace, or traces can function in radically different contexts. This means, as he puts it in “Signature événement contexte,” that the context is “jamais assurée ou saturée” (Derrida, Limited Inc. 20). The context of a given utterance cannot be certainly identified or exhaustively delimited. “To function,” in this case, means both to have meaning and to have felicitous performative force, that is, to make something happen by way of words or other signs. This limitless multifunctionality means, to put it simply, that any
utterance or writing I make may escape my intentions both as to what it should mean (for others), and as to the destination it is supposed to reach. It may be destined to err and to wander, even though it may sometimes, by a happy accident, reach the destination I intended for it. “I” and “intended,” as I blithely use them here, are of course extremely problematic notions for Derrida, and for me too.

Derrida expresses succinctly this tendency to wander in “Le Facteur de la vérité.” He does this apropos of Jacques Lacan’s logocentric claim, in the last sentence of the first part of his seminar on Poe’s “The Purloined Letter,” that “une lettre arrive toujours à destination” (Lacan, 41). Derrida replies that, for him, a letter may always fail to reach its destination. This means that it never really reaches its destination. Here is Derrida careful formulation of the letter’s destiny to wander and to err: “La divisibilité de la lettre [. . .] est ce qui hasarde et égare sans retour garanti la restance de quoi que ce soit: une lettre n’arrive pas toujours à destination et, dès lors que cela appartient à sa structure, on peut dire qu’elle n’y arrive jamais vraiment, que quand elle arrive, son pouvoir-ne-pas-arriver la tourmente d’une dérive interne” (Derrida, La Carte postale 517). He goes on to add that the divisibility of the letter, taking “letter” in the double sense of alphabetic letter and epistle, means “la divisibilité [. . .] du signifiant auquel elle donne lieu.” “Signifiant” here means a collection of letters turned into a meaningful word or sentence. The divisibility of the signifier gives rise, in turn, to a divisibility of the “sujets,” “personnages,” or “positions” (e.g. sender, receiver, or witness, in whatever places they may be) that are subjected to that signifier. I shall return to this issue of the pluralizing of sender and receiver.

Just what does Derrida mean by the divisibility of any letter or mark? In “Mes chances” and in “Le Facteur de la vérité,” he defines it in terms of his resistance to what he calls “l’atomystique de la lettre” (La Carte postale 517). “Atomystique” is the mystified belief that a letter or other mark is an indivisible atom, like those in Epicurus, referred to by Poe in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue.” On the contrary, says Derrida in “Mes chances,” because these “atoms,” that is letters, numbers, or proper names, are without significance, they are multiplied and divided internally by their consequent capacity to be used differently in innumerable contexts, as, for example, innumerable singular persons can be named “Pierre”:

L’itérabilité idéale qui forme la structure de toute marque, c’est ce qui lui permet sans doute de se soustraire à un contexte, de s’émanciper de tout lien déterminé avec son origine, son sens ou son référent, d’émigrer pour
jouer ailleurs, en totalité ou en partie, un autre rôle. Je dis “en totalité ou en partie” car en raison de cette insignifiance essentielle, l’idéalité ou l’identité idéale de chaque marque (qui n’est qu’une fonction différentielle sans substrat ontologique) peut encore se diviser et donner lieu à d’autres identités en prolifération. Cette itérabilité, c’est donc ce qui fait qu’une marque vaut plus d’une fois. Elle est plus d’une. Elle se multiplie et se divise intérieurement. Cela imprime à son mouvement même un pouvoir de détournement. C’est dans la destination (Bestimmung) un principe d’indétermination, de chance, de hasard ou de destinarance. Pas de destination assurée: précisément parce qu’il y a de la marque et du nom propre, autrement dit de l’insignifiance. (Derrida, 1988, 31)

“Mes chances” gives me a chance to identify another conspicuous feature of Derrida’s procedure in all these essays about destinarance. They mime the thing they talk about. This may be seen in both large-scale and small-scale features of style. Derrida’s seminars remained focused on the topic at hand, hospitality, or cannibalism (“eating the other”), or capital punishment, or sovereignty, or the animal, or whatever, but they tended conspicuously to wander from author to author as exemplifications of his theme. As you listened to one of his seminars, if you turned your attention away for a moment and then returned to listening you were likely to find that he was no longer talking about Carl Schmidt but about, say, St. Augustine, in a dizzying aleatory whirl. The one thing you could be sure of was that sooner or later, usually sooner rather than later, you would find him talking about Heidegger. Heidegger was, more than Kant, Hegel, Freud, or any other author, Derrida’s King Charles’s Head. Heidegger was destined to come up whatever the ostensible topic.

This wandering is a feature, however, of Derrida’s published essays too. “Mes chances” is about the chances, good and bad, that befall the thinker or lecturer, Derrida in this case. The essay-lecture itself wanders from a beginning with—guess who?—Heidegger, to Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius, to Heidegger again, to Lacan on Poe, to Derrida’s own essay on Lacan on Poe, to Epicurus again, as referred to by Poe, to Baudelaire’s translations and essays on Poe, and finally to Freud, who was presumably meant to be the center of this lecture on psychoanalysis and literature.

Wandering is also a conspicuous feature of Derrida’s local style.

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5 This is a reference to Mr. Dick, in Dickens’s David Copperfield. Whatever Mr. Dick started talking about, sooner or later the decapitation of Charles I came up.

4 It was presented in October 1982 as the Weigert Lecture, before the Forum on Psychiatry and the Humanities of the Washington School of Psychiatry.
Often a sentence will contain a long list of words or phrases in apposition, sometimes just different ways to say “the same thing” (as if Derrida were perhaps striving, not altogether successfully, to find just the right word or even to avoid saying the right word), but sometimes as a series of different things that are related metonymically, at best. I have cited in another essay an amazing sequence in Derrida’s last seminars in which he postpones, for obvious reasons, uttering the word “mort.” The word falls, with a clang like a funeral bell or glas, at the end of the sequence: “quand je serai passé, quand j’aurai passé, quand je serai parti, décédé, éloigné, disparu, absolument sans défense, désarmé, entre leurs mains, c’est-à-dire, comme on dit, pour ainsi dire, mort” (“La bête et le souverain”). In “Mes chances,” Derrida says to his audience: “Les ‘choses’ que je jette, projette ou lance dans votre direction, à votre rencontre, tombent assez souvent et assez bien sur vous, sur certains au moins d’entre vous” (21). A few pages later he asserts that “le sens de la chute en général (symptôme, lapsus, incidence, accidentalité, cadence, coïncidence, échéance, chance, bonne chance ou méchance) n’est pensable que dans la situation, les lieux ou l’espace de la finitude, le rapport multiple à la multiplicité des éléments, lettres ou semences” (25). The effect of such sentences is to suggest a bristling multiplicity of etymological connections, synonyms, homonyms, metaphors, and metonymies that forbids the writing of simple declarative sentences with a single word in each syntactical place. At this point the reader may happen to fall on the reflection, highlighted by Derrida, that in French mes chances (my chances, strokes of luck) and méchance (bad luck) are pronounced the same. Derrida’s title contains a “destinerring” pun dividing the signifier from within and deflecting any straight line to a single meaning. Derrida’s chances or strokes of luck (that Freud, for example, mentions Democritus) are at the same time the bad luck of a perpetual drifting, wandering, or erring from any straight path toward any predetermined goal.

In other examples of such a series in “Mes chances,” the words or phrases form a chain leading from one to another by an apparently random set of links or by the accidental filiation of a strange sort of family heritage. Derrida cites the passage in Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” in which Dupin explains to the narrator how he guessed that the word the narrator muttered to himself was the Epicurean word “stereotomy.” The word defines an intricate cutting of something, for example a paving stone, so that it will fit: “The larger links in the chain run thus—Chantilly, Orion, Dr. Nichols, Epicurus, Stereotomy, the street stones, the fruiterer” (cited in Derrida, “Mes
Anyone spectacular recipient, beloved. Wander. 

seem postcard, kisses wisdom, I I can function. "Il n'y a donc que des analystes, c'est-à-dire des analysants, dans cet abîme textuel, tous plus engendrés, générés, endettés, affiliés, assujettis les uns que les autres [note the series effect again ([JHM]), tous descendus ou tombés d'une série de proto-analystes dans une chaîne éminemment indivisible de noms propres et de singularités: Freud, Stross, Sterne, le fils et le père dans Tristram Shandy, Protagoras, Démocrate, etc. Chacun d'eux a interprété et réduit, du même coup, une série aléatoire. Chacun d'eux l'a donnée à lire à l'autre—avant l'autre" ("Mes chances" 19).

Derrida, I conclude, does not just name destinerrance as an objective fact. Nor does he just exemplify it in the local style and overall structure of his essays. He is also himself the joyfully willing victim, as one might call it, of destinerrance. A playful exuberance, or joyful wisdom, a fröhliche Wissenschaft, is an evident feature of Derrida's writings. However hard he tries to stick to the point, he is destined to wander. That is his chance or méchance.

The consequences of destinerred iterability for everyday life are considerable, to say the least. I write a postcard and send it to my beloved. The postcard means to tell her how much I love her. On it I write, “Je t'aime” and other endearments. The postcard sends her kisses indicated by a row of Xs at the bottom of the message area. A postcard, however, is open to all under whose eyes it happens to fall. Anyone who intercepts it and reads it can take it as addressed to him or to her. Anyone can interrupt its passage to its intended destination. Anyone can short-circuit that passage. Anyone can make my postcard have a meaning I in no way intended. My intimate postcard can function perfectly well in all kinds of situations. My intention and the address I put on the postcard fail to limit its functioning. One distressing result of this is that I cease to be as single pre-existing “I.” I double, triple, quadruple myself in the act of writing that postcard. I become legion. “Tu as raison,” says Derrida in La Carte postale, “nous sommes sans doute plusieurs” (10). Iterability also means that the recipient, however fortuitously he or she may come upon that postcard, is transformed into someone else, put beside himself or herself, dislocated, by reading it. I become the person to whom those words seem to be addressed, their fitting recipient.

When Derrida gave at Irvine, in improvised English translation, a spectacular two-hour seminar on the phrase, Je t'aime, his claim that he
was only “mentioning” this phrase, not “using” it, did not keep it from functioning, when he said *je t’aime* over and over again, as a felicitous performative utterance. That utterance seemed to be addressed individually to each one in the large auditorium full of students and faculty of both sexes. It was received as such, consciously or not, received, that is, as a declaration of love addressed to each auditor uniquely and individually. These are the figurative presuppositions that underlie one of Derrida’s wildest and most exuberant works, the philosophical *roman à clef* in letters he called *La Carte postale.*

I always associate those presuppositions, in a short circuit, interruption, or *destinerrance* of my own, with a moving passage in Franz Kafka’s *Letters to Milena.* I have discussed this letter, as well as Derrida’s “Télépathic,” in my “Thomas Hardy, Jacques Derrida, and the ‘Dislocation of Souls’” (135–36):

The easy possibility of letter-writing must—seen theoretically—have brought into the world a terrible dislocation [Zerrütting] of souls. It is, in fact, an intercourse with ghosts, and not only with the ghost of the recipient but also with one’s own ghost which develops between the lines of the letter one is writing and even more so in a series of letters where one letter corroborates the other and can refer to it as a witness. How on earth did anyone get the idea that people can communicate with one another by letter! Of a distant person one can think, and of a person who is near one can catch hold—all else goes beyond human strength. Writing letters, however, means to denude oneself before the ghosts, something for which they greedily wait. Written kisses don’t reach their destination, rather they are drunk on the way by the ghosts. It is on this ample nourishment that they multiply so enormously [. . .]. The ghosts won’t starve, but we will perish. (Kafka, *Letters to Milena* 299; *Briefe an Milena* 259–60)

The ghosts in question here are the distorted specters or phantoms of the sender and receiver of the letter, generated by the words of the letter. The letter is an invocation of ghosts, but these are not to be identified with the sender and receiver of the letter as such. The letter itself deflects the letter and the written kisses it contains away from its intended message and its goal, its destination. The letter is deflected toward the ghosts of sender and recipient that the letter itself raises, by a powerful incantation or conjuration. For Kafka too, as for Derrida, and against Lacan, the letter never reaches its destination, or, if it does, it has lost its precious gift of kisses along the way. Message and kisses never reach their destination, according to Kafka’s version of the law of *destinerrance.* To write a letter, in Kafka’s strange metaphor, is to make oneself naked before the hungry hovering specters the
letter generates. To write a letter is to denude oneself, and therefore to put oneself at the mercy of the ghosts the letter conjures up. The ghosts greedily drink the kisses meant for the beloved. This spectral act associates drinking and kissing with an obscene denuding, a making public of what ought to remain private.

By a strange happenstance or serendipity, Derrida had fallen upon the same Kafka letter to Milena in the “Envois” of _La Carte postale_ a year or two before I wrote my essay for the same volume that contained the initial publication (it first appeared in English) of Derrida’s “Mes chances” (“My Chances/ _Mes Chances_” 1–32). Was this really an accident, or did I come upon Kafka’s letter by way of the “Envois”? I do not think so, but I no longer remember. This is the excuse, I am aware, offered by witnesses when they want to cover up something incriminating. I swear I no longer remember where I encountered Kafka’s letter. I think I would have cited the reference in “Envois” if I had then been aware of it when I was writing my essay. Perhaps both of us were led to the _Letters to Milena_ by Blanchot’s remarkable essay of 1954, “L’écrit de Milena” ( _De Kafka à Kafka_ 155–70), though Blanchot, it is true, does not cite that particular letter. In any case, my citation and Derrida’s reference come together, like two atoms falling in the Democritean, Epicurean, or Lucretian void. They bump against one another by a fortuitous _clinamen_. Juxtaposed, in a happy rendezvous, the two references to Kafka’s letter form a stereophonic echo generating a solid surround sound. Here is Derrida’s notation: “Des fantômes, pourquoi convoque-t-on toujours les fantômes quand on écrit des lettres? On les laisse venir, on les compromet plutôt, et on écrit pour eux, on leur prête la main, mais pourquoi? Tu m’avais fait lire cette lettre à Milena où il disait à peu près ça, quelque chose comme spéculer avec les esprits, se mettre nu devant eux” ( _La Carte postale_ 40). The _tu_, first person “you,” here, as Derrida’s initial note to the “Envois” says explicitly about all the pronouns in this work, is entirely unidentifiable. Even Derrida does not know to whom his dispatches ( _envois_ ) are addressed or who speaks them ( _La Carte postale_ 9).

As I did not fully understand in my earlier essay on Kafka, Hardy, and Derrida, what Kafka says is not quite what Derrida means by _destinarance_ as it applies to any sending ( _envoi_ ), missive, missile, performative utterance, or just plain letter, in the sense of epistle. “ _Telépathie_ ” is an essay that was mysteriously displaced, destinerred, one might say, among Derrida’s papers. He calls it a “restant,” a remains or a remainder (“ _Telépathie_ ” 5). Since the essay was buried alive, so to speak, it was left out by mistake from _La Carte postale_. Derrida then
disinterred it again, to publish it separately, or, rather, he just fell upon it again by accident, by a happy chance or méchance. In a remarkable couple of pages in “Télépathie” Derrida imagines a letter that has no intended receiver and no fixed message. It just somehow gets written. Someone, male or female, comes upon it by accident and says, quite without any authority or textual evidence, “This letter is addressed to me. It is meant for me.” This decision creates a sender, a receiver, and a content that did not exist before the letter followed its errant trajectory. It may bind the newly created sender and receiver together in a life-long liaison. As opposed to Kafka, who sets the real sender and receiver against the ghosts the letter generates, Derrida imagines a transaction by letter that involves nothing but the ghosts it invokes. I must cite the whole admirable passage in which Derrida develops this idea:

Je ne fais pas l’hypothèse d’une lettre qui serait l’occasion externe, en quelque sorte, d’une rencontre entre deux sujets identifiables—et qui se seraient déjà déterminés. Non, d’une lettre qui après coup semble avoir été lancée vers quelque destinataire inconnu(e) au moment de son écriture, destinataire inconnu de lui-même ou d’elle-même si on peut dire, et qui se détermine, comme tu sais bien faire, à la réception de la lettre; celle-ci est alors tout autre chose que le transfert d’un message. Son contenu et sa fin ne la précédent plus [...]. Alors tu dis: c’est moi, uniquement moi qui puis recevoir cette lettre, non qu’elle me soit réservée, au contraire, mais je reçois comme un présent la chance à laquelle cette carte se livre. Elle m’échoit. Et je choisis qu’elle me choisisse au hasard, je veux croiser son trajet, je veux m’y trouver, je le peux et je le veux—son trajet et son transfert. Bref tu dis “c’était moi” par une décision douce et terrible, tout autrement: rien à voir avec l’identification à un héros de roman [...]. D’autres concluraient: une lettre ainsi trouve son destinataire, il ou elle. Non, on ne peut pas dire du destinataire qu’il existe avant la lettre. (Derrida, “Télépathie” 7–8)

It is perhaps a little too easy to accept at face value and without challenge what Derrida says. It is expressed so winningly and so persuasively! One is tempted simply to paraphrase it and pass on. After all, Derrida was a great and highly influential theorist. He presumably knew what he was saying. He presumably meant what he said. What he says, however, I am tempted to assume, is not likely to change all that much the assumptions on the basis of which I carry on my daily life. Too much is at stake to take Derrida seriously, a small internal voice whispers to me. Anyway, everybody knows how “playful” he is. What Derrida says is just “theoretical,” “non-serious,” after all. It may even
be no more than a fictive “as if,” “als ob,” or “comme si,” such as those he discusses as a fundamental feature of professing the humanities in *L’Université sans condition*.

Think for a moment, seriously, however, of what Derrida asserts in the passage I have just cited. When I write a letter I think of myself, my pre-existing and perdurable self, as its author. I think of myself as in control of what I say. Though of course I may be misunderstood, I know what I mean and intend to say. I try my best to get this down on paper. I try to turn it into words that are as clear and unequivocal as possible. I also write this letter to a specific person. I address it to him or her as someone just as pre-existing and perdurable as I am. The letter will communicate something, but it will not change either of us fundamentally. Of course the letter may go astray. It may never reach its intended destination. It may end up in the dead letter office. It may be intercepted along the way and read by someone for whom it is not intended. That would be an unhappy accident, but it would not disturb my assumptions about the stable selfhoods of me as sender and of my intended recipient as receiver. The meaning of my letter, moreover, also remains stable, even though it may of course be misunderstood. When I spoke of myself a moment ago as the “I” who has just cited the passage from Derrida, I took for granted that I know who “I” am, just as my use of the proper name “Derrida” makes the blithe assumption that this cognomen refers to a single, stable person. Of course “Derrida” continued to be the same individual through time from his earliest writings until he died! How can we get on with it if I do not take all this for granted and do not try to put it in question?

An enormous number of everyday transactions depend on the set of assumptions “I” have listed, for example my ability to make promises and to keep them, or to be held responsible for a breach of promise if I do not; my ability to commit myself to a contract and to be held responsible for fulfilling its conditions; my liability to be hailed by subpoena before the law and interrogated, forced to give my name and to answer questions truthfully, on pain of punishment for perjury (unless I plead the Fifth Amendment that protects me against incriminating myself); my responsibility to answer for things I wrote and published years ago, to say, “Yes, I wrote that”; my ability to sign all sorts of documents—checks, letters, credit card receipts—on the presumption that I know who I am and that I go on being the same person from day to day and year to year.

Since what Derrida says firmly contradicts and negates the assump-
tions underlying all the everyday performatives I have just listed, a lot that is not “just theoretical” is at stake in what Derrida says. What he says goes well beyond the disquieting implications of Kafka’s letter to Milena. After all, we assume, “Kafka” wrote this letter and it did reach “Milena,” two circumscribed and unitary persons. All Kafka does is to lament the way a letter generates fictive senders and receivers that interfere with the transmission of the message the letter is intended to send from the real, extra-literary or extra-letteral Kafka to the real, extra-literary Milena. What Kafka fears is bad enough, but what Derrida holds is much more devastating. He hypothesizes a letter that is not the external occasion of a communication between two pre-existing and identifiable subjects, let us say, “Kafka” and “Milena.” No, he hypothesizes a letter that seems, after the fact, to have been thrown out (lancée), at the moment it was written, toward an unknown receiver. The sender, male or female, does not know ahead of time the recipient. The recipient’s “who” is determined at the moment of reception.

It would follow that the letter does not have a predetermined content. It does not simply communicate a message. Its content and its goal do not precede it. Someone or other chances upon the letter and says, “It is intended for me. It has chosen me, and I choose to be chosen by it. I say, ‘It’s me (c’est moi).’” That might seem to imply that the letter has found its intended recipient. No, the recipient did not exist before receiving the letter. The letter creates the recipient, unpredictably, incalculably, by chance or even by error. The letter reaches that recipient by destinerrance. If what Derrida says is true, if Derrida is right, then the whole structure of everyday assumptions “I” outlined above falls to the ground, like a fragile house of cards. I, we (whoever these pronouns designate), find ourselves at the mercy of whatever piece of language comes upon us. That language falls upon us by chance. Nor would this apply only to letters. My reading of “Télépathie,” for example, creates or recreates me. I, you, we, they, would do well to think twice or three times before giving credence to what Derrida says. That saying truly is a delayed-action improvised explosive device.

All he has said implies, as Derrida asserts just after the passage I have been discussing, a new, anomalous, unconventional theory of performative utterances. “Anomalous” should be given here its strong meaning of “lawless.” A standard performative depends on a pre-existing self or ego who utters it, and on a pre-existing authorized recipient of the utterance. For example, I say to someone, “I bet you
a nickel it will snow tomorrow.” That utterance binds me according to certain social laws and conventions. These too are assumed to be solidly in place beforehand. Derrida, correctly in my view, imagines that the speech act he is discussing, and, perhaps, disquietingly, every performative utterance of whatever sort, creates the self of the one who speaks. It creates also the recipient, unpredictably, turning him or her into the one who is interpellated by the speech act, bound by it. The person to whom I say, “I bet you a nickel it is going to snow” is bound by my utterance in the sense that he or she must either say, “Done! I accept your bet,” or “No thanks. Snow is 100% predicted.” I am changed by the performative utterance that is directed toward me, and who knows just how I will respond to the violence that is done to me by words? “S’il y a du performatif dans une lettre,” says Derrida, “comment cela peut-il produire toute sorte d’événements, prévisible et imprévisibles, et jusqu’à son destinataire? [. . .] l’imprévisible ne devrait pas pouvoir faire partie d’une structure performative stricto sensu, et pourtant . . .” (“Télénpathie” 9).

Another version of Derrida’s resistance to the idea of a pre-existing self, ego, or subject appears in “‘Il faut bien manger’ ou le calcul du sujet.” The word destinerrance appears five times in this interview with Jean-Luc Nancy, like a recurrent leitmotif. Derrida’s chief gesture in this interview is to register the inevitable survival of the subject, the “who,” even after it has apparently been deconstructed or “liquidated” for good by radical modern thought. At the same time, Derrida argues that the notion of the independent, perdurable subject is the product of an act of “throwing” or “jetting.” This throw both generates the illusion of the subject and undermines it, pulls the rug out from under it, so to speak. Though each of the five appearances of the word calls for commentary, the most important, for my purposes, is the following:

Dans le texte ou l’écriture, tels du moins que j’ai essayé de les interroger, il y a, je ne dirai pas une place (et c’est toute une question, cette topologie d’une certaine non-place assignable, à la fois nécessaire et introuvable) mais une instance (sans stance, d’un “sans” sans négativité) pour du “qui,” un “qui” assiége par la problématique de la trace et de la différence, de l’affirmation, de la signature et du nom dit propre, du jet (avant tout sujet, objet, projet) comme destinerrance des envois. J’ai essayé d’élaborer cette problématique sur de nombreux exemples. (Derrida, “Il faut bien manger” 94–95)

This passage was improvised as an answer to a question posed by Jean-Luc Nancy, “Peux-tu préciser?” It is a good example of the complex rhetoric of Derrida’s style. In the act of being more precise, he
takes away with one hand what he offers with the other. He says that a “who,” that is, a subject, has what he would not call a place, but a sort of assignable non-place, both necessary and impossible to find. Well, he would not, after all, call it a place, but an instance. An instance, in French, is something that stands in, inserts itself, or insists, such as an authoritative legal court (with an overtone of the German or Heideggerian Instanz, that is, a higher authority that imposes itself). The qui, however, is an instance without a stance, that is, without a ground to stand on. This “without,” nevertheless, is without negativity, in an echo of the Blanchotian trademark, phrases that say, “X without X.” The reader will note the series of key words that corresponds to part of that list I gave earlier of Derrida’s most salient motifs: trace, differentiation, affirmation, signature, proper name. Derrida calls this qui, or who, a jet without subject, object, or project. He cuts off all the usual prefixes. The who as jet is just something thrown out, jeté, with another Heideggerian echo, this time of Geworfenheit, throwness. Dasein, for Heidegger, is “thrown,” geworfen, jetted forth in the world. The word destinerrance appears at the end of this remarkably twisted sequence. It appears as a definition of what the qui casts forth or jets, namely, dispatches (envois) that are, perhaps, destined to err and to wander without ever reaching their goal. “Es gibt ein Ziel,” says Kafka in one of his aphorisms, “aber keinen Weg; was wir Weg nennen, ist Zögern.”

(“There is a goal, but no way; what we call the way is only wavering” [Kafka, 1946, 283].)

Derrida’s qui is no more than a baseless lieu de passage between a mysterious source that throws out or instantiates the who, and an unpredictable goal that the qui throws itself out toward, in a crucial modification of Heidegger’s definition of human time in Sein und Zeit. In the last sentence of all in the passage cited above, Derrida tells the reader that if you do not get what he is saying, he has elaborated all this elsewhere, with numerous examples, and you might want to go there, though he does not exactly say where. The sentences mime what they talk about, wandering from term to term until finally landing with a thud on the word destinerrance, before gesturing toward other unidentified places where that word is used and explained more fully.

What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. Derrida must expect others to do unto him as he has done unto them, for example in all those exemplary essays and books he wrote about his friends after they died, books and essays on de Man, Levinas, and on all the

others collected in *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*. If all locutions, performative utterances, writings, messages, letters, postcards, marks, traces, or philosophical essays are destined, perhaps, to deviate from their destined goal and be deflected off on a detour or *Umweg*, if they will, perhaps, never reach their intended destination, this must apply as much to Derrida’s writings as to any others. Derrida knows this, and this makes him anxious, though he also knows that this is also his chance. What, he asks, will happen to my remains after I am, so to speak, dead?

On the one hand, Derrida carefully tries to control the meaning and reception of his work by explaining, with patient generosity, over and over, just what he means. In this he is like a person writing a will who tries to control absolutely what will happen to his body and to his other remains, his legacy, after he is dead. Nevertheless, as Derrida knows, after his death his body and his works, his *corpus* in both senses, will be at the mercy of others, to do with what they like. Plato had already, in the *Phaedrus*, proclaimed that the trouble with written documents is that they are like orphans wandering the world with no father to protect them. When you ask them what they mean, they can do nothing but repeat again the words on the page. They do not answer to our urgent interrogation: “Stand and unfold!” Tell us what you mean,” whereas a living speaker, such as Derrida in all those brilliantly loquacious interviews he “gave,” can try to explain what he meant when he wrote or said so and so. Derrida’s “La Pharmacie de Platon,” one of his earliest acts of deconstruction, brilliantly analyzes and dismantles Plato’s distinction between writing and speaking. Nevertheless, a latent acceptance of what Plato says seems to underlie his anxiety about what will happen to his writings after he is gone and to have motivated his willingness to explain himself orally in interviews, patiently, over and over.

On the other hand, Derrida’s wager, as he explains in *A Taste for the Secret* (12–15), is that since his works form a systematic/asystematic *œuvre*, a corpus, they will be capable of functioning decades and centuries later in radically different contexts. They will function, that is, to enter those contexts and performatively change them in new events of reading. The worst thing that could happen, from Derrida’s perspective when he was still living, would be that his works would simply be forgotten, would gather dust on the shelves. Better than that is to foresee and accept all the misreadings and misappropriations,

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6I steal this fine phrase from Geoffrey Hartman.
along with the more productive exappropriations, that are almost certain to occur, according to the law of destinerrance.

Just what will happen to Derrida’s writings in the future, the “to come,” is impossible to foresee, since that future, we know, and that is all we know for sure, will be discontinuous with the past, partly through the interruptions caused by readings of Derrida’s work. These interruptions will repeat with a difference the original performative force of what he wrote. His writings were interruptive events brought about by his response to the demand made on him by the wholly other. Those events are echoed by the happenings now of exappropriative readings of his work by others, such as by me in this essay. I read Derrida’s works as if they were addressed to me. They have chosen me, by a happy destinerrance, and I choose to be chosen. I can be sure only that Derrida corpus is probably destined to err and to wander, like a specter, revenant, or ghost come back from the dead. That is the price of its survival, its “living on,” after Derrida’s “passing,” when he is “parti, décédé, éloigné, disparu, absolument sans défense, désarmé, entre leurs mains, c’est-à-dire, comme on dit, pour ainsi dire, mort,” and when he and his writings are, as a result, “exposé[s] ou livré[s] sans aucune défense possible, une fois totalement désarmé, à l’autre, aux autres.”

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**WORKS CITED**


——. “La bête et le souverain (deuxième année).” Private computer file, 2002–03. Since this is a manipulable computer file, I cannot give fixed page numbers.


