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Elliptical Interruptions

Or, Why Derrida Prefers *Mondialisation* to Globalization

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RESPONDING TO A JOURNALIST'S QUESTION ON THE SUBJECT OF globalization, Jacques Derrida expressed his interest in the notion of "world" [*monde*] and its history while emphasizing that the world is "neither the earth nor the universe nor the cosmos." He then went on to ask provocatively: "Why do the English, the Americans, and the Germans speak of globalization and not (as the French do) *mondialisation*?" (2005b, 118).

Rather than merely reflecting a francophone bias, Derrida's preference for *mondialisation* calls attention to a couple of important points. First, Derrida suggests that the global adoption of the Anglo-American word "globalization" not only reveals the *de facto* status of English as the universal medium of linguistic exchange, but also the more troubling ascendancy of a global Anglo-American hegemony or "homo-hegemonization" in which an apparent homogeneity or unity conceals great imbalances of power (2002, 373). As he notes, "the word *globalization* is itself becoming global to the point of imposing itself more and more, even in France, in the rhetoric of

politicians and the media” (374). Resisting this “homo-hegemonization” promoted by the global adoption of the word “globalization” will, therefore, require us to think *of* and *with* another word that will challenge its seeming universality.

Second, even though *mondialisation* (which can be translated literally as “worldwide-ization”) is often used as the French equivalent of globalization, Derrida insists that the two words are different. Rachel Bowlby, one of Derrida’s English translators, explains that “the geometrical or geographical ‘globe’ of *globalization* lacks the social and historical sense of the ‘world’ (*monde*) that is present in the French word” (2005, ix). A brief examination of the etymology of the word “globe” establishes its root in the Latin word *globus* or “ball,” a self-contained, spherical object. The word “global” also suggests inclusiveness and completion, conveying a sense of the earth as an all-encompassing whole. *Monde* takes us back etymologically to the Latin *mundus* or “world,” a word dense with social and religious meanings but lacking the geometric totality imparted by “globe” or “global.” The latter terms, as Urs Stäheli points out, not only seem free of national, religious, cultural, and social codes, they also exhibit a “pervasive totalizing gesture,” which theories of globalization generally favor (2003, 2). “Recent political and theoretical discourses on the global and globalization,” Stäheli observes, “are fascinated with this logic of completeness. . . . The narratives put forward understand the global as teleological process, awaiting its fulfillment in the imaginary totality of an all-encompassing globality” (1). Similarly, Krzysztof Ziarek describes how globalization theories, inspired by the image of the globe as a spherical totality, allow themselves to be “animated by a certain ‘eco-politics’ of the whole or the all” (2002, 141).

It is precisely against globalization’s “logic of completeness” and “eco-politics of the whole or the all” that Derrida poses two elliptical interruptions: first, that globalization does not translate as *mondialisation*, and second, that *mondialisation* in its European and Christian filiation undergoes an autoimmune, autodeconstructive process that opens it out to the event that cannot be calculated, programmed, or predicted in advance.

However, before examining these interruptions in greater detail, I need to explain why I have called them elliptical. This will require me to refer

briefly to the last essay in Derrida's *Writing and Difference*, "Ellipsis," and to Jean-Luc Nancy's essay on "Ellipsis," which he titles "Elliptical Sense." Derrida's essay reads Edmond Jabès's *Le retour au livre* (*The Return to the Book*) as a description of how the closing of the book, a figure of completion and totality, is also the opening up of writing. Writing may appear to be a repetition, a return to the book. But, Derrida says, "the return to the book does not enclose us within the book. The return is a moment of wandering" (1978, 294–95). Writing is not just repetition, faithfully circling back to end where it began; writing is a return that wanders, a repetition that introduces difference. Derrida writes:

Once the circle turns, once the volume rolls itself up, once the book is repeated, its identification with itself gathers an imperceptible difference which permits us . . . to exit from closure. In redoubling the closure of the book, one cuts it in half. . . . The return, at this point, does not retake possession of something. It does not reappropriate the origin. (295)

The book, though it appears closed, is never closed; the circle is never completed. Derrida, therefore, wants us to understand that

the return to the book is of an *elliptical* essence. Something invisible is missing in the grammar of this repetition. . . . Repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, the ring no longer has exactly the same center, *the origin has played*. Something is missing that would make the circle perfect. (296)

Coming at the end of *Writing and Difference*, the essay performs what it describes by opening up the book at the moment of its putative close, preventing it from coming full circle by reminding us that writing creates difference through an elliptically positioned essay that happens to be called "Ellipsis."

Invited by Rodolphe Gasché to present a paper on a work by Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy chose "Ellipsis," which he notes is "no doubt the briefest of Derrida's texts which we might call 'properly theoretical' [though

it] describes elliptically the entire orbit of his thought” (1992, 36). Nancy is quick to add, however, that though Derrida’s essay describes the entire orbit of his thought, it does not close off that thought. The text and the thought remain elliptical because their orbit, “like that of the earth and of all thought, does not remain identical to itself” (1992, 36). Ellipsis as non-identity is what interests Nancy in Derrida’s text. He focuses his attention on Derrida’s analysis of meaning’s failure to coincide with itself, its inability to achieve proper identity: “Meaning is lacking to itself; it misses itself; and this is why ‘all meaning is altered by this lack.’ Writing is the outline of this altering. This outline is ‘in essence *elliptical*’ because it does not come back full circle to the same” (38). Nancy further notes that Derrida inscribes an ellipsis in his own title—an ellipsis of ellipsis—by not making explicit the meaning of the word “ellipsis”:

[Derrida] will inscribe it in Greek, and he will elliptically attach to it the double value of lack and decentering. He will not say that ellipsis (like eclipse) has as *etymon* the idea of fault, of failing to be precise or exact. The geometric term “ellipse” was first of all the name given to figures which lacked identity, before being used (by Apollonius of Perga in his treatise of *Conics*) in the sense familiar to us as that which is missing in a circle . . . (46)

Both grammatical lack and geometric incompleteness, ellipsis itself remains elliptical, never quite coinciding with itself, always just missing itself. But, as Nancy suggests, the failure of ellipsis to complete its own meaning, its inability to close the hermeneutic circle is also its opening to something it cannot presuppose or account for in advance:

A question presupposes some meaning and aims to bring it to light in the answer. But here [in Derrida’s text on the ellipsis of writing] meaning is only presupposed as the call to meaning, the meaning which has no meaning, of calling to meaning: the ellipsis which never links up, but which calls. . . . To a call, no “answer” answers; but rather a coming. . . . It would be that which *comes* to all discourse, in all discourse, at its fractured joint, without

this coming ever being arrested *there*—being, on the contrary, always coming and advent. (45)

The trope of ellipsis returns, rather elliptically, 35 years later in the opening lines of Derrida's *Rogues* (*Voyous*):

For a certain sending [*envoi*] that awaits us, I imagine an economic formalization, a very elliptical phrase, in both senses of the word *ellipsis*. For *ellipsis* names not only a lack but a curved figure with more than one focus. We are thus already between the “minus one” and the “more than one.” Between the “minus one” and the “more than one,” democracy perhaps has an essential affinity with this turn or trope that we call the ellipsis. (1)

Sending, it seems, never coincides with the receiving. There is a time lag in sending that renders it elliptical, never quite what it meant to send. It is either too little (minus one) or too much (more than one); it fails to achieve the completion, the fullness and unity (the one) of the circle. Perhaps democracy, Derrida muses, is like an ellipsis: never quite fully present, never complete, never quite *one*, always lacking or always more than what it is. There's always more to say and more to come with democracy.

With the incompletion of ellipsis and its affinity to democracy in mind, we can better understand why the circularity of the wheel occupies and troubles Derrida's thoughts when he comes round to the subject of sovereignty and democracy in *Rogues*. Derrida states rather dramatically that he cannot

imagine it was ever possible to think and say, even if only in Greek, “democracy,” before the rotation of some *wheel*. When I say “wheel,” I am not yet or not necessarily referring to the technical possibility of the *wheel* but, rather, rather earlier, to the roundness of a rotating movement, the *rondure* of a return to self. . . . It seems difficult to think the desire for or the naming of any democratic space . . . without the rotary motion of some quasi-circular return or rotation toward the self, toward the origin itself, toward and upon the self of the origin, whenever it is a question, for example, of sovereign self-determination, of the autonomy of the self, of the *ipse*, namely of the

one-self that gives itself its own law, of autofinality, autotely, self-relation as being in view of the self, beginning by the self with the end of the self in view—so many figures and movements that I will call . . . *ipseity* in general.
(10–11)

Iipseity, the circular return of the self to itself, the rotary movement which secures self-determination, self-completion, self-sameness—in short, the autonomy of the self—thus names the principle or axiom of sovereignty “before any sovereignty of the state, of the nation-state, of the monarch, or, in democracy, of the people” (12). Both sovereignty and democracy can, therefore, be seen, according to Derrida, as describing “a circularity, indeed a sphericity. Sovereignty is round; it is a rounding off” (13). Indeed, Derrida continues, “in a modern sense . . . the thought of a cosmopolitical democracy perhaps presupposes . . . a vision of the world determined by the spherical roundness of the globe” (17–18).

But the ipseity, the circular self-sameness of sovereignty or of democracy, troubles Derrida. It tortures him like an inquisitorial wheel on which the victim is stretched and interrogated. He writes:

I should perhaps confess that what tortures me, the question that has been putting me to the question, might just be related to what structures a particular axiomatics of a certain democracy, namely, the turn, the return to self of the circle and the sphere, and thus the ipseity of the One, the *autos* of autonomy, symmetry, homogeneity, the same, the like, the semblable or the similar, and even, finally, God, in other words everything that remains incompatible with, even clashes with, another truth of the democratic, namely, the truth of the other, heterogeneity, the heteronomic and the dissymmetric, disseminal multiplicity, the anonymous “anyone,” the “no matter who,” the indeterminate “each one.” (14–15)

We can, at this point, see more clearly how Derrida’s thoughts on ellipsis, circularity, sovereignty, ipseity, and democracy are related to the subject of globalization. Just as the ipseity of democracy is troubled by democracy’s other truth of the heteronomic and the dissymmetric, so too the logic of

completeness and all-encompassing sphericity of *globalization*—“a term so frequently encountered in American discourse”—is elliptically interrupted or disturbed by the distinction he draws between the Anglo-American “globalization” and the French *mondialisation* (1998, 55).

Mondialisation acts as an elliptical interruption of the term “globalization” because it disputes the latter’s sense of autofinality and universal inevitability unmarked by any historical or religio-cultural origin. Derrida insists on marking the Eurocentric provenance of *mondialisation* and on distinguishing it from a globalization without history or memory:

If I maintain the distinction between these concepts [of *monde* and *mondialisation*] and the concepts of *globalization* . . . , it is because the concept of world [*monde*] gestures towards a history, it has a memory that distinguishes it from that of the globe, of the universe, of Earth. . . . For the world begins by designating, and tends to remain, in an Abrahamic tradition (Judeo-Christian-Islamic but predominantly Christian), a particular space-time, a certain oriented history of human brotherhood, of what in a Pauline language . . . one calls *citizens of the world* . . . , brothers, fellow men, neighbors, insofar as they are creatures and sons of God. (2002, 374–75)

It is this “predominantly Christian” filiation of the concept of the world [*monde*], Derrida argues, that drives what, at least in Anglo-American discourse, is called “globalization.” The importance of establishing *mondialisation*’s Euro-Christian provenance is that it enables a deconstructive genealogical examination of globalization together with its ethico-politico-juridical concepts of national sovereignty and territory, cosmopolitanism, human rights, and international law. Such a critical deconstruction “would consist in analyzing rigorously and without complacency all of the genealogical features that lead the concept of world, the geopolitical axioms and the assumptions of international law, and everything that rules its interpretation, back to its European, Abrahamic, and predominantly Christian, indeed Roman, filiation (with the effects of hegemony implicit and explicit that this inherently involves)” (375). Such a genealogical deconstruction would establish globalization not as a neutral, objective process, but as

mondialisation, or, even better, as *mondialatinization*, a worldwide-ization emanating from a Christian Europe. Thus, since globalization is really *mondialisation* or *mondialatinization*, we have to concede that it is, as Derrida bluntly notes, “Europeanization.”

But just as *mondialisation*’s European genealogy elliptically interrupts globalization’s universal encompassment or encirclement of the earth, so too *mondialisation* as the Europeanization of the world suffers its own elliptical interruption in the form of an autoimmunity process. In other words, we are witnessing, Derrida tells us, a “double movement”: “globalization [*mondialisation*] of Europeaness and contestation of Eurocentrism” (2004, 178). Eurocentric *mondialisation* suffers an autoimmune crisis insofar as its attempt to establish itself worldwide results in a breakdown of its own immunity to change and transformation. As Derrida observes:

What is exported, in a European language, immediately sees itself called into question again in the name of what was potentially at work in this European legacy itself, in the name of a possible auto-hetero-deconstruction. Or even, I would say, of autoimmunity. Europe is in my opinion the most beautiful example, and also the allegory, of autoimmunity. (178)

An autoimmune logic is at work in the Christian European filiation and legacy of *mondialisation* resulting in the release of a “universal exigency” that “tends irresistibly to uproot, to de-territorialize, to de-historicize this [Eurocentric] filiation, to contest its limits and the effects of its hegemony.” Autoimmunity, in the form of a universal exigency, enables the autodeconstruction of Eurocentric *mondialisation*, thereby allowing it to envisage what Derrida calls “an actual universalization, which frees itself of its own roots or historical, geographical, national state limitations” (376). At the same time, however, this “actual universalization” would not forget its Euro-Christian heritage, even as it exceeds it, because it is that very same heritage that enables the autodeconstruction that ushers in the universalization to come (another name for which may be the “New International”).

In the same way that autoimmunity can be seen as the elliptical disruption of ipseity, of the circularity of autoaffection, in that the return to the

self is also a turning against the self, so too an autoimmune logic ensures that Eurocentric *mondialisation* self-deconstructs and opens itself up to what Derrida calls an *event*: that which “escapes, remains evasive, open, undecided, indeterminable. Whence the unappropriability, the unforeseeability, absolute surprise, incomprehension, . . . unanticipatable novelty, pure singularity, the absence of horizon” (2003, 90–91). An event is “possible only as im-possible,” since it is “without any horizon of expectation, any telos, formation, form, or teleological pre-formation,” and, thus, “nowhere *as such*,” since any “phenomenological or ontological ‘as such’” would annul the “im-possible” event “that never appears or announces itself *as such*.” It is this “im-possible” event, this “nowhere *as such*” that opens up the possibility of a nonhegemonic and nonteleological future for the world and promises a democracy always to come in which an unconditional heteronomy exceeds any autonomous ipseity or sovereign identity. Autoimmunity, therefore, does not just threaten or destroy all attempts at securing identity, it also initiates the coming of the event that opens up the “im-possible” future to come. “In this regard,” Derrida notes, “autoimmunity is not an absolute ill or evil. It enables an exposure to the other, to *what* and to *who* comes—which means that it must remain incalculable. Without autoimmunity, with absolute immunity, nothing would ever happen or arrive; we would no longer wait, await, or expect, no longer expect one another, or expect any event” (152).

To summarize my argument so far, I have suggested that Derrida’s distinction between globalization and *mondialisation* is an elliptical interruption of the former’s seeming neutrality, universality, and inevitability by the latter’s geo-historical and ontotheological origins in Europe. I have also argued that the introduction of autoimmunity is a second elliptical interruption that exposes Eurocentric *mondialisation* to an “actual universalization” that is nonteleological, unforeseeable, open to the incalculable and unprogrammable event. To Derrida’s two elliptical interruptions I wish now to add a third in order to honor his legacy by interrupting it.

According to Derrida, the universal “is not a given, the way an essence would be; rather, it announces an infinite process of *universalization*” (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004, 18). As we have seen, it is in the name of an

infinite universalization that European thought has tried to free itself from its own Eurocentric circle. European thought, Derrida observes, embodies an internal contradiction in that “not only does it give itself weapons to use against itself and against its own limitations, but it gives political weapons to all the peoples and all the cultures that European colonialism itself has subjugated. Once again, it resembles a process of autoimmunization” (18–19). Derrida, therefore, does not consider the European legacy as a sacrosanct tradition that one must simply obey, for to do so would be to engage in a politics of immunity and to refuse to emerge from the protection of a totalizing hermeneutic circle. Instead, he sees the European legacy as “an inexhaustible potential for crisis and deconstruction,” and as an allegory of autoimmunity (178). Thus it is “precisely out of fidelity” to the legacy of the European Enlightenment that one must “question anew” that very legacy. The European legacy is ours “to receive, to mine, to discuss, to filter, to transform, faithfully unfaithfully.” “Faithfulness,” Derrida reminds us, “is unfaithful” (160). Following Derrida’s injunction precisely in order to be faithfully unfaithful to *his* legacy, I wish, in my concluding remarks, to interrupt it elliptically to prevent it from coming full circle, and hence reveal its own autoimmunity. I will interrupt Derrida’s argument that *mondialisation* is simultaneously the Europeanization of the world and the autodeconstruction of Eurocentrism by posing a couple of elliptical questions.

First, can we not see in Derrida’s account of European autodeconstruction, of Europe’s elliptical interruption of its ipseity, its return to itself, a further reaffirmation of the centrality of Europe’s critical spirit? To be sure, Europe is put under deconstructive erasure, but, as Derrida also firmly admits, he persists

in using this name “Europe,” even if in quotation marks, because, in the long and patient deconstruction required for the transformation to come, the experience *inaugurated* at the time of the Enlightenment . . . in the relationship between the political and the theological or, rather, the religious, though still uneven, unfulfilled, relative, and complex, will have left in European political space *absolutely original marks* with regard to religious

doctrine. . . . Such marks can be found neither in the Arab world nor in the Muslim world, nor in the Far East, nor even, and here's the most sensitive point, in American democracy. (2003, 116–17; emphasis mine)

An interesting argument emerges from Derrida's remarks. It seems that despite ambivalence and uncertainty over Europe's identity, Europe is nevertheless regarded as inaugurating the questioning of religious authority and ontotheological principles, a questioning one does not find in the Muslim world, the Far East, or even an America which has seen a resurgence of Christian fundamentalism. Europe, in questioning itself, is exceptional; European exceptionalism, moreover, seems to be made possible only by the Muslim world or the Far East acting as exceptions to the spirit of critical questioning. Gayatri Spivak has noted that "there is something Eurocentric about assuming that imperialism began with Europe" (1999, 37). Similarly, one can ask, "is there something Eurocentric about assuming that the questioning of religious doctrine began with Europe?" Is there something Eurocentric even in the European autodeconstruction of Eurocentrism, an autodeconstruction seen as originating only in Europe? Shouldn't the very thought that Europe inaugurated the spirit of criticism by criticizing itself be erased lest that autocriticism end up reinstating Europe's critical originality? Derrida has argued, for example, that the unconditionality of the gift lies in its not being recognized as a gift. As he puts it, "a gift without calculable exchange, a gift worthy of this name, would not even appear *as such* to the donor or donee without the risk of reconstituting, through phenomenality and thus through its phenomenology, a circle of economic reappropriation that would just as soon annul its event" (2005a, 149). In the same way, to prevent the completion of a circle of nominal reappropriation that would reestablish Europe at the very moment of its deconstruction (or, mark a return to Europe even as it is turned against), can we not argue that we should refuse to recognize Europe as Europe or let it appear *as such* to Europeans and non-Europeans alike? Should we, perhaps, try to forget Europe altogether even if this remains an "im-possible" task?

Our second elliptical interruption is directed at Derrida's discussion of the logic of autoimmunity and the event. For Derrida, autoimmunity

occurs simultaneously with autoaffection; the return to the self is also a turning against the self. Autoimmunity is, therefore, part of the logic and structure of the self (coming before all distinctions between it and its others) and, as such, can be considered as having a certain universal or *à priori* status (2005a, 109). Derrida notes, in fact, that he would risk speaking of a “transcendental autoimmunity” (125). In a perceptive review of *Rogues*, Rodolphe Gasché provides an apt description of the quasi-transcendental nature of autoimmunity: “To argue that no autonomy of the self is conceivable without the circularity of self-affection, and that this return to oneself inscribes within oneself at once the possibility of auto-immunity, is to engage transcendental questions. . . . This concern with auto-affection and auto-immunity is, therefore, one with quasi-transcendental structural limits of autonomy that are older than all established distinctions and that concern structures of *sui*-referentiality in advance of all possible ideality” (2004, 298). As a general logic or quasi-transcendental concept, autoimmunity is inescapable and irreducible. Any strong or determinate action designed to safeguard or immunize ipseity or sovereignty or the worldwide-ization (*mondialisation*) of Euro-Christian ideas will, it seems, automatically and ineluctably undergo an autoimmune process that, by breaching the self’s sovereignty or Eurocentric hegemony, ensures an opening to the event—that is, to the absolutely heteronomous, the incalculable, the unforeseen and unpredictable.

But if autoimmunity is an unavoidable and intractable exigency that opens up all forms of immanentist thinking, then doesn’t its function and logic become all too predictable, even automatic, thereby making the unforeseeability and incalculability of the event less unforeseeable and incalculable? If the futurity of the event is automatically guaranteed by an intractable, transcendental autoimmunity, doesn’t the event become less of an event because of its predictable eventuality? To be sure, the autoimmune process may be different in each case and the content of each event may be unpredictable and unforeseeable. However, even though the specific content of the event may be unpredictable or unforeseeable, isn’t the general logic or structure of the event predictable and knowable as that which always escapes predictability and ontologization? Isn’t it the case

that the more the event is deemed unknowable and inappropriate (and hence open to the future of the “to come”), the more certain and compulsive, and hence foreclosed, becomes the deconstructive procedure or that act of vigilance that confirms the arrival of the event? Just as we should, perhaps, forget Europe to prevent its circular renominalization, should we also, perhaps, try to forget deconstructive vigilance as a program, procedure, or performative in order to be open to and, hence, be surprised by the event? “A performative,” Derrida notes, “produces an event only by securing for itself, in the first-person singular or plural, in the present, and with the guarantee offered by conventions or legitimated fictions, the power that an ipseity gives itself to produce the event of which it speaks—the event that it neutralizes forthwith insofar as it appropriates for itself a calculable mastery over it. If an event worthy of this name is to arrive or happen, it must, beyond all mastery, affect a passivity” (2005a, 152). But even such a declaration about the noncalculable event worthy of its name must not succumb to the performative, must not be too confidently proclaimed. It can only be stated hesitantly and incompletely as a “perhaps.” As Derrida sees it, the event (that is to say, the future itself) is only possible because of the ellipsis of certitude in “perhaps”: “The thought of the ‘perhaps’ perhaps engages the only possible thought of the event . . . For a possible that would only be possible (non-impossible), a possible surely and certainly possible, accessible in advance, would be a poor possible, a futureless possible, a possible already *set aside*, so to speak, life-assured. This would be a programme or a causality, a development, a process without an event” (29).

As we have seen, for Derrida, the difference between the Anglo-American “globalization” and the Latinized French *mondialisation* is the difference between a teleologically informed homo-hegemonization of the earth and a world [*monde*] exposed to infinite universalization, to what is forever “to come.” It is to honor the openness of Derrida’s thought—that is, to be faithfully unfaithful to it—that I have chosen to end by posing a series of questions designed to interrupt elliptically his legacy, a legacy that, unlike sovereignty or globalization, refuses to come full circle, choosing tentatively instead to affirm its responsibility to an elliptical thinking of a world that opens out, *perhaps*, to an infinite “to come,” to the always “more

than one,” to that which exceeds any thought that seeks to encircle and, thus, to globalize it.



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