



PROJECT MUSE®

---

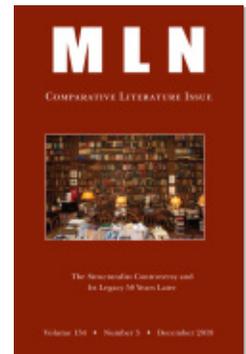
From the Impasses of Baltimore to the Strategy of  
Deconstruction: Thinking "History" Beyond the Language of  
Metaphysics

Anne Alombert

MLN, Volume 134, Number 5, December 2019, pp. 861-870 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2019.0098>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/748152>

# From the Impasses of Baltimore to the Strategy of Deconstruction: Thinking “History” Beyond the Language of Metaphysics



*Anne Alombert*

“Is that what you are tending toward?  
Because, for my part, I feel that I am going  
in that direction . . . a history which no  
longer has anything to do with eschatological  
history, a history which loses itself always  
in its own pursuit, since the origin is  
perpetually displaced.”

“What can that thought mean which belongs  
neither to positive science nor to classical  
ontology? What is the place of this thought  
and of its language?”

– Jean Hyppolite, “The Structure of  
Philosophic Language according to the  
Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Mind*”

## **Introduction**

In *The Postmodern Condition*, published in 1979, Lyotard describes postmodernity as a loss of faith in what he calls “meta-narratives,” that is to say, philosophies of history (like Enlightenment discourse

or speculative dialectics) whose role was to legitimate modern science. According to him, these philosophical narratives shared a common historicist or eschatological conception of time, by which history was supposed to progress towards a final end, which always appeared as a rediscovery of a lost origin. They thus looked forward to an emancipatory and liberating horizon, which can give a reason to hope (Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes* 91).

But the postmodern mind, contrariwise, is aware of the possible excesses of Western democracies and of the possible threat entailed by techno-scientific development. The future is no longer an object of expectation; the historicist conception of time and the philosophical discourse which used to carry it are no longer credible. Postmodern thought suffers from a lack of finality and corresponds to the crisis of metaphysical philosophy (Lyotard, *Moralités postmodernes* 93): scientific transformations, together with the advancement of technique and technologies, made philosophical attempts at legitimization obsolete (Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne* 7–8). According to Lyotard, the metaphysical way has become an impasse; metaphysics can at most become an object of criticism. Therefore, postmodernity could be described as the end of history and the end of philosophy. It represents a “crisis” of thought (*Moralités postmodernes* 93), leading to a state of unease and uncertainty, which creates a “reactionary desire for security, stability, and identity” (*Les Immatériaux*).

Yet, when we look at the works of Derrida during the sixties, it seems that what appears as the collapse of grand narratives may also be interpreted as the beginning of something else, as if the postmodern crisis of thought, which was undeniably a source of melancholy, also embodied a chance for renewal. Indeed, in the talk he presented at the Johns Hopkins conference, “The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man” in 1966, Derrida adopts a critical attitude toward traditional philosophy and modern conceptions of history, but he also seems to attempt to transform and renew both of them. While visiting Baltimore in 1966, where he raised the question of the human sciences’ impact on metaphysical language and structuralist discourse’s effect on the metaphysical conception of history, Derrida was working on *Of Grammatology* and elaborating the deconstructive strategy. When we place his talk, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in the context of his global work, we see that grammatology and deconstruction aim at finding a way to transgress philosophical language and to produce a new “conceptual chain” of

history—that is to say, to solve the two issues raised in Derrida’s lecture in Baltimore in 1966.

Why do structuralist empirical discoveries and theories require a consideration of philosophical language and a critic of the metaphysical conception of history? Is it possible to “make a step beyond philosophy” without “turning the page of philosophy,” and to abandon the “metaphysical conception of history” without falling in “ahistoricism” (Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” 259, 262)? At first glance, these tasks seem aporetic. But it is precisely these two aporias that deconstructive thought will have to overcome: when we look at the strategy of deconstruction Derrida suggested a few years later, the two aporetic problems raised in 1966 turn out to be strategic guidelines. What is the strategy elaborated by Derrida in order to overcome these difficulties, and is it sufficient, fifty years later?

### 1. Is It Possible to Make “a Step Outside Philosophy” Without “Turning the Page of Philosophy”?

Derrida’s intervention in the 1966 conference has often been interpreted as critical of structuralism, as a text directed *against* structuralism, but in his communication Derrida seems to be looking for a way to think *with* structuralism, without betraying the structuralist discoveries and theories. He exposes the consequences of structuralism for the thought which may come after structuralism, and which, according to him, can no longer be a *philosophical* thought in the classical sense of the term. Derrida takes the example of the discovery of the incest-prohibition by Claude Lévi-Strauss, which challenges the traditional opposition between nature and culture. Indeed, the factum of the incest prohibition cannot be conceived within the nature/culture opposition, because it is at the same time *universal* (and in this sense one could call it natural) and at the same time *normative* (and in this sense one could call it cultural). The fact of incest prohibition requires at one and the same time the predicates of nature (universality) and those of culture (normativity): it constitutes a scandal “in the interior of a system of concepts sanctioning the opposition between nature and culture.” That is why, even if Lévi-Strauss continues to use these categories in order to avoid the sterilizing effect of their suspension, he no longer attributes any truth value to them: they become mere methodological instruments, with no “objective significations” (Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play” 254).

Yet according to Derrida, the nature/culture opposition is congenital to philosophy: the opposition between *physis* and *nomos* and *physis* and *technè* is older than Plato, and has been “passed on to us by a whole historical chain which opposes nature to the law, to education, to art, to technics—and also to liberty, to the arbitrary, to history, to society, to the mind, and so on” (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 252). Such oppositional categories are not “elements or atoms” (251): they belong to a syntax and a system and drag along with them the whole of metaphysics. That is to say that when the truth value of the categories of nature and culture are called into question by the anthropological discourse, it is the whole metaphysical system which is challenged, just as when the opposition between signified and signifier is called into question by Saussure’s linguistic discourse, as Derrida will show one year later in *Of Grammatology*. Once the limits of such categories are felt, it becomes necessary to question systematically and rigorously the founding concepts of the whole history of philosophy: a “systematic and historic questioning” of philosophical categories becomes unavoidable, which cannot be “a philosophical action on the classic sense of these words” (254).

Yet, it seems difficult to assume such a responsibility because, as Derrida puts it, no language, no syntax, and no lexicon exists outside of this metaphysics: the thinker, whether a philosopher or a human scientist, is not a subject who builds the totality of his discourse out of nothing, breaking with the received historical categories and logic. On the contrary, he must always already deal with an inherited language: “we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest” (250). Even our ordinary language carries with itself all the metaphysical presuppositions (nature/culture, signified/signifier, animal/human) which are in perfect agreement with common sense. Therefore, it is clear that this systematic questioning of philosophical categories and logic cannot be practiced from outside of philosophy, within another language free of any assumptions.

The critical activity will inevitably have to take place inside the philosophical language itself. Even if it is no longer possible to practice philosophy innocently, Derrida maintains that it is still necessary to read philosophers, but to read them “in a certain way” (259). Indeed, although every thinker inevitably receives a linguistic heritage and accepts metaphysical premises as soon as he is producing a theoretical discourse, all the ways of using these inheritances “are not of an equal

pertinence" (252). The quality and the fecundity of the discourse will depend on how the thinker uses this inherited language, or rather, on how he struggles with it—whether the thinker manages to inscribe in his writing the concern which commands his reading: for Derrida, this is a “problem of economy and strategy” (252). It is thus clear that “the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy” (258); nevertheless, the new way to read and write philosophy after structuralism remains mysterious, and this problem of economy and strategy seems far from being solved in 1966.

## **2. Is It Possible to “Abandon the Metaphysical Concept of History” Without “Falling Back into Ahistoricism”?**

In the rest of his paper Derrida raises a second issue: structuralism implies a second paradoxical requirement, namely, that we abandon the metaphysical conception of history without falling back into ahistoricism. Indeed, for Derrida, the traditional concept of history has always been complicit with an archeological or teleological metaphysics: history always refers to the unity of a becoming, it is conceived as “the movement of a resumption of history, a diversion between two presences, the presence of the origin (*archè*) and the presence of the end (*telos*)” (262). Repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always included in a history of sense, and refer to an origin or an end—that is to say, to a center that escapes historical movement: substance, subject, essence, *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, God, and man are the different names which have been given to this center or originary presence (248).

Yet the structuralist discourse requires relinquishing this desire for an originary presence or a horizon of sense, because it demands thinking a system of differences, a series of substitutions that neither start from a fundamental ground nor end with a reassuring certitude, that is to say, substitutions and transformations that cannot be assigned to a fixed and unmoving center. Structuralism expresses the necessity to break off from the contradictory concept of a centered structure, and to think the structurality of the structure: “to think that there is no center, that the center has no natural locus, that it is not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play” (249). In structuralist theories, be they anthropological or linguistic, “everything begins with the structure, the substitution, the relationship” (256). This discourse on an acentric structure is particularly obvious in Lévi-Strauss’s study of

myth or in Ferdinand de Saussure's study of sign: while Lévi-Strauss shows that there is no reference-myth, that each myth is a more or less forced transformation of another myth, Saussure shows that there is no primary signified, that each signified is a signifier for another signified. According to Derrida, the insistence on this movement of free play and the stated abandonment of all reference to a privileged origin or to an absolute end expresses the need to forego the classical notion of historicity.

But if it is legitimate to be suspicious of the concept of history, that does not mean that one has to "neutralize time" or "put historical facts into parentheses," and fall back into an ahistorical position, which would be just as metaphysical as the historicist one (263). On the contrary, Derrida insists on the necessity to "pose the problem of the passage from one structure to another" outside a linear and continuous conception of time (262). Derrida maintains that structuralism cannot solve this problem because it aims at describing the internal originality and specificity of a structure, not at explaining the development or extinction of structures; but he himself does not indicate what this new conception of history—which would enable imagining the transformation of structures—would look like.

That is why, during the discussion following his communication, Jean Hyppolite immediately asks Derrida if he would agree with a conception of history as "a process which requires no author," "whose origin is always already lost in a mutation," and "which no longer has anything to do with eschatological history" (Macksey and Donato, *The Structuralist Controversy* 265). Derrida answers that he entirely agrees with Hyppolite, except with his choice of words, which do not satisfy him. He insists on the fact that "as always, words are more than mere words" (267): history is itself a concept that cannot be separated from the whole structure and logic of the metaphysical text. Therefore, it becomes obvious that the question of history is linked with the question of philosophical language. The two issues raised by Derrida are in fact two aspects of the same problem, and thus will have to be solved at the same time—if they can be.

### 3. Grammatology and Deconstructive Strategy: Internal Transgression of Philosophical Language and the Production of a New “Conceptual Chain” of History

One year after the conference at Johns Hopkins, Derrida published *Of Grammatology*, a book devoted to confronting the structuralist work of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss with traditional philosophy, and to think the consequences of the structuralist theories for the metaphysics of presence. “Grammatology” was the name of the thought which was supposed to be neither metaphysical nor scientific, and to make a step beyond philosophy. In 1971, in an interview titled “Positions,” he is questioned about his initiative: he responds by making clear the link between the problem of philosophical language and the problem of the metaphysical concept of history, and reveals a strategy aiming at dealing with both of them.

Derrida maintains that metaphysics has not been transgressed if the transgression is understood as an installation outside of metaphysical language, but that a genuine transgression becomes possible, and necessary, if it is seen as a progressive modification of the internal field of philosophical language itself (Derrida, *Positions*). He describes such a transgression as a “reading protocol,” a “strategy of textual work” which has to modify the “economy” of the inherited language. Derrida thus seems to be explicitly addressing the problem of economy and strategy, and of the new way of reading philosophy that he introduced in Baltimore a few years ago. According to him, such a strategy includes two phases. The first phase is critical (which Derrida describes as a phase of inversion or reversal): it consists in revealing philosophical oppositions as violent hierarchies, contentious organizations, inside of which one term commands the other in an axiological or logical way (for example, idea/matter, intelligible/sensible, speech/writing, culture/nature). The second phase is positive (which Derrida describes as a phase of displacement or transgression): it introduces to the metaphysical text some new terms or notions that cannot be conceived within the traditional binary oppositions and entail a new formulation of traditional questions (57, 88).

These notions constitute some tools, which produce conceptual effects, by modifying the functioning of the metaphysical text and by challenging the forces which command its economy. They do not tell something new, but they do something new to the philosophical

text; they do not bring new answers to philosophical problems, but they open new questions by reformulating the old issues in a language that does not carry metaphysical presuppositions: they enable certain formulations that were impossible within the syntax and logic of the previous philosophical discourse. For example, the notion of “difference” introduced by Derrida in the metaphysical text cannot be conceived within the opposition of nature and culture, and enables him to formulate the question of the anthropological difference in a new way, in a language that does not presuppose an essence of the human and that does not look for an oppositional limit between humanity and animality or culture and nature. This is why, after the introduction of such a notion, and the transformation of the traditional problem, concepts of humanity or animality, or nature and culture, may no longer seem necessary.

Indeed, according to Derrida, once the questions have been reformulated, there is no need to keep what he considers “old” concepts (96). Even if inherited concepts must be used before asking new questions in order to remain tied to the discursive system about to be displaced, as soon as new issues can be expressed, it is necessary to abandon the old words, which carry with them the metaphysical presuppositions and the semantic background that has been deconstructed. For example, the fact that the notion of human (opposed to animal), of culture (opposed to nature) or of subject (opposed to object) are no longer useful does not mean that we have to assume that there is no “human specificity” or that the subject has to be destroyed: it just means that such questions can now be expressed another way, and that the human or the subject cannot be *opposed* to the living animal anymore.

This is this economical strategy that explains Derrida’s apparently paradoxical attitude towards the concept of “history” in the rest of the interview, where he refuses both the concept of history and the idea of the “end of history.” In fact, it is precisely the concept of history which is used by Derrida in order to exemplify the double movement of the deconstructive strategy that he has just described. Derrida claims that the destruction of the metaphysical concept of history does not mean that there is no history (77–78): although it is necessary to keep the word “history” in the initial phase in order to produce a textual displacement and to inscribe the concept in a new significant chain, in a second phase, when the question of history has been formulated inside a new text, it will be necessary to stop using this notion, which is too strongly associated with the idea of a linear and

continuous proceeding of presence, even in the supposed non-idealist philosophies. That is why, when he is questioned about the possibility of considering heterogeneous histories, differentiated in their type, in their rhythm, in their registration, Derrida insists on the need to ask a new sort of question: "is it still possible to call 'histories' these heterogeneous and irreducible histories, without implicitly referring them to the reality of a general history?" (77). As always, "words are more than mere words."

Indeed, according to Derrida, if the concept of history is used, it follows that the essence of this history, of the historicity of this history is questioned, and some metaphysical interrogations are reintroduced (77). On the contrary, the problem for Derrida is to question the history of essence, which precisely cannot be a "history" in the classical sense of the term (81). Thus, it is not sufficient to think history another way (as Hyppolite was trying to do in 1966): the old notion has to disappear. It is necessary to produce a new conceptual chain, based on "a new logic of repetition and trace" (Derrida 79). These new concepts and this new logic will have to answer new questions, such as: "Is it possible to criticize historicism in the name of something else than truth or science?" "How to locate the science's or truth's effects?" (79).

Such questions obviously require a text which is not entirely regulated by "essence," "sense," "truth," or "consciousness," which is not a purely "theoretical" discourse, whether it be philosophical or scientific (81). To put it in Hyppolite's words, it requires a "thought which belongs neither to positive science nor to classical ontology" ("The Structure of Philosophic Language" 157). Derrida will specify that such a "thought" cannot remain untouched by any scientific or philosophical contamination; on the contrary, it has to emerge from the confrontation between structuralist sciences and traditional philosophy (Derrida, *Echographies de la télévision* 149).

## Conclusion

Derrida's gesture may not be sufficient to transgress metaphysical oppositions, to transform philosophical categories, and to think evolution without the traditional concept of history (48, 58, 67). Nevertheless, it attests to the emergence of new problems: how can the traditional oppositions (between nature and culture, nature and technics, nature and history, humanity and animality) be transgressed in order to produce a new conception of evolution, capable of think-

ing the passage from a structure to another? How can the traditional frontier between science and philosophy be transgressed in order to situate the emergence of philosophy and science in an evolution that cannot be considered “historical” anymore? If Derrida does not answer to such issues, he nonetheless gives some clues to understand the so-called “end of philosophy” or “end of history” in a new way. Given the scope of such issues, it seems that postmodernity should be considered not only as a state of unease or suffering, but rather as a “gestation of a new question,” which, according to Derrida, can only proclaim itself “in the formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity” (“Structure, Sign, and Play” 265).

*Université Paris Nanterre*

#### WORKS CITED

- Derrida, Jacques. “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, edited by Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, Johns Hopkins UP, 1972.
- . *De la grammatologie*. Paris: Minuit, 1967.
- . *Positions*. Paris: Minuit, 1972.
- . *Marges. De la philosophie*. Paris: Minuit, 1972.
- Derrida, Jacques, and Bernard Stiegler. *Echographies de la télévision*, Galilée, 1996.
- Hyppolite, Jean. “The Structure of Philosophic Language according to the Preface to Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Mind*,” *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*, edited by Macksey and Donato, Johns Hopkins UP, 1972.
- Macksey, Richard, and Eugenio Donato, editors. *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. John Hopkins UP, 1972.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *La condition postmoderne*. Paris: Minuit, 1979.
- . *Catalogue de l’exposition Les Immatériaux*, 1985.
- . *Moralités postmodernes*. Paris: Galilée, 1993.
- Simondon, Gilbert. *L’individuation à la lumière des notions de formes et d’information*, 1964. Jérôme Millon, 2005.
- Stiegler, Bernard. *La technique et le temps, t.2 La désorientation*. Paris: Galilée, 1996.