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The Ethics of Criticism

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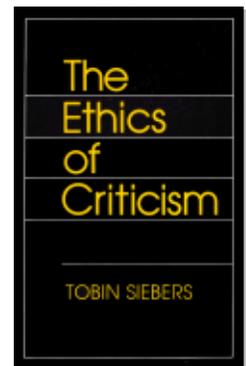
Published by Cornell University Press

Siebers, Tobin.

The Ethics of Criticism.

Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.

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*Ethics in the Age of
Rousseau: From Lévi-Strauss
to Derrida*

Structuralism exists, Lévi-Strauss claims in the shadow of Rousseau, to return human beings to nature, and deconstruction makes its debut as a challenge to structuralism—most specifically, to the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss. Derrida dedicates *Of Grammatology* to a critique of the “age of Rousseau,” the age of anthropology, in which the concept of the human reaches its greatest power as an explanatory category. Structuralism is in Derrida’s view only the latest phase in Western logocentrism, and his early essay “Sign, Structure, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” attacks the notion of structure with which Lévi-Strauss hopes to reconcile nature and culture.

The central issue in the disagreement between Lévi-Strauss and Derrida is the explanatory status of “man.”¹ Much has been

1. General references to Derrida and Lévi-Strauss will be given parenthetically in the text. They include Jacques Derrida, “Differance,” *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973), *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: At the University Press, 1981), and Claude Lévi-Strauss, *L’Homme nu* (Paris: Plon, 1971), *Le Regard éloigné* (Paris: Plon, 1983), *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Pocket Books, 1977), and *La Vie familiale et sociale des Indiens Nambikwara* (Paris: Société des Américanistes, 1948). Translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

written about their debate, but its ethical dimension has been largely ignored. The declared Rousseauism of Lévi-Strauss is not merely an idiosyncratic preference for one historical figure but the acknowledgment of an awesome intellectual debt, for in many ways Rousseau founds modern anthropology. Rousseau's bequest is not methodological, however, as much as it is ethical. Indeed, the name of Rousseau can hardly be mentioned without either alluding to the science of ethics or passing a moral judgment on the man himself. His greatest contribution to ethics is his vision of human equality and difference. The most anthropological works, *The Discourse on Inequality* and *The Social Contract*, examine the origins of inequality and equality in culture, or contract, as opposed to the ethical tendency of nature to give equal value to human beings on the basis not of their sameness but of their specific differences. The autobiographical works, *The Confessions* and *The Reveries*, take a personal and aesthetic, although consistently ethical approach to Rousseau's own differences. They record the history of a unique individual, whose originality is demonstrated on the basis of his exclusion and isolation from the rest of humanity.

If the opposition between "inside" and "outside" surfaces repeatedly in the writings of Lévi-Strauss and Derrida, it is because of the legacy of Rousseau. The age of Rousseau defines a period of brooding over those divisions that tend to establish inequality among human beings. In *Le Regard éloigné*, Lévi-Strauss provides a definition of anthropology that reproduces Rousseau's struggle with and against oppositions. Anthropology aspires to seize its object "humanity" in its most diverse manifestations, and that is why "humanity" retains the mark of ambiguity. In its generality, "humanity" seems to reduce to a unity those differences that the anthropologist works to isolate as particulars. The great test of anthropology is to reconcile the postulated generality of the human condition with the incomparable diversity of its particular manifestations.

Good scientific methodology certainly lies behind the desire to reconcile the two extremes of the anthropologist's quest. To focus only on scientific method, however, would be to overlook the anthropologist's ethical motivation and the profound influ-

ence of Rousseau. For to rank peoples according to separate categories, placing some closer to nature through the use of terms such as "primitive" and "savage," ends by refusing them the constitutive qualities of human beings. Anthropological theory is more ethically than scientifically motivated insofar as the hypothesis of a general human condition erodes the impact of those particulars and differences that lay the foundation for the violence of prejudice and racism. Its appeal as a hypothesis may in fact owe more to ethics than to scientific objectivity. Anthropological methodology, in its attention to the particular, leaves no avenue to a universal hypothesis without attracting the accusation of incompleteness. Moreover, the anthropologist's fascination with human differences always risks the accusations of prejudice and racism, especially when this fascination appears in writing, for ethnography presents individual human beings as objects of discourse to a public. Perhaps the Rousseauism of the modern anthropologist is not nostalgic but a solution to the ethical problem of representing particularity in any scientific system. Rousseau's innovation is to attribute the perfect reconciliation between the general and particular to the state of nature. In nature, Rousseau proposed, individuals are equal in their differences and distinctive autonomy. Culture establishes the divisions among people that must be healed through social contract.

Here is the key to the similarity between ethnocentrism and logocentrism in the respective views of Lévi-Strauss and Derrida. For Lévi-Strauss, ethnocentrism is the name for the anthropologist's inability to write about particular groups of people without abandoning general and ethical theories. Such is the curse of a disabling culture that strives to reach the methodological purity of Rousseau's nature. For Derrida, logocentrism replaces ethnocentrism as the name for the debasement of writing and the use of "writing" as a category to rank peoples. "Actually," Derrida observes, "the peoples said to be 'without writing' lack only a certain type of writing. To refuse the name of writing to this or that technique of consignment is the 'ethnocentrism that best defines the prescientific vision of man' . . ." (*Of Grammatology* 83). Oddly, antilogocentrism, if possible,

would be an ethical position akin to Rousseau's perfect state of nature, where proper names, for example, could circulate through the general population without damaging their propriety.

Rousseau's stand on opposition also has a uniquely private dimension. His aesthetic and ethical system attains its historical eminence through his identification with the victims of exclusion and violence.² The autobiographical works record a remarkable understanding of the ethical superiority of the victim in history and end by contributing more to anthropology than do the writings on social contract. Like his view of nature, Rousseau's status as victim reconciles the inside and outside, but in a highly personal manner that leads ethics into the realm of aesthetics. To call it a paranoid system underestimates his vision of interpersonal aggression as well as the power of discovering a unique position of marginality at the center of society. To become the example and outcast of humanity, "to make an example of oneself," is to resolve methodologically a certain division between victim and victimizer as well as to achieve a uniqueness extremely beneficial to aesthetic goals.

That ethnography increasingly takes the form of the confession reveals both its debt to Rousseau and the ethical superiority of placing oneself among the ranks of cultural others. The identification with the outcast is made possible in anthropology by the essential requirement that all students do fieldwork. Although the requirement was conceived for other reasons, anthropologists benefit ethically from their identification with their subjects, and anthropological literature has achieved an aesthetic status within Western culture. In addition, the easy solution to the accusation of ethnocentrism is to identify with the victims of ethnocentrism. This identification begins as an ethical response to the existence of ethnocentric behavior, but it may

2. See Eric Gans, "The Victim as Subject: The Esthetic-Ethical System of Rousseau's *Rêveries*" and "*René* and the Romantic Model of Self-Centralization," *Studies in Romanticism* 21 (1982): 3-31 and 22 (1983): 421-35. Gans situates in the writings of Rousseau the origin of the ethical and aesthetic system that recognizes and strives toward the historically significant position of the victim. It is this system, furthermore, that accounts for the configurations of character in the Romantic novel as well as its ability to reflect upon its ethical heritage.

evolve into a rhetorical maneuver having little to do with the existence of genuine ethnocentrism. Rather, it concerns the campaign to preserve the appearance of anti-ethnocentrism and the anthropologist's marginal status in Western culture.

As anthropologist in the age of Rousseau and philosopher in the age of anthropology, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida both take advantage of Rousseau's rhetoric of marginality. *Tristes Tropiques* laments the awkward position of the anthropologist, whose profession isolates him from his own culture without establishing him in another. Among the Indians of South America, Lévi-Strauss lives as an outcast, and often among the outcasts of the tribe. He tells us that he shares a hut with a Bororo *bari*, a shaman who acquires his skills by making a pact with the community of evil, and with an elderly widow who has been abandoned by her relatives and stung by the loss of five consecutive husbands. According to Lévi-Strauss, *dépaysement* is the definitive affliction of the anthropologist, and the chapter entitled "A Little Glass of Rum" further enhances his feelings of estrangement by identifying him with the victims of the French guillotine. *Of Grammatology* records Derrida's adventures among the wilds of theory, where he forges the impossible science of writing. Its perilous object is contemplated at risk, and its "future can only be anticipated in the form of an absolute danger" (5). Derrida's metaphors consistently heighten the threat to the grammatologist, who has become a latter day anthropologist risking his person within the forest of symbols.

A Writing Lesson

The use of Rousseau's rhetoric by Lévi-Strauss and Derrida would be of minor importance if it did not cut to the heart of their philosophical presuppositions. The influence of Rousseau survives most dramatically in the stubborn equation between violence and writing found throughout structuralism and poststructuralism. For Rousseau, writing is the carrier of death. Compared to an innocent nature, writing insists on the fallen state of culture. Differences among human beings that are superficial in nature are exaggerated by culture to an unjust

degree, and inequality and violence erupt within institutions. In effect, Rousseau initiates the line of questioning concerning the relation between the language of inequality and the performance of violence that has become the central issue in civilization's struggle with its ethical discontent.

Lévi-Strauss's "A Writing Lesson" in *Tristes Tropiques* would seem to be a stunning example of Rousseau's ideas put into practice. Such, at least, will be Derrida's point of departure for his critique of structural anthropology. As Lévi-Strauss distributes pencils and paper to the Indians, the writing lesson begins, and it produces the expected results. The leader of the band immediately aligns himself with writing in order to consolidate his power over the others:

No doubt he was the only one who had grasped the purpose of writing. So he asked me for a writing-pad, and when we both had one, and were working together, if I asked for information on a given point, he did not supply it verbally but drew wavy lines on his paper and presented them to me, as if I could read his reply. . . . Was he perhaps hoping to delude himself? More probably he wanted to astonish his companions, to convince them that he was acting as an intermediary agent for the exchange of the goods, that he was in alliance with the white man and shared his secrets. (333-34)

Derrida attacks Lévi-Strauss's conclusions as naive because they represent the Nambikwara as innocent and peaceful when many incidents contradict that view. Moreover, Derrida concludes that Lévi-Strauss's Rousseauistic and ethnocentric image of the tribe actually does it a disservice by further widening the gulf between Western and non-Western cultures. The bond between Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss is most visible, according to Derrida, on the issue of writing's relation to violence, a relation that Derrida wishes not to dispute but rather to explore in its most radical expressions. Opposed to the apparent innocence of the Nambikwara, those "without writing," Lévi-Strauss situates the Western anthropologist, whose use of writing carries the seeds of political oppression. For Lévi-Strauss, writing holds the essence of cultural politics. He makes it responsible for the creation of unjust laws that enslave the many at the hands of the

few. "Writing is a strange invention," he begins; "it seems to have favoured the exploitation of human beings rather than their enlightenment" (336–37). Writing is indispensable to a centralized authority. It does not consolidate knowledge, but strengthens dominion. "My hypothesis, if correct," Lévi-Strauss concludes, "would oblige us to recognize the fact that the primary function of written communication is to facilitate slavery" (337–38).

At first glance, there would seem to be no need to pursue a reading of "A Writing Lesson." The relation between Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss seems undeniable. Moreover, Derrida's extensive reading of the episode appears to allow no escape from the conclusion that Lévi-Strauss is hopelessly unoriginal in his adherence to Rousseau. Yet Derrida does agree with Lévi-Strauss on a significant point. Indeed, the major source of agreement among Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida is their belief in the violence of writing. Derrida makes his agreement absolutely clear: "Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss are not for a moment to be challenged when they relate the power of writing to the exercise of violence. But radicalizing this theme, no longer considering this violence as *derivative* with respect to a naturally innocent speech, one reverses the entire sense of a proposition—the unity of violence and writing—which one must therefore be careful not to abstract and isolate" (106).

The relation between violence and writing is the central issue. All three writers affirm and develop the correspondence. Rousseau defends the primitive as the noble savage, a breed yet free from the constraints of writing, culture, and violence. Nearly two centuries later, Lévi-Strauss further honors the "savage mind" by revealing and defending its sophisticated turn of thought. Finally, Derrida exposes the "ethnocentrism" of both men in their tendency to deny the possession of writing to non-Western peoples and to consider this as the proof of their non-violent nature. Derrida's judgment of the Nambikwara differs considerably: "But above all, how can we deny the practice of writing in general to a society capable of obliterating the proper, that is to say a violent society? For writing, obliteration of the proper classed in the play of difference, is the originary violence itself . . ." (110).

Derrida tries to escape the ethnocentrism characteristic of the thought of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss. He neither segregates "primitive" from "modern" peoples nor insinuates that anyone is without writing. According to Derrida, writing is present in the differential system of kinship relations, and as such no culture is without writing. Despite Derrida's redefinition of writing, however, it grows apparent that he maintains essentially the same position on writing and violence as do Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss. In short, Derrida uses a radical terminology but not a radical argument. He still argues that writing is the violent sword separating nature from culture.

I will return in a moment to the agreement among Rousseau, Lévi-Strauss, and Derrida concerning the irrepressible unity of violence and writing. First, we must finish our reading of "A Writing Lesson" by examining how it strays from the theories of Rousseau. Lévi-Strauss cannot help admiring the chief's ingenuity in "recognizing that writing could increase his authority, thus grasping the basis of the institution without knowing how to use it" (339). But the anthropologist soon laments his introduction of writing to the "virtuous savages" and blames himself for perverting the innocent politics of the tribe. For Lévi-Strauss, it is the presence of writing that corrupts the chief. Yet it might be argued that writing is only the medium through which the chief acts to ally himself with the mysterious secrets and economic powers of "the white man." Had Lévi-Strauss chosen to introduce another aspect of Western life to the Indians, would not the chief have imitated this practice as well in order to cement the bond between himself and the powerful anthropologist? If the tribe's politics are perverted, it is due not to the introduction of writing but to the arousal of the chief's desire to share the social prestige of the Western anthropologist. The chief's genius consists in his ability to recognize Lévi-Strauss's difference and to transfer some of it to himself.

That writing is responsible for separating natural and civilized peoples is also placed in doubt by the central tenets of structuralism. Lévi-Strauss's most original contribution to modern thought is perhaps his theory of myth. Opposed to the disorder of ritual, he explains, myth creates order. Myth organizes the raw data of nature into binary oppositions, providing a world

order for believers. Before Lévi-Strauss, few anthropologists had ever held this view: ritual was defined as the originator of order and opposed to the deceitful and imaginative powers of myth. Linguistic structuralism reduces language to the structural disposition of oppositional patterns, and in Lévi-Strauss, myth reproduces the elementary structure of language as such. Language and myth, in effect, betray nature by creating oppositions where none existed before. It would seem only a short step from Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth to the nature-culture opposition invented by Rousseau. We need only read "opposition" with Rousseau's sense of paranoia to see that myth becomes a device for falsifying opposition in nature, just as culture imposes disturbing inequalities among human beings.

What critics often call the paranoia of Rousseau's system is in fact a rather acute sensitivity to intersubjective violence. It is also a strategy for placing the self at the center of social life, and it may represent Rousseau's greatest influence on modern critical thought. Lévi-Strauss shares this paranoia, as does Derrida, but to overemphasize it at this moment misses the opportunity to see the extent to which both Lévi-Strauss and Derrida struggle to free themselves of Rousseau.

Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth defines language as the source of the "false" oppositions organizing the natural world, but structuralism would be untrue to its goal of reconciling nature and culture if this definition remained unquestioned. For Rousseau, there is no guaranteed return to nature after the emergence of culture, and states of reconciliation with nature are maintained only with difficulty in his writings. The idyll of *Julie* is shattered. The model of *The Social Contract* seems impossible, and the love between Emile and Sophie is eroded in Rousseau's unfinished sequel, *The Solitaries*, in which Emile is parted from his beloved and reduced to solitude and nostalgic reveries. In Rousseau's mind, opposition in the form of social hierarchies dominates culture; but the existence of nature establishes the hypothesis that we may yet be able to overcome forms of social inequality and violence. The heroism of civilization is defined by the struggle within social contract toward the ethical purity of natural equality.

For Lévi-Strauss, structuralism is the insight that easily re-

stores humanity to nature, if not to innocence. For “binary distinctions do not exist solely in human language” (*L’Homme nu* 617). Structural analysis reveals the profound organic truth of opposition; it “can arise in the mind only because its model is already in the body” (*L’Homme nu* 619). It appears that binary oppositions permeate both the body and the mind, and with this revelation, the barrier between nature and culture crumbles. Natural innocence is a myth, and human divisiveness only a shadow of nature’s pattern. A profound coherence now unites humanity and nature, but this unity is based on a negative property common to culture and nature.

The value of “A Writing Lesson” as an example of Lévi-Strauss’s Rousseauism pales in this light. The episode demonstrates the profound influence of Rousseau, but gives ultimately a distorted picture of Lévi-Strauss’s larger concerns. The philosophical implications of the episode contradict the theory of structuralism. The separation between the Nambikwara and the anthropologist created by the critique of writing maintains the nature-culture distinction that structuralism struggles to eliminate. For the major thrust of *The Savage Mind* and other writings is to assert the similarity between Western and non-Western thought in general. Lévi-Strauss’s “Rousseauistic” critique of writing acts unwittingly to decenter the rest of his theoretical system.

Derrida’s reading of the scene now acquires added dimension as well. He does not agree with Lévi-Strauss’s estimation of the relation between writing and political oppression. Nor does he readily disagree. Rather, he concludes that Lévi-Strauss’s statements are the answer to a meaningless question, which means that “A Writing Lesson” is apparently not germane to the real link between writing and violence. Just as Lévi-Strauss’s theory of binary distinctions destroys the myth of nature by exposing the deep structure of opposition, Derrida’s deconstruction of Western logocentrism and the subsequent “radicalizing” of writing end by eliminating the hypothesis of natural innocence. Deconstruction, in effect, tears down the barrier between nature and culture, fulfilling the goal of structuralism as Lévi-Strauss defines it. “Deconstructing this tradition,” Derrida says of West-

ern logocentrism, "will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense I shall gradually reveal, writing. 'Usurpation' has always already begun" (37).

In the context of their other writings, Derrida's view of "A Writing Lesson" parallels that of Lévi-Strauss. It represents his ongoing struggle with the legacy of Rousseau and the nature of political contract. But Derrida will soon turn from the potential aggression of writing in politics to the essentially violent nature of symbolic forms as such, thereby devising the theory of writing now associated with deconstruction. The theory establishes an absolute association between violence and writing that ends in the kind of "radical Rousseauism" expressed by a certain Nietzsche and by the tradition that denies the possibility of any ethical action within social institutions.

"A Writing Lesson" plays no more than a thematic role in the exposition of both structural anthropology and deconstruction. The scene is important, however, for two reasons. First, it defines the point where Lévi-Strauss and Derrida appear to take Rousseau's ideas most seriously. Both maintain a momentary political emphasis that opens the way to the ethical theory of "nature." Second, it defines the point where both Lévi-Strauss and Derrida swerve away from the possibility of an ethics. In Lévi-Strauss, the reconciliation of nature and culture by structuralism requires the departure from the political meaning of "A Writing Lesson" and the ethical hypothesis of nature.³ In Derrida, the swerve occurs in the form of the thematic subordination of "The Battle of the Proper Names" and "The Battle of the Poisons" to "A Writing Lesson." Despite the deconstructive view that writing eschews presence, Derrida gives primary em-

3. In his response to Derrida's initial reading of *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss denies constructing any form of systematic thought and accuses Derrida of reading with too much philosophical rigor the "daydreams of an ethnographer in the field." He also reaffirms his belief that "the idea of a just society is inconceivable." See "A propos de 'Lévi-Strauss dans le XVIII^e siècle,'" *Cahiers pour l'analyse* 8 (1967): 89–90.

phasis to the scene in which writing *appears*. The remainder of his analysis is devoted to defining writing by deconstructing the myth of a natural innocence and speech—in short, the myth of nature that represents the possibility of an ethical hypothesis in Rousseau's system.

The Battle of the Proper Names

"What links writing to violence?" Derrida begins his reading of *Tristes Tropiques* with this question, but it is the question with which he might begin any of his writings, for it inspires his deconstruction of Western metaphysics. According to Derrida, metaphysics acts to contain the disorderly and explosive force of writing, and his project struggles to release the constraints on this force and to free its dissemination. Derrida's essential quarrel with structuralism focuses on its love of the binary opposition, since "all dualisms . . . are the unique theme of metaphysics . . ." (71). The binary opposition, as a product of metaphysics, constrains writing by imprisoning its power in hierarchies, and Derrida agrees with Lévi-Strauss that language is the principal manifestation of hierarchy. Like the structuralists, Derrida believes in a correspondence between language and myth because both orient through the creation of false oppositions. The oriented structure of language is therefore a disorientation: "Language is a *structure*—a system of oppositions of places and values—and an *oriented* structure. Let us rather say, only half in jest, that *its orientation is a disorientation*. One will be able to call it *polarization*" (216).

In Rousseau, evil takes the form of difference, and in Lévi-Strauss, myth and language are at the surface oppositional organizations of a chaotic nature. Similarly, Derrida's view of language is possible only within a context that perceives opposition as disorientation. In *Positions*, when Derrida describes the economy of deconstruction, it is in response to the oppositional patterns discovered by structuralism. Notice how "oppositions" becomes a metaphor for violence: the "*general strategy of deconstruction . . . is to avoid both simply neutralizing the binary oppositions of metaphysics and simply residing within the*

closed field of these oppositions, thereby confirming it." For "in a classical philosophical opposition we are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. . . . To deconstruct the opposition, first of all, is to overturn the hierarchy at a given moment" (41).

The neologism "differance" represents Derrida's essential tactic to intervene in the oppositional patterns of metaphysics. It is an "undecidable" in the sense that Derrida calls undecidables those verbal elements that cannot be included within "philosophical (binary) opposition, resisting and disorganizing it" (*Positions* 43). Differance "holds us in a relation with what exceeds . . . the alternative of presence or absence" ("Differance" 151). Only by viewing differance as a strategy to overcome "violent hierarchies" may we begin to see the role of violence in Derrida's work. Rousseau's sense of paranoia lurks in every writing of the words "opposition" and "difference" in Derrida's text, for Derrida perceives them as representing the "violent hierarchies" that perpetuate social inequality. Danger hides in differance itself, for the notion contains both the assertion and deferral of difference, just as Derrida's other major terms—"pharmakon," "supplement," "hymen"—merge polarities in confusion. Often the word "differance" cannot be distinguished at all from "difference," for all differences are in flux and all risk erupting in violence. The introduction "now and then," as Derrida says in "Differance," of the *a* of difference serves only to expose the true nature of all difference.

As such, Derrida's theory of differance is a strategy against itself. Just as he opposes the violent hierarchies of structuralism, he militates against "the violence of difference" by stressing its postponement. Differance is difference written under erasure, and we must understand that Derrida wishes to erase "differences" because he associates them with the violence of forced inequality. Herein lies Derrida's fundamental attachment to Rousseau. Despite his attempts to break free of Rousseau's hold by disrupting the nature-culture opposition, Derrida cannot escape the sensation that writing is violent simply because it creates differences. To some extent, therefore, the nature-culture division remains intact, even though Derrida refuses to

mark the origin of its separation. Writing, in Rousseau's mind, introduces the false differences that make exclusionism, prejudice, and political oppression possible, and Derrida offers his agreement in his definition of man: "Man *calls himself* man only by drawing limits excluding his other from the play of supplementarity" (*Of Grammatology* 244). The idea of man is therefore based on a violent hierarchy whose very existence disorients and falsifies what we might call the dream of nonopposition, here Derrida's "play of supplementarity."

It might be objected that this reading has dealt only with the metaphor of the "violence of the letter." The objection would be essentially correct, although my strategy represents an appropriate entry into a theory that enshrines the metaphoricity of all argumentation. My point so far has been to demonstrate to what extent violence lurks in Derrida's metaphors of writing and how some of his ideas may be better understood as attempts to deal with his awareness of the fact. To the question "What links writing to violence?" Derrida provides only a metaphorical response, most specifically because he believes that no other response is possible. Yet this very belief may itself be a symptom of his desire to defer the violence of difference. The belief in the closure of representation has the effect of containing violence within the realm of the metaphysical, that is, beyond the concrete concerns of human beings, society, and politics.

Derrida debunks Lévi-Strauss and the social sciences in general by exposing their complacency with the violence of metaphysics. The social sciences are inappropriate to the study of writing because they are implicated in its aggression. Moreover, all forms of knowledge extend the forces of exclusion and opposition. At the same time, however, Derrida believes in a profound relationship between writing and "interpersonal violence": "If it is true, as I in fact believe, that writing cannot be thought outside the horizon of intersubjective violence, is there anything, even science, that radically escapes it? Is there a knowledge, and, above all, a language, scientific or not, that one can call alien at once to writing and to violence? If one answers in the negative, as I do, the use of these concepts to discern the

specific character of writing is not pertinent" (*Of Grammatology* 127).

Since the opening of any question—"What is writing?" for example—departs from the closure of self-evidence and creates a system of oppositions, knowledge in Derrida's view necessarily takes the form of errancy. But his recognition of error is an ethical judgment, not a judgment of fact, for Derrida is concerned not with the "reality" of opposition but with its linguistic nature. His definition of errancy depends on the Rousseauistic contention that such "opposition" is false and unsupportable. Strangely, it is precisely the domain of ethics, of social character, that Derrida refuses to discuss openly in his work, despite his affirmation of the relation between writing and intersubjective violence.

Derrida enumerates, in fact, three types of violence. The first violence is to give names; "such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying. . . . To think the unique *within* the system, to inscribe it there, such is the gesture of arche-writing: arche-violence." The second stage of violence, Derrida continues, "is reparatory, protective, instituting the 'moral,' prescribing the concealment of writing and the effacement and obliteration of the so-called proper name. . . ." This is the violence of prohibition that Derrida stresses in his critique of Lévi-Strauss's naive belief in the Nambikwara's innocence, for those who prohibit the proper name are by definition implicated in the aggression of concealment. Finally, out of the "arche-violence" of language and its prohibitions, "a third violence can *possibly* emerge or not (an empirical possibility) within what is commonly called evil, war, indiscretion, rape; which consists of revealing by effraction the so-called proper name, the originary violence which has severed the proper from its property . . ." (112).

Derrida gives the most emphasis in his writings to the first two forms, naming and the prohibitions surrounding naming, because "empirical violence" merely repeats the scene of these earlier infractions. As such, Derrida's exposition of the three forms of violence owes a great debt to the logic of psycho-

analysis. Just as Freud wishes to trace the origin of war neurosis to the Oedipus complex, Derrida gives precedence to the violence of the letter over physical violence. War in both deconstruction and psychoanalysis would be merely the product of the return of the repressed.

This is an interesting swerve away from the earlier assertion that writing cannot be conceived outside the horizon of inter-subjective violence. The distinctions between forms of violence reduce the effect of this insight by encouraging us to view inter-subjective violence on a much more abstract level, equating it with naming and prohibitions before thinking of it in terms of rivalry and war. It also takes for granted that language makes physical violence possible and ignores the alternative that human aggression may in fact exist in a reciprocal relation with language, generating representations that may either contain its escalation or determine the focus of more violence.

Derrida's argument is played out in the thematic subordination of "The Battle of the Proper Names" and "The Battle of the Poisons" to "A Writing Lesson." His interest in proper names, of course, derives from the parallel between their circulation among different individuals and the slippage of language in general over and about the referent. Despite his interest in the proper name, Derrida chooses to focus on "A Writing Lesson" as the example that exposes the cooperation between writing and violence. His choice is puzzling given the relative sterility of the scene in comparison to "The Battle of the Proper Names" and "The Battle of the Poisons." Lévi-Strauss's distribution of writing implements causes little commotion: only one individual attempts to imitate the anthropologist's writing skills. Consequently, the scene occupies little space in Lévi-Strauss's first sketches of Nambikwara life. His thesis, *La Vie familiale et sociale des Indiens Nambikwara*, places "A Writing Lesson" in a totally different context. There the episode appears in the description of the Indian chief, A-1, who feigns the knowledge of writing. It is a scene that bears upon the dilemma of proper names as well. In the thesis, directly after the account of "The Battle of the Proper Names," Lévi-Strauss triumphantly announces: "On a day of great confidence, A-1 gave us the names of his par-

ents and great-grandparents so that at the final count the list of proper names recovered a total of five generations" (38). In *Tristes Tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss suppresses the fact that A-1 helps him to complete the list of proper names. In short, the squabble among the young girls of "The Battle of the Proper Names" is not the only incident in which the prohibition is broken.

Lévi-Strauss's self-satisfaction with this day of amazing confidence is greatly undercut, however, by the absence of A-1's name from his list. Apparently, for all his trust and willingness to reveal his relatives' names, A-1 still gave some credence to the superstition against pronouncing one's own name.

Thus, all paths converge on the usage of the proper name and "The Battle of the Proper Names." The episode, perhaps more than "A Writing Lesson," unfolds within the horizon of inter-subjective violence, revealing an astounding dynamic between aggression and language. I cite the version in *Tristes Tropiques*:

One day, when I was playing with a group of children, a little girl who had been struck by one of her playmates took refuge by my side and, with a very mysterious air, began to whisper something in my ear. As I did not understand and was obliged to ask her to repeat it several times, her enemy realized what was going on and, obviously very angry, also came over to confide what seemed to be a solemn secret. After some hesitation and questioning, the meaning of the incident became clear. Out of revenge, the first little girl had come to tell me the name of her enemy, and the latter, on becoming aware of this, had retaliated by confiding to me the other's name. From then on, it was very easy, although rather unscrupulous, to incite the children against each other and to get to know all their names. After which, having created a certain atmosphere of complicity, I had little difficulty in getting them to tell me the names of the adults. When the latter understood what our confabulations were about, the children were scolded and no more information was forthcoming.

(312)

A little girl slaps another, who in turn breaks the prohibition against uttering a proper name. Derrida's reading of the episode will not be without irony; in fact, it typifies his method of reading in general. He reads over Lévi-Strauss's shoulder, repeating

and exaggerating the anthropologist's own arguments to the point of absurdity. Nevertheless, a certain moment arrives when parodic imitation merges with its object; especially in those instances where the device advances Derrida's own position, we should not hesitate to strip away the exaggeration and to read a passage seriously. Derrida declares that the breaking of the taboo exceeds all other forms of violence, and given his attitude toward language, the reaction is predictable. He adds a touch of hyperbole to the anthropologist's sorrow at pitting the girls against each other, but the hidden message of his words serves his own argument that the originary violence of naming and prohibition precedes physical acts of aggression. The fact that a blow incited the transgression seems to mean very little: "That one of them should have 'struck' a 'comrade' is not yet true violence. No integrity has been breached. Violence appears only at the moment when the intimacy of proper names can be opened to forced entry" (113).

The violent catalyst of transgression literally disappears in the din of language created by the little girls and Derrida. The slap is not perceived as an authentic act of violence. Transgressing the prohibition works admirably, for it fools Lévi-Strauss, Derrida, and the Nambikwara children. The play of language turns the Indians and the critics away from the violence of the blow.

"The Battle of the Proper Names" illustrates with perfection the notion of differance, but only if we understand that the object of deferral is violence. Here the system of writing hinders the escalation of physical aggression. The transgression defers the blow into a representational domain. The difference between the blow and the transgression is the reduction of violence in the latter. The real violence of the slap is channeled into a cultural representation that subdues it. Instead of responding blow for blow and provoking a cycle of reciprocal violence, the victim retaliates through a cultural system of exchange. She avenges her injury by exposing her adversary to a less sure and less immediate form of violence. The transgression, unlike the blow, is not a private but a social and public form of reprisal. Its violence depends on the judgments of the tribe and the whims of hazard.

What is the role of hazard in the episode? It is well-known

that there is no such thing as an accident among "primitive" people. Every effect has its cause, and every cause, its effect. How may hazard serve to dissipate violence?

The easiest way to understand the role of hazard in the scene is to think of the little girl's transgression as a curse. If we consider the magical import of language among the Nambikwara, it is not surprising that they fear the proper name. In their estimation, names invoke presence. The name of a god, if uttered, may make that vengeful god materialize. Curses do indeed cause accidents. Among the Nambikwara, the proper name is considered to be a double of its possessor. To know another's name gives one power, and to speak a name carelessly is to manhandle and expose its bearer to attacks and enemies. In a society where speaking someone's name may place its bearer under the power of an enemy, such an outburst is truly a curse. Unless we believe in magic, however, an accident must follow the curse for it to work.

In this sense, "The Battle of the Proper Names" is a good case in point. The little girls remain in excellent health despite the transgression. The scene has no ramification other than the scolding. Yet another situation is easily imagined. If the plague preceding "The Battle of the Poisons" had appeared directly after the transgression, the curse might have been considered more effective. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss's role would have become more complex. Lévi-Strauss already occupies a marginal and somewhat mysterious position among the Nambikwara, as he repeatedly tells the reader. Indeed, "A Writing Lesson" presupposes that the chief can win power by allying himself with the "white man" and "his secrets." The structures of the two scenes are remarkably similar, and "The Battle of the Proper Names" in effect complements "A Writing Lesson" by providing a clearer example of Lévi-Strauss's liminal relation to the tribe. Remember that the girls seek reprisal by "whispering" the names to the anthropologist. As the new possessor of the tribe's proper names, Lévi-Strauss might have been blamed for the plague and, in retrospect, for having instigated the original transgression through sorcerer's gifts for the purpose of obtaining the means of harming the tribe.

Since no accident calls forth this logic, that is, demands to be

explained at the anthropologist's expense, Lévi-Strauss escapes the potential accusations. At least temporarily. Derrida discovers the scene much later and blames Lévi-Strauss for having antagonized the children. He transforms (admittedly playing upon Lévi-Strauss's guilt) the scene of observation into a crime of sexual violation, narrating the story almost as an advocate for the tribe would to acquit the girls of all blame. Notice how Derrida retells the story, infusing it with the drama of sexual attack: "It is the anthropologist who violates a virginal space so accurately connoted by the scene of a game and a game played by little girls. . . . The mere presence of a spectator, then, is a violation. First a pure violation: a silent and immobile foreigner attends a game of young girls. . . . The eye of the other calls out the proper names, spells them out, and removes the prohibition that covered them" (113). After remarking the scolding received by the children, Derrida continues in the same vein: "The true culprit will not be punished, and this gives to his fault the stamp of the irremediable . . ." (114).

Lévi-Strauss, not the blow, apparently incites the initial transgression. Derrida views the violence of the girls in an innocent light to demonstrate the anthropologist's ethnocentric interference in tribal life. His emphasis is confusing because a major aspect of his critique is devoted to Lévi-Strauss's Rousseauism. Derrida goes to great lengths to quote every incident in *Tristes Tropiques* that exposes the turbulent nature of the Nambikwara and contradicts Lévi-Strauss's belief in the tribe's peacefulness. The only time that he allows them to maintain their natural innocence is when it is necessary to his attack on Lévi-Strauss's ethnocentrism.

The Battle of the Poisons

One example of the Nambikwara's fierceness is "The Battle of the Poisons," which Derrida automatically parallels with "The Battle of the Proper Names." The latter stresses the virginal innocence of the Nambikwara children and the lascivious desire of the anthropologist. "The Battle of the Poisons" supposedly reverses the scheme, highlighting an incident in which the an-

thropologist refuses to take part in tribal violence. The episode further clarifies the logic of "A Writing Lesson" and of "The Battle of the Proper Names," and it reflects so strongly on the present argument that it is well worth recounting. Lévi-Strauss provides the most complete account in his thesis:

During our stay, poison was again to play a role in A-6's existence. In August of 1938, we were visiting a neighboring band (a-2), and relations became strained so quickly between A-6 and our hosts over what was undoubtedly a question of women that he acquired the habit of coming to my camp in search of a more cordial atmosphere. He also shared my meals. The fact was quickly noted. One day a delegation of four men came to see me, asking me in a menacing tone to mix some poison (that they had brought with them) into the next dish I offered to A-6. They estimated that it was essential to remove him quickly because, as they told me, he is "very mean" (*kakore*) and "not worth anything at all" (*aidotiene*). I had great trouble getting rid of my visitors without offering a refusal that would expose me in turn to an animosity against which I had just learned it was best to protect myself. I decided that the best alternative was to exaggerate my ignorance of the language and to feign incomprehension obstinately. After many attempts, my visitors left greatly disappointed. I warned A-6 who disappeared right away. I was only to see him again four months later. (124)

The episode opens with an outbreak of an infectious eye disease. Lévi-Strauss's wife catches it and goes home for treatment. The disease establishes an atmosphere of unrest and irritation among the Indians, and Lévi-Strauss leaves to continue his journey. In trying to escape the disorder of the plague, however, he stumbles into a more dangerous situation. He encounters a very angry group of Nambikwara, whose principal target, unfortunately, is A-6.

The space in which the conflict unfolds is just as important as the events themselves. A-6 tries to avoid the tension by going to Lévi-Strauss's camp for meals, and the anthropologist once again finds himself in the company of one who enjoys a marginal status with regard to the majority. A-6's behavior reveals more about Lévi-Strauss's status than about his own. The anthropologist's camp serves as a kind of neutral ground or sanc-

tuary. A-6 appears to stand beyond the reach of his enemies, but not for long because they also have a mind to exploit the neutral territory of the outsider's camp. The delegation arrives and calls A-6 *kakore*, a word designating a dangerous substance, or the evil and nefarious nature of certain people. They request that this *kakore* be removed through the application of *kakore*, their poisonous devices. Any one of the Nambikwara, a group of talented poisoners, would have been able to perform the unsavory task. Why do they approach a foreigner who has no experience in poisoning? Why do they ask Lévi-Strauss to murder A-6?

The Nambikwara appeal to Lévi-Strauss precisely because he is not a member of the tribe. The anthropologist, the outsider who lives within, is known by everyone, but he has no blood ties to the tribe. Even his nearest relative, his wife, has been sent away. The arrangement is coldly logical. If a member of the tribe performed the poisoning, A-6's relatives would seek him out to avenge the murder, an act that would in turn incite further retribution. The potential feud would be avoided, however, by taking advantage of the neutral space of Lévi-Strauss's camp, by bringing in an "outside man." The cycle of revenge would stop with the anthropologist because he has no blood relatives in the tribe. Within tribal society, the use of Lévi-Strauss to murder A-6 would be the perfect crime.

The striking resemblance between this scene and "The Battle of the Proper Names" (perhaps what urged Derrida to give them similar titles) reveals the hidden motivations of the Nambikwara children. The little girl whispers the proper name to Lévi-Strauss to give the stranger possession of the *kakore*. If the little girl had shouted out the name, ignoring the presence of the anthropologist, the subsequent blame would have been placed on her head. The situation would have evolved normally, depending on the play of hazard and tribal justice. As it is, however, the girl dictates a narrower frame within which hazard and justice must unfold. Like the delegation of poisoners, she has "tempted" the stranger to commit her crime. Whether the anthropologist has "succumbed" to the temptation turns on the future health of the tribe. If the plague breaks out, the anthropologist may be suspected of causing it.

The girl's actions are aggressive not because the transgression is itself violent, as Derrida suggests, but because her selection of Lévi-Strauss as the medium of her reprisal constitutes a recognition of his difference. Her violence concerns the attempt to use the anthropologist as a weapon, in effect, to bring in an "outside man." This logic is not open to scrutiny, but it is implicit in the code of behavior.

"A Writing Lesson," "The Battle of the Proper Names," and "The Battle of the Poisons" reveal similar patterns. "A Writing Lesson" singles out Lévi-Strauss as a unique individual whose power may be appropriated. Lévi-Strauss's personal feelings of guilt about his involvement preserve the uniqueness that the Nambikwara attribute to him, and Derrida eventually criticizes him for being more concerned with his own humility and unacceptability than with the damage done to the tribe. "The Battle of the Proper Names" reproduces the same configuration. But in this case, it is the little girl and Derrida who imply the anthropologist's difference to serve their own ends. Finally, "The Battle of the Poisons" casts light on the social processes hidden in the other two episodes by making an explicit association between the difference attributed to the anthropologist and inter-subjective violence.

The startling similarity between the Nambikwara's behavior and the explanations of Lévi-Strauss and Derrida disposes of any sense that Western and non-Western cultures are significantly different. Each episode progresses by holding one particular element responsible for the violence, be it the presence of the anthropologist, the transgression of a prohibition, or the special status of "writing." The transgression of the taboo against the proper names contains the violence of the children within a system of prohibitions. The Nambikwara warriors attempt to escape retribution for their murderous plot by shifting the blame to someone outside the cycle of tribal revenge. Lévi-Strauss holds himself responsible for the corrupt behavior of the Nambikwara chief and the mischief of the children. And, finally, Derrida accuses Lévi-Strauss for the girls' transgressions and then blames writing in general for being the source of cultural violence.

In point of fact, the eruption of violence cannot be traced to

any one source. The anthropologist does not cause the violence any more than writing does. Violence evolves within the context of interpersonal relations and the attempts of society to regulate the focus and discharge of aggression. The Nambikwara divert their own violence toward the anthropologist and the system of proper names in order to externalize it. In the first case, the cause of violence is located in someone outside the tribe. In the second, the violence is contained through representation. In both cases, the containment is mistaken for cause. Whatever dissipates violence and is identified as its last resting place is always seen as its source. Lévi-Strauss and Derrida remain within this logic when they claim that the anthropologist and writing have the power to bring about the tribe's misfortunes.

If the value of such logic lies in its tendency to hinder the escalation of intersubjective violence, one must admit as well that the system includes the potential of directing violence against individuals or ideas in the effort to control it. In short, ethical systems are capable of producing their own violence even as they move to eradicate other forms of violence. We describe as ethically advanced the cultures that have turned their efforts toward the forms of violence that they create in addition to the forms whose insistence first sparked the need for an ethics as such.

The Nonethical Opening of Ethics

The term "ethnocentrism" arises as an ethical attempt to prohibit the unjust treatment of other peoples. It acts to deter the rivalry created by the clashing of two systems of belief, that of non-Western groups and that of anthropologists. The majority of the first anthropologists placed themselves among "primitives" in a "missionary" capacity. They arrived fully armed with a system of beliefs, coming not so much to be taught as to teach. They guarded themselves against the "savage mentality" of their subjects by asserting their own ideologies. Their methods of study translated their observations into Western languages, subject to Western comparisons, contrasts, and judgments. This disposition is found among anthropologists as recent as Lévy-

Bruhl, who keeps "modern" and "primitive" human beings on totally separate ground. It also accounts for the campaign of Lévi-Strauss to overcome past mistreatment of non-Western groups and to consider "early" and "modern" human beings as equals.

Derrida equates the anti-ethnocentrism of modern anthropology with the spirit of Rousseau. In Derrida's estimation, Lévi-Strauss's critique of ethnocentric behavior is concerned less with the spread of prejudice than with the anthropologist's desire to contrast the innocence of the native with his own sense of guilt and unacceptability. "Lévi-Strauss's writings would confirm," he claims, "that the critique of ethnocentrism . . . has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of original and natural goodness, of accusing and humiliating oneself, of exhibiting its being-unacceptable in an anti-ethnocentric mirror" (114). Derrida's reading of Rousseau's rhetoric of marginality is accurate, and no doubt the gesture of anti-ethnocentrism may at times be directed more toward gaining prestige than toward defending subjects of anthropological study. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss's emphasis on the Nambikwara's innocence contradicts his larger view of the "savage mind," as it derives more from the influence of Rousseau than from his own theories. "A Writing Lesson" presents the Nambikwara as a symbol of ethical innocence, as the hidden path leading back to the ethical domain of nature. The tribe represents the hypothesis of an ethical state of affairs, which may be either steeped in nostalgia and made the subject of utopic dreams or registered in social science as the possibility of social reform and action. In the case of Rousseau, it would have been impossible to write *The Social Contract* if the hypothesis of the "noble savage" had not been explored seven years earlier in the second *Discourse*. Indeed, critics of his idea complain typically about the presence of the first work in the second: they dispute the possibility of social contract among individuals who are not already civilized. The general will necessary to contract is said to be a social contract a priori.

In Lévi-Strauss, the desire for an ethics arises in the momentary concern with the influence of writing on the Nambikwara's political system, only to die as structuralism matures and strives

to realize the reconciliation of nature and culture. The motivation for the reconciliation comes from Rousseau, which explains why he occupies such an honored position in Lévi-Strauss's thought, but the only reason in Rousseau for reconciling nature and culture is to recuperate the ethical hypothesis of nature. The driving force of both Rousseau's aesthetic and ethical writings is his acute sensitivity to the violence among human beings. Structuralism tries to reconcile nature and culture, but it achieves the effect at the expense of Rousseau's ethics, which denies the only reason to bring about the reconciliation.

Derrida repeats Lévi-Strauss's exclusion of Rousseau's ethics with a double gesture. First, he calls the spirit of anti-ethnocentrism a cliché of Rousseau's thought and exposes the cruelty of the Nambikwara in order to shatter the hypothesis of natural innocence. By implication, he also reduces the anthropological critique of ethnocentrism to the selfish desire to attain the status of ethical superiority in Western cultures, thereby limiting seriously any form of altruistic behavior on the part of anthropologists. Second, he translates "ethnocentrism" into "logocentrism." The former exists at the level of social interaction within the checks and balances of ethical behavior as well as within the aggression of mutual accusation, as when Derrida accuses Lévi-Strauss of being ethnocentric in his belief that the Nambikwara are anti-ethnocentric. "Logocentrism" is, in effect, a theory of language that equates representation with a certain prejudice for presence. To posit an antilogocentrism would be an ethical and nonprejudicial gesture, but Derrida reminds us continually that such a desire means thinking the unthinkable. Similar to Lévi-Strauss's theory of mind, Derrida's idea of logocentrism identifies thought itself with the creation of violent hierarchies, oppositions, differences, and structures of exclusion. In practice, the faithfulness of both Lévi-Strauss and Derrida to Rousseau's equating of writing and violence is belied by the extremes to which they take it. Both create an absolute identity between culture and violence, or writing and violence, that the author of *The Social Contract* would have energetically denied because such an identity precludes the ethical hypothesis that all of his work strives toward.

At the end of his reading of *Tristes Tropiques*, Derrida at last turns to the topic of ethics, and it is significant that the discussion occurs in a chapter entitled "The Violence of the Letter." Derrida defines Rousseau's ethics in terms of the "ethic of speech," claiming that it is nothing but "the *delusion* of presence mastered" (139). Its ethical failing may be found in its dream "of a presence denied to writing, denied by writing" (139). Derrida has been arguing that violence is writing and its exclusion of presence; and ethics, by definition, cannot exist apart from the violence of writing: "There is no ethics without the presence of *the other* but also, and consequently, without absence, dissimulation, detour, differance, writing. The arche-writing is the origin of morality as of immorality. The nonethical opening of ethics. A violent opening. As in the case of the vulgar concept of writing, the ethical instance of violence must be rigorously suspended in order to repeat the genealogy of morals" (139–40).

Ethics emerges as a defense against the violence of human relations, but Derrida understands that the primary oppositions that it establishes to bring about order are also a form of violence. Consequently, the opening of ethics is nonethical and violent. The problem of an ethics is to move from one term of opposition to the other while maintaining their sameness, their equality. Ethics creates a hypothetical sameness called equality to achieve its ends. But the idea of equality does not end in moral relativism. Evil exists in the caricatural presentations of good and evil created by hatred, human violence, and rivalry. Evil is the pact of violence that humanity designs in its dedication to the forms of prejudice and persecution threatening this world.

Derrida's allusion to Nietzsche's "genealogy of morals" is not without significance in this regard. Nietzsche attempts to move beyond good and evil and to deny the fundamental divisions established by ethics because he believes that oppositions are the product of resentment, rivalry, and excessive will—that evil is the mythology used by the "man of resentment" to define his goodness. On the one hand, Nietzsche remains a moralist and a disciple of Rousseau because he struggles against those differences and oppositions that lead to nationalism, racism, and prej-

udices of all kinds. The eternal return affirms the sameness inherent in apparent oppositions, thereby advancing toward Rousseau's hypothesis of nature. Nietzsche's radical Rousseauism, and perhaps his madness, on the other hand, lies in his late abandonment of the belief that ethical behavior is possible and in his stubborn affirmation of his own will to power, despite his early descriptions of its self-serving and self-deluding nature. Nietzsche's characterization of the nonethical mythologies of culture as a "prison-house" reveals both his despair and the source of his rationalization for the tyrannical willfulness of his final madness.

Derrida is most often associated with the late Nietzsche, and he does little to discourage the correspondence between the view of interpretation as will to power and his definition of writing. Derrida would not be a radical disciple of Rousseau if he did otherwise. Nevertheless, the theory of differance, which is ultimately a theory of language, may be said to contradict Nietzsche in his essential description of the "prison-house of language." For differance describes a linguistic activity that disrupts those very differences and oppositions that form the bars of Nietzsche's prison. "Is not the whole thought of Nietzsche," Derrida writes, "a critique of philosophy as active indifference to difference, as a system of reduction or adiaphoristic repression? Following the same logic—logic itself—this does not exclude the fact that philosophy lives *in* and *from* differance, that it thereby blinds itself to the *same*, which is not the identical. The same is precisely differance (with an *a*), as the diverted and equivocal passage from one difference to another, from one term of opposition to the other. . . . It is out of the unfolding of this 'same' as differance that the sameness of difference and of repetition is presented in the eternal return" ("Differance" 148–49).⁴

Differance conducts within language toward the "sameness that is not identical." In other words, differance leads within language toward equality. Language is necessary to invent the

4. For an intriguing reading of recent French thought in terms of the opposition between "the same" and "the other," see Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1980), originally published as *Le Même et l'autre* (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

principle of equality because only language provides a space for the ethical hypothesis holding that differences may be the same without being identical. As a pure theory of language, difference makes no statement on ethics, but as a return of Rousseau's belief in the tendency of nature to guarantee the equality of individual differences, it revives Rousseau's hypothesis at the very point where his radical disciples have most threatened its existence. The theory of difference makes the structure of language not a prison-house but the ethical model and signature of a hypothetical equality based on difference and not identity. In this assertion, often denied and rarely allowed its ethical content, Derrida becomes not a radical disciple of Rousseau, but a disciple of Rousseau at his most radical.