Glossing the Gloss of “Envois” in The Post Card

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The Post Card invites glossing of all sorts. It is an immensely complex and rich text, one of Derrida’s most fascinating and challenging. La carte postale is full of specific historical and personal references that will puzzle many readers. Many formulations and allusions are enigmatic or counter-intuitive. They need explanatory glossing. Derrida uses just about every rhetorical device and figure of speech in the book. You name it, it is there (il y a là): puns (calembours), metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, catachresis, apostrophe, prosopopoeia, hyperbole, prolepsis, analepsis, ellipsis, paradox, aporia, and of course a constant pervasive destabilizing irony. How can you tell when this joker is telling the truth or speaking straight, if ever?

“Envois,” moreover, is full of complex wordplay that is not exactly “figurative” in the usual sense. This wordplay is often not easily translatable from French to English. One tiny example: In the last entry for February 1979, Derrida writes: “La séance continue, tu analyse ça comment? Je parle grammaire, comme toujours, c’est un verbe ou un adjectif?” (“La séance continue, how do you analyze that? I’m talking grammar, as always, is it a verb or an adjective?” [PC, 178/193]) Derrida here plays on an untranslatable ambiguity on whether “continue” in the French is verb or an adjective. In the first case, the locution would mean: “The session continues.” In the second, “The continued session.” It makes a lot of difference which way you read it, as a duck or as
a rabbit, as in the famous Gestaltist diagram that oscillates unpredictably before the viewer’s eyes between those two animals. The reader (you! [singular]) will note the second person singular pronoun in “tu analyse ça comment?” This is an example of the endless play on the difference between “tu” and “vous” that pervades the “Envois.”

You(!), dear reader, can easily imagine a glossed *La carte postale* that would be immensely longer than the original. If the glosses were marginal, the result might be like one of those Renaissance glossed Bibles or theological treatises in which the margins on both sides and at the bottom are filled with glosses on specific points of a few lines of the original text. The glosses are much longer than the glossed text.

I presume, however, that before glossing a given text, it is helpful to decide just what sort of text it is. That is not so easy to decide for the “Envois” in *The Post Card*. My remarks here will focus on that apparently limited and presumably answerable question. To what genre does “Envois” belong? “La loi du genre” (“The Law of Genre”), a wonderful essay in *Parages* on Blanchot’s récit, *La folie du jour* (*The Madness of the Day*), begins by asserting firmly that genres should not be mixed:

Genres are not to be mixed.
I will not mix genres.
I repeat: genres are not to be mixed. I will not mix them.

(*NE PAS MÊLER les genres.*
*Je ne mèlerai pas les genres.*
*Je répète: ne pas mèler les genres. Je ne le ferai pas.*)

Is this a constative assertion or a performative speech act, followed by a promise? Derrida of course goes on to break his promise and also to show that Blanchot extravagantly mixes

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genres. Nevertheless, it sounds like a sensible idea that a given text should have an ascertainable genre and that decisions about appropriate glosses should be made on the basis of that certainty. Let me see if I can do that.

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“Envois” appears from many clues to be autobiographical, to be made up of real letters, and to be full of representations of events that did actually take place. I can testify that the episodes that mention me really did happen as Derrida describes them. Of course I might be lying, even though I swear I am telling the truth, giving accurate testimony.

Paul de Man and I did go year after year to pick Derrida up after his flight from Paris and take him to one or another of the Yale residential colleges where he was to stay while giving his annual five-week seminar series. It is the case that Derrida, after we met him at the arrivals gate, used to go to make a phone call to someone or other. (Perhaps his wife? Who knows? He never said. None of our business.)

It is the case that Derrida and I visited on one occasion Joyce’s tomb in the cemetery next to the zoo in Zurich. We did encounter on our walk back through the cemetery the gravestone of one Egon Zoller, “der Erfinder des Telefonographen,” the inventor of the ticker tape, or of some device to turn telephone signals into graphic ones that can be printed out. A ticker-tape machine is carved on Zoller’s tombstone with tape going from alpha to omega. We both stood for several minutes contemplating this tombstone. It fascinated Derrida (me too), partly because he was working at that time on communication technologies, a big topic in The Post Card. At Derrida’s request I asked a Zurich friend to take a photograph of this gravestone and send it to Derrida. I heard recently that this photo is still among his Nachlaß. We looked for the grave of Peter Szondi but did not find it, as one of the “postcards” says.

It is a fact that during one of Derrida’s visits to Yale I took him sailing on Long Island Sound in my 18.5 foot Cape Dory
Typhoon, the “Frippery.” I did not tell Derrida, however, that the “Small Craft Warnings” were up for strong wind and waves. We had no great difficulty with those, however, and returned safely to the mooring up the river in Branford.

I have in my possession a precious original of the postcard from the Bodleian showing Plato, absurdly, instructing Socrates in what to write (or to erase). Whoever writes those postcards in _The Post Card_ spends much time, as you readers will know, exuberantly trying to interpret this enigmatic graphic. The postcard writer says Jonathan Culler and Cynthia Chase took him to the Bodleian to let him discover the postcard for himself. Cynthia Chase sent me my exemplar on June 10, 1977. In tiny but quite legible handwriting she begins by mentioning her wonderful essay on George Eliot’s _Daniel Deronda_ (referred to by “Derrida” in _The Post Card_). It had just been accepted by _PMLA_, the _Publications of the Modern Language Association_. She then goes on to say, “Derrida was here last week to talk informally in Jonathan’s seminar, where he began in very slow but precise English, and spoke about parisitage and the more amusing features of his lengthy response to Searle in a forthcoming _Glyph_.” This seems to confirm that the account in _The Post Card_ of Derrida’s discovery of the postcard in the Bodleian is historically accurate. It really did happen just as that particular postcard says it did. Here are recto and verso of my postcard. You can see from the postmark that it was in truth sent from Oxford on June 10, 1977. The postmark on the recto has what seems to be the beginning of the word “Remember.” Remember what? The rest is cut off. It seems a provocative exhortation:
GLOSSING THE GLOSS OF “ENVOIS” IN THE POST CARD
Dear Mr. Miller,

I reviewed Daniel Davis's essay and will publish it in our next volume. I'm so pleased. Thank you for encouraging me to submit it.

John, your recommendation was much appreciated.

J. Hillis Miller
Chairman
English Department
Yale University
New Haven, Connecticut 06520

USA

Bodleian Library, Oxford
Socrates and Plato, the Homilies of Eustathios
Pan. 310b, 311b

I'm hoping to see you in Paris for the conference of the International Dante Society. I'd be happy to have you join us.

Best wishes,

[Signature]

Friends in a Foreign Country

Athens at Cambridge Colloque Limited
Those external confirmations, my own and Cynthia Chase’s, lead me to believe that other episodes in the “Envois” are “true to life” too. A drunk did wander around the phone booth on one occasion while “Derrida” was trying to make a call. Someone did phone him collect at home claiming to be “Martini Heidegger.” He did encounter an American graduate student, perhaps Avital Ronell, and suggest to her that she write her PhD dissertation on the telephone in modernist literature (Proust etc.): “and then asking the question of the effects of the most advanced telematics on whatever would still remain of literature. I spoke to her about microprocessors and computer terminals, she seemed somewhat disgusted. She told me that she still loved literature (me too, I answered her, mais si, mais si), Curious to know what she understood by this” (PC, 204). That “me too, […] mais si, mais si,” is wonderfully ironic. “Mais si” is a more or less untranslatable French idiom that is positive and negative at the same time, something like, “Yes. But nevertheless. But nevertheless,” or colloquially, “Yeah, but.”

I associate this interchange with the unnamed American graduate student, which I believe to have occurred “in the real world,” with a passage a few pages earlier. That passage is of great importance for me. It leads me to endless reflection. In it “Derrida” asserts that “an entire epoch of so-called literature, if not all of it, cannot survive a certain technological regime of telecommunications (in this respect the political regime is secondary). Neither can philosophy, or psychoanalysis. Or love letters” (PC, 197). Literature, philosophy, psychoanalysis, and love letters will be destroyed by the computer, the Internet, email, and those other features of our present (2012) prestidigitalization that Derrida could not yet foresee in 1977: email, Facebook, Twitter, iPhones, iPads, Kindle, etc.

Whether or not what Derrida says is really the case as hyperbolically as he says (the complete disappearance of these four forms of discourse) is an immense question, but Derrida gets an A+ for prophetic insight. His very first interview, out of hundreds given over his life time, was in 1968 for a now long-
defunct journal called *Noroît*. It was called “Culture and écriture. La prolifération des livres et la fin du livre.” That puts our present situation in 2012 in a nutshell. The printed book industry is thriving, but even so Amazon since 2011 has been selling more e-texts than printed books. I take it Derrida in 1968, long before e-texts became common, meant by “livre” a printed book that you can hold in your hand and read by turning physical paper pages.

I conclude from these examples that it seems easy to decide that *The Post Card* belongs to the genre of confessional autobiography and needs to be glossed as such. You would do that by adducing as much factual and contextual information as possible, as I have done with a few examples. Doing this will make the text more perspicuous and more believable as truth-telling testimony.

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Matters are not quite so simple, however, as a little more attention to the text of *The Post Card* will show. Derrida gave me my copy of the French original. He has charmingly, but a little alarmingly, added to the title of the first section, “Envois”: “à Hillis, à Dorothy,” as though all those post cards were addressed and sent to us. “Telepathy” is a section of “Envois” that was mysteriously omitted and then published separately. There is a long story to tell about that omission and about “Telepathy” itself. I have tried to tell that story in *The Medium is the Maker: Browning, Freud, Derrida and the New Telepathic Ecotechnologies*.² My little book is an extended gloss on a section of “Envois,” “Télepathie,” that is present there only in its ghostly absence, though published separately. Does an omitted section of “Envois” deserve a gloss for readers of “Envois”? I think the answer must be yes, but the mind boggles at the thought of glossing a spectral absence/presence. As you readers of “Telepathy” will know, Derrida claims in

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that essay that a postcard, in part because it is open for anyone in the world to read who comes upon it, makes any one who intercepts it as it travels through the postal system into the person, the “you [tu]” for whom the postcard is intended. The reader, whoever he or she might be (Hillis, or Dorothy, or whoever), is transmogrified into the addressee of the postcard.

That is what I mean by “alarmingly”? I’m not at all sure I want to be transformed into the person those postcards in the “Envois” invoke into being by a magic telepathic or hypnotic hocus pocus, by an irresistibile “transfer” in the psychoanalytic sense. I just want to go on “being myself,” thank you very much. Part of me, however, knows that each of those poems, novels, and other texts I have read and taught and written about for so many years, including La carte postale, has dispossessed me, turned me, at least temporarily, into someone other than myself, perhaps into someone of a different gender. In reading Eliot’s Middlemarch I become Dorothea Brooke or the personified narrator, “George Eliot” “himself.” In reading Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poems, prose works, and letters I become Hopkins. In reading The Post Card I become the person “Derrida” addresses as “tu.” (The reader needs always to remember how much is lost in translation when La carte postale is turned into The Post Card. Derrida, for example, as I have said, in the “Envois” section carries on a complex play between French second person singular and second person plural, tu and vous. English makes no such distinction. I shall return to this.)

Nevertheless, the reader wonders just whom these so circumstantial-sounding letters were really meant for, to whom they were originally destined as envois, sendings, to whom they were mailed. Surely, in spite of the discretionary total absence of any proper names, these are real love letters sent by a male named Jacques Derrida to some never-named intimate female beloved. Derrida’s short untitled preface, however, dashes all our hopes for a certain identification of either sender or addressee, as I shall show. A preface is a species of anticipatory gloss. My gloss in this essay will focus on glossing that gloss. Prefaces are usually intended, like glosses, to guide or orient the reader for
the proper reading of the text to come. Derrida’s preface, in this
case, however, only makes matters more complicated and puz-
zling, as I shall show.

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Let me take the “Envois,” for the moment, as perhaps an exam-
ple of yet another venerable genre, not an autobiography, but an
epistolary novel. In one place within “Envois” Derrida claims to
have had just this genre in mind as a set of conventions to paro-
dy, as well as the detective story, yet another genre. “Envois,” he
writes, will be “a kind of false preface, once again. Which, while
parodying epistolary or detective literature (from the Philo-
sophical Letters [by Voltaire, 1733] to the Portuguese nun [Let-
ters of a Portuguese Nun, 1669, believed to be fictions composed
by Gabriel-Joseph de La Vergne, comte de Gulleragues], from
the liaisons dangereuses [1782, by Choderlos de Laclos] to Mile-
na [Franz Kafka, Briefe an Milena, 1952]), would also obliquely
introduce my speculations on Freudian speculation” (PC, 179). I
suppose “Envois” is a kind of detective story in the way it hides
the mystery of just who the sender(s) and receiver(s) of these
letters are and just what romance the letters covertly reveal. That
gives two more possible genres for “Envois”: novel in letters and
detective story.

It is easy to identify the generic laws of the epistolary novel,
from Richardson, Marivaux, and Rousseau in the eighteenth
century on to more recent examples. These laws are a special
case of the standard conventions of the Western novel from Don
Quixote to Ian McEwan. Those conventions, for either sort of
novel, are a version of what Derrida, notoriously, called “log-
ocentrism.” Logocentrism is a coherent system of concepts or
presuppositions that centers on the notion of the logos. Logos is
a multivalent word in Greek meaning Being, transcendent and
simultaneously immanent ground, discourse, word, mind, ra-
tio, rhythm. Jesus is the Logos in Christian theology. He is the
second person of the Trinity, both transcendent and immanent
deity, the God/man in whose name the creation was created and is upheld in being.

In the case of the conventions of the Western novel, whether epistolary or not, the stress is especially and in manifold ways on the unity of the self, subject, or ego. The Western novel assumes that the selves of the author, narrator, and characters are unified and remain the same through time, however much they may evolve. A not so latent sexism assumes that authors and narrators are most likely male. Some form of intersubjective communication, however limited it may be in some novels, is presumed. A good novel tells a unified story with a beginning, middle, and end. Within the fiction of a given novel, it is possible to understand the other person, to some degree at least, and to sympathize with him or her. The pleasure of reading novels is to a considerable degree the pleasure of an intimate access to the interiority of other (fictive) persons such as we do not have in “real life.”

Marian Evans became a novelist when she adopted a male pseudonym and called herself George Eliot. Her *Middlemarch* (1872), that prototypical Victorian novel, is told by an imaginary male narrator who has telepathic insight into the minds and feelings of the imaginary characters, both male and female, and can speak for them in that logocentric form of narration, free indirect discourse. The narrator transfers that telepathic knowledge to the reader. George Eliot’s narrator speaks in the third person past tense for what Dorothea Brooke and all the other characters are presumed to have experienced in the past and in the first person, present tense. Though the characters evolve through time, the cores of their selfhoods remain the same. The name “Dorothea” goes on referring to something unified and perdurable. Dorothea’s insight into other people is at first limited and laughably mistaken, as in her radical misreading of her first husband, Mr. Casaubon. Gradually she learns to read others more accurately and to sympathize with them. That change leads to the happy ending and makes it possible.

An epistolary novel differs from novels like *Middlemarch* in having, typically, no overt narrator. Nevertheless, the presence
of a supervising and ordering consciousness is implied in the way the letters are put in a sequence that tells a unified story. A vestigial narrator is implied, in some cases, in the identification of the sender and receiver of each of the letters in some impersonal, exterior, notation. An example is that belated epistolary short story by Henry James, “A Bundle of Letters” (1879). I say “belated” because the eighteenth century was the heyday of the epistolary novel in Europe. Relatively few were published in the nineteenth century, though hardly a Victorian novel exists that does not cite at least one or two letters. An example of the latter convention is the inclusion of letters in the novels of Anthony Trollope. The sender and receiver of each letter in James’s “A Bundle of Letters” are labeled by some impersonal external authority: “Miss Miranda Hope in Paris to Mrs. Abraham C. Hope at Bangor Maine”; “From Mrs. Violet Ray in Paris to Miss Agnes Rich in New York,” and so on. The letters are dated. They are arranged (by that effaced narrator) so as to tell a latent story. The letter-writers’ unity of selfhood in an epistolary novel is indicated by the way they are signed and by the unity of a personal style that the author invents for them. James has evident fun in imitating what he imagines to be the epistolary style of Miss Miranda Hope, an intelligent young woman from the exceedingly provincial town of Bangor, Maine, traveling alone in Europe, e.g., “I guess we don’t know quite everything at Bangor.”

Though hardly a novel of either sort from Don Quixote on does not in one way or another challenge the assumptions I have been identifying, the regime of logocentrism remains relatively sovereign, relatively untouched, except in special notorious cases like Don Quixote itself or like Tristram Shandy.

In Derrida’s “Envois” every single one of the conventions I have named is defiantly, exuberantly, systematically, and overtly transgressed, except for the dating of each entry, a convention

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he obeys. The reader cannot tell for a given entry who is writing and to whom, or whether a single “je” wrote them all to a single “tu,” since neither salutation nor signature is ever given. Moreover, the assertion that these long entries are all being written on numerous postcards seems extremely unlikely. At a minimum of four postcards a page it would take over a thousand postcards at least for the whole of the “Envois,” something highly implausible. See how few words Cynthia Chase was able to get on the postcard from the Bodleian she sent me, even with her miniature handwriting.

The letters in “Envois” are punctuated by seemingly random breaks of 52 characters each, so that parts do not even make grammatical sense. If these are supposed to be love letters, all the learned discussion of Plato, Socrates, Freud, psychoanalysis, the history of the postal system, the constant word play and use of obscure allusions, etc., seems an exceedingly odd and probably ineffective way to say, “I love you,” in spite of the constant circumstantiality of detail about the writer’s or writers’ daily activities that might plausibly make up part of “real” love letters. I say Derrida’s defiance of conventions is “exuberant” to bring into the open Derrida’s evident ironic joy in subverting logocentric expectations. Just in case you might not notice this for yourself, the unnamed preface, or, as I have called it, proleptic gloss, makes these wholesale transgressions explicit.

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That anticipatory gloss of four pages, which I shall now partly gloss, is an exceedingly odd and even exasperating document, for a commonsensical person like me, someone who wants univocal certainty. That makes me what Derrida calls in this foreword a “bad reader” (PC, 4). What characterizes a bad reader, according to Derrida, is an impatient desire for certainty, for knowing ahead of time what to expect. I cite the whole wonderful paragraph because it is so splendid a description and de(con)structive analysis of the sort of reader that is certain to get “En-
vois” wrong through what John Keats called, in a letter to Bailey, a “hunger […] after Truth”:

Because I still like him, I can foresee the impatience of the bad reader: this is the way I name or accuse the fearful reader, the reader in a hurry to be determined, decided upon deciding (in order to annul, in other words to bring back to oneself, one has to wish to know in advance what to expect, one wishes to expect what has happened, one wishes to expect oneself). Now, it is bad, and I know no other definition of the bad, it is bad to predestine one’s reading, it is always bad to foretell. It is bad, reader, no longer to like retracing one’s steps. (PC, 4)

The canny reader (you!) of this distinctly insolent paragraph (who would want to be a bad reader, even if Derrida says he likes them?) will note that Derrida begins by saying that he foresees the impatience of the bad reader, but ends by saying it is always bad to foretell. He does what he forbids, perhaps by an unavoidable law. You must have some sort of expectations in order to be able to read at all. You may also remember, perhaps on a re-reading (praised here as an escape from bad reading), that the famous postcard from the Bodleian of plato dictating to Socrates, that begat the whole of “Envois,” is from a fortune-telling book of the thirteenth century, by one Matthew Paris, Prognostica Socratis basilei. The “Envois” proper have a lot to say about the ambiguities of fortune-telling, of prognostication. Psychoanalysis is a form of fortune-telling, with Dr. Sigmund Freud as the all-knowing telepathic medium receiving postcards from the patient’s unconscious and from the future.

I say the post card of plato (small “p” on the postcard) and Socrates “begat the whole of Envois.” Derrida says just that in an entry of 9 March 1979, in what follows the entry about epistolary and detective fiction already cited: “The entire book, accordion astrologies of post cards, would initiate into speculation via the reading of Sp [Socrates/plato]. Finally that is all there would be, everything would come back and amount to the patient, inter-
minable, serious and playful, direct or detoured, literal of figurative description of the Oxford card” (PC, 179). That gives you yet another genre. The whole of “Envois,” from beginning to end, is nothing but a glossing of that postcard, a reading of it, or annotation of it. It is certainly the case that Derrida has a wonderful time imagining different readings of the somewhat sinister or even obscene intercourse that he finds to be going on between Socrates and plato. Just what, for example, is that long cylindrical object sticking out from under Socrates’s right leg?

In its scrupulous care for the significance of graphic detail, “Envois” resembles (in parody perhaps) yet another genre: the learned essay in art historical interpretation of a graphic artwork, for example the endless essays reading Dürer’s Melencolia I or the learned quarrels over Van Gogh’s paintings of shoes. (Are they female peasant shoes, as Heidegger claimed in a famous sentimental passage about peasant life, or are they the artist’s own shoes?)

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The first sentence of the preface gives the reader a distinctly anomalous genre for the “Envois” to add to those I have already identified. It is the first of many proposed genres: “You might read these envois as the preface to book that I have not written” (PC, 3). There is an odd genre for you! Derrida (I don’t know what else to call whoever wrote these words; he speaks as an “I,” a “je,” throughout what you might call a preface to the preface or a proleptic gloss)... Derrida, you will note, does not say that the “Envois” is the preface to a book he just never got round to writing. He says, “Vous pourriez lire ces envois comme la préface d’un livre que je n’ai pas écrit”: “You (second person plural: any “you” whatsoever) might [pourriez] read these sendings as a preface to an unwritten book [PC, 3/7]. It is up to you to decide whether or not to do so. It’s a free country, and I’m not going to make up your mind for you.”

Here, already, it has taken me a paragraph to gloss the grammar and rhetoric of the very first sentence. If I were to go on
like this, which you will be happy to know I shall not, a truly monstrous interminable gloss would result.

Derrida goes on to say that the unwritten book would have “treated that which proceeds from the *postes, postes* of every genre, to psychoanalysis.” He makes this more precise by adding: "Less in order to attempt a psychoanalysis of the postal effect than to start from a singular event, Freudian psychoanalysis, and to refer to a history and a technology of the *courrier*, to some general theory of the envoi and of everything which by means of some telecommunication allegedly *destines* itself” (PC, 3). The problem of course is that the “Envois” do in great detail just what he says the unwritten book would have done. This is especially the case if you include the mysteriously omitted section on “Telepathy,” not to speak of the six essays added after the “Envois.” These are primarily on Freud, though one is the splendid and definitive put-down of Lacan, “Le facteur de la vérité.” What Derrida calls the preface to an unwritten book is in fact that book itself, in a species of what Derrida calls “invagination,” the outside becoming the inside, the preface the text proper, in a perpetual oscillation.

Having proposed that you can, if you like, consider the “Envois” as the preface to an unwritten book, “Derrida,” if that is who it is, goes on to say that he does not know whether reading them “is bearable” (“est soutenable”) (PC, 3/7). “Soutenable” means “bearable” all right, but it has, to my ear, an overtone, of “sustainable,” “able to be carried on,” as in “sustained discourse.” The “Envois” may be both unbearable to read and impossible to read in a sustained fashion.

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“Derrida” then proposes yet another genre for the “Envois” that you might wish to consider: “You might consider them, if you really wish to (*si le cœur vous en dit*, if the heart tells you to do so), as the remainders (*les restes*) of a recently destroyed correspondence” (PC, 3/7). You can do so if you really want to, but I do not authorize your choice. In any case, the remainders of a
recently destroyed correspondence is another odd genre, to say the least. “Reste” or “restes” are key words in Derrida, as I have elsewhere shown. The word “restes” always has an overtone of dead body, “remains,” as well as of archived writings, Nachlaß, as in the double word “corpus,” corpse and body of writings.

Derrida goes on to say that what we read in the “Envois” is just what is left over, what remains, of a much more extensive correspondence, much of which has been “destroyed by fire or by that which figuratively takes its place, more certain of leaving nothing out of the reach of what I like to call the tongue of fire, not even the cinders if cinders there are [s’il y a là cendre]” (PC, 3). What could be “more certain” than fire? A shredder? Derrida tells in one place in “Envois” the story of how at some time in the past he took a huge correspondence in his car and first tried unsuccessfully, beside the Seine, to tear it into illegible scraps and throw it in the river. It would have taken far too long. He then drove to a suburb of Paris that was unfamiliar to him and burned the whole collection beside the road. What a wanton act of vandalism! I know of nothing like it except Henry James’s burning of his accumulated correspondence.

Much later in “Envois” “Derrida” describes circumstantially the process whereby he decided which parts of the correspondence to destroy, which parts to save by typing them on his electric typewriter for publication in the book you are now reading. He observes that the rule of leaving out everything private, everything that would identify the sender and receiver, was unworkable, since everything was both private and at the same time relevant to the general project of the “Envois” and of his desire to make a book open to everyone. “Before all else I wanted, such was one of the destinations of my labor, to make a book—in part for reasons that remain obscure and in part for other reasons that I must silence” (PC, 5). That phrase about “leaving nothing out of reach of what I like to call the tongue of fire” is of course completely double-faced, or fork-tongued.

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A tongue of fire is totally destructive. You speak about the way “flames licked the roof of the burning house.” At the same time that “tongue of fire” speaks, as in the tongues of fire that in the Book of Acts in the New Testament settled on the apostles at Pentecost and gave them the gift of tongues, the ability to speak all languages so that they might spread the Gospel through all the world: “And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance” (Acts 2:3–4).

As for intending to destroy even the cinders of the conflagrated parts of the correspondence, if cinders there are [s’il y a là cendre]: a cinder may be dead ash, or it may hide a secret glow ready to burst into flame again. The reference is to another extremely enigmatic book by Derrida, feu la cendre (1982; 1987, apparently written in 1971). The title of the Italian translation by Stefano Agosti links this book to “Envois”: ciò che resta del fuoco, “what remains of a fire.” A cinder is what remains of a fire, just as “Envois” is what remains of a destroyed correspondence.

Feu la cendre is a meditation on a phrase that Derrida says has been haunting him for fifteen years: il y a là cendre. To gloss just the preface to “Envois” you would perhaps need also to gloss the whole of feu la cendre, another virtually interminable task. Just part of the leitmotif, il y a là, is extremely difficult to translate, though, or perhaps just because, it is idiomatic French. Literally it means “it has there there,” nonsense in English. Il y a is the French equivalent of German es gibt, or of English “there is” or “there are.” “There are/is some[thing] there.” “Cinder there is, there, cinder.”

Derrida plays on the complexities of his phrase in the strange and enigmatic dedication to feu la cendre. He gives the dedication the strange and ominous name of “Animadversiones.” I am included as a dedicatee (to my great honor) along with several others, listed in carefully non-hierarchical alphabetical order,

and followed by “d’autres,” “among others.” An animadversion is in modern French or English “hostile criticism” or “a critical or censorious remark.” Really? Does Derrida mean he is making a hostile criticism of us, or that we are doing so with him. Neither makes good sense. Happily, however, the first meaning given in the OED for “animadversion” is neutral: “the turning or directing of the attention.” “Animadversiones,” moreover, is neither French nor English, but the nominative, accusative, or vocative plural of the Latin word, animadversio, which means initially perception, observation, paying attention to, that is, “turning the mind toward.” Only secondarily does the word mean punishment, censure, or blame. Peter Ramus wrote in 1543 a book called Aristotelicae animadversiones. The word animadversiones has the meaning in biblical studies of commentary or gloss on a particular problematic word or passage in the Bible. So Derrida most probably intends no more than to name, in dedicatory acknowledgment, turnings of his mind toward, paying attention to, those who have read him or whom he has read (“their reading, “leur lecteur”), to his benefit. I rather like, however, trying to take animadversiones as somehow vocative. “O Animadversiones” might be an apostrophe addressed by Derrida to those who have turned their minds toward his work, that is, the dedicatees. My tentative glossing of animadversiones is a good example of how Derrida habitually says much in little by way of word play and of how that much in little is likely to be puzzling or contradictory, perhaps even “undecidable.”

I cite below part of these animadversions, since the part I cite links with the idea in “Le facteur de la vérité” in The Post Card that since a letter may always not reach its destination, it never does. The first part of the dedication asserts, in a way that echoes the preface to The Post Card, that writing absents itself from its author as soon as it is written, resulting in the “effondrement extrême de la signature” (“the extreme disintegration of the signature”). You wrote it, but you cannot sign it. The second paragraph is also counter-intuitive: “Que la lettre soit forte en cette seule indirection, et de toujours pouvoir manquer l’arrive, je n’en prendrai pas prétexte pour m’absenter à la ponctualité d’une
This entire “dedication” has always made me more than a little uneasy, greatly honored as I am by it. What in the world, for example, does Derrida mean by adding that “il y a là cendre” after our names, in all its ambiguity or undecidability as a locution? Does he mean that those named or perhaps just their names are the dead cinders of past friendships, or that his writings have never reached us as their destination, that we haven’t really ever understood a word of what he has written (a distinct possibility), or does he mean that the names are live coals that might burst into cloven tongues of flame if breathed upon by a dedication or even by an animadversion. “De leur lecture” is also undecidable in meaning. It could mean the dedicatees’ reading of Derrida, or it could mean Derrida’s reading of what they have written, perhaps including what they have written about his writing. You must decide that for yourself, dear reader, though I incline to the latter, since it hardly makes sense that my solitary reading of Derrida in those far-off days could have contributed anything to feu la cendre.

That some positive reading ought to win the day over the negative implications of “animadversion” is suggested not only by Derrida’s almost forty years of generosity and friendship for me, but also by the dedication he inscribed in the copy of the 1987 reprint of feu la cendre he gave me in Laguna Beach in 1987: “pour Hillis/(la dedicace, depuis plus de 15 ans, est/ dans le livre)/affectueusement/Jacques./Laguna Beach, 6/avril 1987.” He means, I think, that the book was apparently first written, with the dedication, more than fifteen years before the revised
printing of 1987. Here, in case you doubt my word, is a scan of the kind inscription:
I am now beginning to be seriously anxious. I have somewhat partially glossed in almost twenty-four pages only about two-thirds of the first page of the unnamed “preface” to “Envois,” and I have by no means yet got to the most important part of that preface, for my purposes of genre-identification. Clearly I must pick up the pace or I’ll never reach even a provisional answer to my initial apparently simple and straightforward question, “To what genre does ‘Envois’ belong?”

After having said that “Envois” is the remains of a destroyed correspondence, Derrida goes on to say that to say that is to say too much or too little, since “it was not one (but more or less) nor very correspondent. This still remains to be decided” (PC, 3). This is another example of the putting in question of any kind of presumed or decidable unity. It is more or less than a single correspondence and it does not successfully correspond to boot.

He then asserts that the partial saving was “due to a very strange principle of selection” (PC, 3). This “due to” and “saved” raises the ghost of the word “registered.” All three are postal words, as in “postage due,” or “registered mail.” After having said that only part of the correspondence was “saved” Derrida adds an odd parenthesis: “(j’entends murmurer déjà ‘accusé’ comme on dit de réception).” Sure enough, the phrase “accuser [signaler] réception” means to give notice that one has received something, so Alan Bass’s translation is correct: “I already hear murmured ‘registered,’ as is said for a kind of receipt” (PC, 4/8). The saved part of the conflagrated correspondence is registered in the sense that the recipient has confirmed receipt by returning a receipt. I suppose that means that “Derrida” may have kept a tally of the remains or registered them by typing them out, as he evidently did in preparing the manuscript for publication. If they were actually sent, by the way, how come he has them and has the right to burn some and save some by some secret principle of selection or filtering? He speaks of “the grate, the filter, and the economy of sorting” (“la grille, le crible, l’économie du tri”) (PC, 4/7). “To filter fire?” he asks, but continues: “I have not

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6 Le Petit Robert, 15b.
given up doing so” (PC, 4). What a monstrous mélange of mixed metaphors, as bad as mixed genres!

Derrida then says that he finds the principle of selection he has used “questionable.” Well, why did he use it then? He goes on to say, “I rigorously do not approve of this principle. [I wish he would say what that principle of selection was! Why not tell us outright?] I denounce it ceaselessly [Really? Where?], and in this respect reconciliation is impossible” (PC, 4). Reconciliation of whom with whom or with what? Another extremely odd sentence follows: “But it was my due to give in to it [j’ai dû y céder: ‘I had to give in to it’], and it is up to you to tell me why” (PC, 4). Why can he not tell us why himself? This question raises in me a cascade of questions, not helpful answers to the question of the genre of “Envois” or directions for how to read it.

A separate one sentence paragraph follows that puts the ball definitely in the reader’s court: “Up to you [toi, first person singular] first. I await only one response and it falls to you” (PC, 4). How in the world can you decide on the basis of the slender evidence Derrida gives? He puts the you, the addressee, that is, me the reader, in an impossible position. I have the responsibility to decide when there are no solid facts on the basis of which to decide. How can you know whether he was or was not right to destroy what he did destroy if we can no longer see and read the destroyed parts and do not know what the principle of selection was?

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The next paragraph suggests yet another genre for “Envois.” It can be taken as an extended apostrophe, an interpellation of the you that reads. Derrida in effect says: “You decide. You must decide.” In an apostrophe the speaker breaks off the constative discourse and turns to address some “you” directly, someone either present or absent, as in Cicero’s direct address to Catilina. “O” is often the sign of an apostrophe, though only in the translation in this case: “Quo usque tandem abutere, Catilina, patientia nostra!” (“When, O Catiline, do you mean to cease abusing our
patience?”) Apostrophe is closely associated with prosopopoeia. An apostrophe personifies the “you” to whom it is addressed, as in Wordsworth’s apostrophe in “The Boy of Winander”: “ye knew him well, ye cliffs and islands of Winander.” “Thus I apostrophize,” writes Derrida. “This too is a genre one can afford oneself, the apostrophe. A genre and a tone. The word—apostrophizes—speaks of words addressed to the singular one, a live interpellation (the man of discourse or writing interrupts the continuous development of the sequence, abruptly turns toward someone, that is, something, addresses himself to you), but the word also speaks of the address to be detoured” (PC, 4). The last phrase reminds the reader that apostrophe involves a turning away as well as a turning toward. Cicero turns away from his primary audience to address Catilina directly rather than making a reasoned argument for Catilina’s condemnation to that primary audience, the Roman Senate. The whole of “Envois” can be taken as a huge extended apostrophe. That possibility is kept before the reader by the pervasive use of direct address (“tu”) in the letters. If Derrida is right to say that an intercepted letter or post card turns the accidental reader into the “you” to whom the missive is addressed, then any you as reader of “Envois” becomes the apostrophized addressee of the letters, with all the responsibilities to respond and decide that Derrida so much insists on.

Then follow that paragraph about the bad reader (already discussed) and then several more paragraphs about the way he indicates in the text something of any length left out of a given letter by a 52 character space, though he swears he no longer remembers the long calculations that led to this “clever cryptogram”: “If I state now, and this is the truth, I swear, that I have totally forgotten the rule as well as the elements of such a calculation, as if I had thrown them into the fire, I know in advance all the types of reaction that this will not fail to induce all around” (PC, 5). Derrida claims to be like someone who has carefully protected a file or a memory disk with a password and then has destroyed and completely forgotten the password. That certainly can happen, but nevertheless (mais si!), I as bad reader
find myself muttering, in an apostrophe to the dead, “Come on, O Jacques, you can’t expect me to believe that!”

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Then at last follow the paragraphs that perhaps interest me most in this short preface. This is the sequence that resolutely dismantles, or, dare I say, “deconstructs,” for “Envois” at least, all the logocentric narratological certainties about the separate unities of author, narrator, and characters I began by briefly summarizing. Derrida says in no uncertain terms that you cannot be certain who or how many different persons is/are writing these letters or whether the destined recipients are one or more persons, whether the author of the whole thing (presumably Jacques Derrida) is one person or many, whether any given “I” or “you” is male or female, or both, whether the sender is the same as the writer, or the receiver the same as the destined recipient. Even “Derrida” swears that he does not know. Here, nevertheless, is what “Derrida” says, in one of his most intransigent disaffirmations, or assertions of dispossession, of disappropriation. You must, I think, take him at his word:

Who is writing? To whom? And to send, to destine, to dispatch what? To what address? Without any desire to surprise [Uh huh; there’s a denegation for you!], and thereby to grab attention by means of obscurity, I owe it [there again is that notion of debt, of obligation, of what is due, as in “postage due’”] to whatever remains of my honesty to say finally that I do not know. Above all I would not have had the slightest interest in this correspondence and this cross-section, I mean in their publication, if some certainty on this matter had satisfied me. (PC, 5/9)

This is an extravagant and implausible confession of ignorance, of uncertainty. It’s implausible because he has told you, the reader, that he has removed the names of addressee and addressee, along with other evidence of what hidden love story lies behind
these letters. Nevertheless, he must have known these facts, and he is not likely to have forgotten them. Now he wants to claim that the law of adestination is such that he really does not know who is writing and to whom in what remains of this destroyed correspondence, a correspondence that is not one (unified) and not correspondent. Perhaps the partial burning of the correspondence frees what remains of its ties to its original circumstances and makes the remains float in the air, so to speak, or perhaps lie dormant in some dead letter repository such as Melville makes much of in “Bartleby the Scrivener,” a work known to Derrida. He uses the postal phrase “left unclaimed” (“laissez pour compte”) in the first of the letters in the “Envois” proper (PC, 7/11).

Derrida then goes on to say that this radical uncertainty is not only disagreeable, but also even tragic. It is “tragic” presumably because it deroutes all the certainties and calculated distances on which ethical decision and responsible interpersonal relations depend, not to speak of that coherent reading of the text that you as a student of literature, or perhaps as a teacher of literature or as a writer about literature, depend. How far would you get if you said, “I haven’t the slightest idea what this text means or how to talk or write sensibly about it.” How could this publication be justified if it was just made up of a collective shrugging of shoulders in despair?

That the signers and the addressees are not always visibly and necessarily identical from one envoi to the other, that the signers are not inevitably to be confused with the senders, nor the addressees with the receivers, that is with the readers (you [toi] for example), etc. — you will have the experience of all this, and sometimes will feel it quite vividly, although confusedly. This is a disagreeable feeling that I beg every reader, male and female, to forgive me. To tell the truth, it is not only disagreeable, it places you [vous; note he says “you” the reader, not the imaginary persons in the story] in relation, without discretion, to tragedy. It forbids that you regulate
distances, keeping them or losing them. This was somewhat my own situation, and it is my only excuse. (PC, 5/9)

“Well, ok,” you say to yourself. “I can take that as a kind of elaborate set of fictional uncertainties achieved by leaving out signatures and proper names, but I am certain at least of one thing: Jacques Derrida himself wrote this preface and uses ‘I’ and ‘me’ with calm certainty, as though these pronouns indubitably refer to one singular person whose given name was Jacques (actually ‘Jackie’ when he was a child in Algiers) Derrida.” The final paragraph of the preface seems reassuringly to confirm this, or at least somewhat reassuringly, since the opening of this final sentence is a little uneasy-making: “Accustomed as you [vous] are to the movement of the posts and to the psychoanalytic movement, to everything that they authorize as concerns falsehoods, fictions, pseudonyms, homonyms, or anonymys, you will not be reassured, nor will anything be the least bit attenuated, softened, familiarized, by the fact that […]” (PC, 5–6/9–10). Not at all reassuring. Psychoanalysis and the movement of the posts (not to speak of all the fabrications of fictional selves these days by politicians, by email, by Facebook, and so on) have made us all suspicious readers, on the lookout for falsehoods, fictions, etc. We are unwilling to assume that anyone is who she or he says they are. Nevertheless, what follows “by the fact that” seems to make a wholesale reversal: “by the fact that I assume responsibility for these envois, for what remains, or no longer remains, of them, and that in order to make peace within you [vous] I am signing them here in my proper name, Jacques Derrida” (PC, 6/10). A date (7 September 1979) follows on the next line in a parody of legal confirmation of a signature.

“Whew!” you say, “At least one thing is certain. Jacques Derrida was one single person and took responsibility for having written the whole of ‘Envois,’ even the parts left out, burned away.” This certainty is reinforced in my copy of the French original that Derrida dedicated to me and to my wife. (See scan above.) He also signed his first name on the last page of the pref-
ace in his own unmistakable handwriting, or perhaps it is the work of a cunning forger. Here is a scan of that:

Alas, even this certainty is dashed by a footnote to that printed signature at the end of the preface. Note that small superscript 1. The appended footnote, with its characteristic cheerful Derridean irony, takes away even the residual unification of Jacques Derrida the putative author that has momentarily reassured you or me as readers:

I regret that you [tu] do not very much trust my signature, on the pretext that we might be several. This is true, but I am not saying it in order to make myself more important by means of some supplementary authority [as when a critic, theorist, or philosopher says, for example, “we shall show” rather than “I shall show.”] Derrida habitually uses this professorial “we.” And even less in order to disquiet. I know what this costs.
You [Tú] are right, doubtless we are several, and I am not as alone as I sometimes say I am when the complaint escapes from me, or when I still put everything into seducing you [à te séduire]. (PC, 6/10)

That might add yet another genre. The “Envois” are an attempt to seduce you, that is, me, as the reader, any reader, of “Envois.”

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My apparent search has been for an answer to the question, “To what genre does ‘Envois’ belong?” I need to know this in order to know how to gloss it and what to gloss. Far from reaching certainty about this, I have instead encountered, in what Derrida himself says in the “preface,” a long series of possible but incompatible genres. Far from obeying his own command not to mix genres, Derrida mixes genres big time. “Envois” may be a disguised autobiography, or the remains of a destroyed correspondence, or the preface to a book he has not written, or an extended interpretation of that post card from the Bodleian, or an extended gloss of that unwritten book, or a strange apostrophe to you the reader, or an attempt at seducing that you, or a history of the postal system in its relation to psychoanalysis, or an epistolary novel, or a detective story. In the end, to your dismay, “Derrida” is saying that it is up to you to choose which genre it is, to take responsibility for that choice and to gloss on that basis.

If Derrida is right to say that something is literature if it is taken as literature, that there is no “essence of literature,” no distinctive linguistic markings that justify you to say “This is a literary work,” it follows that you are to a considerable degree free to assign a genre to any text you gloss, teach, read, or interpret.

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Each choice would determine what and how to gloss. You would gloss differently if you took “Envois” as an extended apostrophe rather than as a somewhat disguised autobiography.

I myself lean toward taking “Envois” as belonging to a genre that had, in 1980, when La carte postale was published, only recently been given a name, and that Derrida himself does not suggest: the so-called post-modern novel. That sort of novel, from proto-post-modern narratives by Beckett, Borges, and Woolf (especially The Waves) down through more recent work by Pynchon, Doctorow, Delillo, McEwan, Coetzee, et al., has had as one of its goals a wholesale putting in question, not just in theory but also in practice, of those logocentric assumptions about the unitary selfhood of author, narrator, and characters, and those assumptions about intersubjectivity, that formed the standard conventions of the novel from Defoe to Conrad. Though those conventions were always in one way or another problematized in any given novel from Don Quixote on, nevertheless they had a considerable degree of sovereign authority over readers’ expectations. Postmodern novels take material from the real world and even from the life of the author to create a non-realistic fictive world of one sort or another that questions unitary selfhood and the coherence of beginning, middle, and end in a narrative. Putting the “Envois” in that context and taking it as a post-modern novel would make possible productive choices about what to gloss in that text.

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