Postface

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Postface

This collection of essays is an example *par excellence* of the postcard effect so extensively treated in Jacques Derrida’s *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. None of these essays was ever meant to end up in my hands, being now the presumed “editor” of this volume. As if in an actual enactment of, or perhaps, better, faithfulness to the project of this publication, its original addressee returned the mail, which, poste restante on the west coast of the United States, in a locale not far away from the Jacques Derrida Papers housed at the Special Collections and Archives of UC Irvine, was forwarded to my inbox.

My own encounter with Derrida’s work started with a similar form of *destinerrance*, when I stumbled across *Of Grammatology* in the philosophy of language section of the W.E.B. Du Bois library at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. A graduate student in linguistics, I was convinced that the book was addressing me. It spoke of the origins of language, took on Saussure, and developed the notion of “trace.” Freshly trained in Chomskyan linguistics, all of these seemed so familiar to me, yet I understood nothing—as if it was written in another English, an English I could pronounce but not read.

The arrival of this text in my non-comprehending hands led me through a maze that only later I came to understand as the so-called analytical–continental divide. In retrospect, it seemed silly to ask my professor in mathematical logic where to turn to gain an understanding of this seemingly inaccessible book. We don’t teach this in our philosophy department, he said. Back in
the Netherlands, the philosophy department of the University of Leiden told me to chase my lead at the comparative literature department. A few years later, in 2003, it became one of the first philosophy books I bought. By then, I had entered the European Graduate School.

There was a door in the linguistics wing of UMass’s South College, at the end of a corridor, that was never opened. Or, more precisely, I never saw it opened. Only later, much later, I understood from a friend who had been to “the other side” what was hidden behind that door: the CompLit department. Not even once during my exchange year had I entered it. That door no longer exists; the building has been renovated, and now has a different purpose. It houses the College of Humanities and Fine Arts.

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The fourteen essays gathered in Going Postcard: The Letter(s) of Jacques Derrida all respond to a single request: to provide a gloss to one or multiple phrases from The Post Card. That this request is not a facile demand becomes theatrically clear in the opening lines of Peggy Kamuf’s contribution: “A commentary? On ‘Envois’? No, really, you’re joking, right?” The Post Card, as Kamuf argues, demonstrates that the presuppositions underlying such a request are shaky, to say the least. This is extensively proven by the contribution of J. Hillis Miller, who, providing a gloss to the preface, inquires “to what genre does ‘Envois’ belong?” To all genres and none at all.

Despite the wide range of topics and approaches extracted from The Post Card by the different contributors, several larger themes can be distinguished. Nicholas Royle, Hannah Markley, and Zach Rivers explore different aspects of telephony and other postal logics. Julian Wolfreys and Éamonn Dunne both address the theme of love, another relevant aspect of this text that also belongs to genre of amorous epistles. Nevertheless, it appears that being a shape-shifting, superbly elusive, and often self-defeating text, The Post Card resists commentary to the extent that
it has managed to derail and extemporize the present volume, destining it for a form of publication that truly adheres to the “postal logic”: open access — for all to read, sans envelope.

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Several authors have remarked about the fact that part of the correspondence has been burned, or so Derrida tells us. Miller cites from the preface to “Envois,” the first half of the larger work, that its letters are “a recently destroyed correspondence. Destroyed by fire or what figuratively takes it 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), a phrase which Miller provides with an extensive gloss. He also refers to a later episode in which Derrida writes about burning the collection at the roadside in suburban Paris. Michael Naas, conversely, examines the white spaces, the 52-character “blanks,” which, rather than the result of consumption by fire, are insertions standing in for erased passages of variable length. How long, we (and Derrida) no longer know, because “I have totally forgotten the rule as well as the elements of such a calculation, as if I had thrown them into the fire” (PC, 5).

This burning of the letters, of correspondence, but also, by extension, of philosophical texts, is explicitly thematized at several points in “Envois.” One of these places is where Derrida considers Plato’s Second Letter, written to the tyrant Dionysius. Towards the end of the letter, Plato asks Dionysius to “read this letter over repeatedly and then burn it up.” Derrida speaks of this order as “indeed the most amorous, most crazy order, which I had also given to you” (PC, 59). The unknown addressee of his envois, somehow, is thus expected to complete the task that he himself couldn’t finish, or, perhaps, Derrida himself is the addressee: “This order was not an order, despite the imperative, as they believe […]. My order was the most abandoned prayer and the most inconceivable simulacrum — for myself first of all”

1 Plat. L. 2.314c.
(PC, 59). Within the space of less than a page, Plato thus already starts to mirror Derrida while Dionysius becomes this elusive “you [tu].” This is far from the only time such a maelstrom of readdresses appears in *The Post Card*. As James Burt suggests in his contribution, it is the constant “proliferation of pronouns […] that leaves [you] panting.”

As extensively treated by Kamillea Aghtan, *The Post Card* plays with the abbreviations “S.” and “p.” of “Socrates” and “Plato,” the latter written with a lowercase letter in reference to his smaller stature on the postcard reproduction (see p. 15) from Matthew Paris’s *Prognostica Socratis baselei* that Derrida found in the Bodleian library, the alleged beginning or impetus of the “Envois.” Several authors have picked up on aspects of this image. Nicholas Royle ana(para)lyses the “stingray” emerging underneath S.’s buttocks, while Wen-Chuan Kao sees links the emergence of the phallus with similar imagery from Bataille, and Eszter Timár sees in it a figure of autoimmunity. Burt, imagining a philosophical relay race, speaks of a “confused baton-handover.”

But S. and p. are not the two only philosophical abbreviations; there is a third: the D. of — at first — Dionysius the Younger of Syracuse, the addressee of Plato’s letter. But one phrase, a page later, which initially seems to rephrase p.’s request to D. to burn the letter after reading, suddenly opens a vista upon the inaugural pyromania of philosophy. In a letter dated September 4, 1977, Derrida writes, “P. asks D. to reread before burning, so be it, in order to incorporate the letter (like a member of the resistance under torture) and to take it in him by heart. Keep what you burn, such is the demand” (PC, 60).

Because Dionysius was not the only D. that p. related to by means of burning, this D. — and this must have been one of Derrida’s reasons to abbreviate — invokes also another philosopher, and one that p. never deigned to mention or address: Democritus. What follows is a wider reading of some of the implications of this displacement of D.

In his own words, Democritus had always been the newcomer. Whereas Plato was the established Athenian, Democritus
was the stranger whom nobody in Athens knew.\textsuperscript{2} Despite this anonymity, Plato is reported to have had an enormous dislike for “the laughing philosopher,”\textsuperscript{3} sometimes also the “prince of the philosophers,” who managed to establish a good reputation among the Athenians. In his \textit{Lives of the Philosophers}, Diogenes Laertius claims that Plato would have liked to see nothing more than all of Democritus’s works burned:

Aristoxenus in his Historical Notes affirms that Plato wished to burn all the writings of Democritus that he could collect, but that Amyclas and Clinias the Pythagoreans prevented him, saying that there was no advantage in doing so, for already his books were widely circulated. And there is clear evidence for this in the fact that Plato, who mentions almost all the early philosophers, never once alludes to Democritus, not even where it would be necessary to controvert him, obviously because he knew that he would have to match himself against the prince of the philosophers.\textsuperscript{4}

Derrida projects Plato’s desire to obliterate Democritus’s oeuvre onto his own correspondence when he refers to his “demand of the first letter: burn everything” (PC, 59). Here, the letter as the result of an abbreviation and the letter as a piece of correspondence impress upon each other, as “first letter” refers back to some previous epistle and the “first letter” of Plato: p. “Burn everything,” is the demand of both.

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Hannah Markley suggests in her contribution that the injunction to “burn everything” “appears only insofar as it haunts and recursively undoes ‘the single event of understood language,’” naming the “impossibility of legibility.” But the specific desire to burn Democritus’s writings, and by extension any philosophical text, is also, to speak with Rick Elmore, a “troubling line” that draws the foundation of the Western metaphysical tradition, a tradition that is firmly rooted in the work of small p. and not the atomism of prince D., whose philosophy, even though the former failed in his pyromaniac plot, has been all but forgotten, with only snippets and fragments preserved here and there. Friedrich Nietzsche, two millennia later, was to become the first philosopher to cast a light upon p.’s inaugural hatred for D. and lament the fate of the latter’s oeuvre: not destroyed by fire but by the steady grind of Christianity. In his early forays into pre-Platonic philosophy, Nietzsche observed:

Bad things have happened to the writings of Democritus: although they would be characterized as full of insightful judgments, as stylistic beauties, as model writings in a philosophic presentation, they would be nonetheless destroyed because in later centuries their justification would be felt as more and more strange, and especially by Christianity as it discarded the grounds for comprehending Democritus, as Aristotle had taken exception to his rejection of teleology. All but the hardest fate had already caught up to them a half-century after the death of their composer: and this is truly the reason that the Christian scholars and monastic transcribers forced their hands from Democritus, to remove him as if he were possessed, a plan which Plato had kindled, to throw the collected writings of Democritus in the fire. […] We are still very much guilty of the death sacrifice of Democritus, and only to some extent have we made good on the indebtedness to him by the past.5

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5 Friedrich Nietzsche, quoted in Paul A. Swift, _Becoming Nietzsche: Early Reflections on Democritus, Schopenhauer, and Kant_ (Oxford: Lexington Books,
This originary scandal has also not been left unnoticed by Derrida, who at several points in his oeuvre has hinted at the violence with which metaphysics has asserted its authority:

[T]he Democritean tradition [...] had been subjected since its origin, and first of all under the violent authority of Plato, to a powerful repression throughout the history of Western culture. One can now follow its symptomatology, which begins with the erasure of the name of Democritus in the writings of Plato, even though Plato was familiar with his doctrine. He probably feared that one might draw some conclusion as to the proximity, or even the filiation, of some of his philosophemes.⁶

One of these philosophemes drawn by p. from D., Derrida suggests elsewhere, is “khōra,” the “bastardly notion” from the Timeaus.⁷ Rivers picks up on this telephonic connection, proposing to listen to correspondances as khōra-spondances. But that’s not the only leftover of the “Democritean tradition.” Another, perhaps even less known notion, is etēē, usually translated as “reality” or “truth.” It has, however, nothing to do with that quintessential Platonic and metaphysical concept, alētheia.⁸ Besides lying at the foundation of the elusive science of etymology, etēē is closely (and indeed etymologically) related to the Socratic method of exetasis, of “examination,” “testing,” or “scrutiny,” and belongs to a juridical semantic field that also includes elengkhos “interrogation” and basanos “torture.” That which interrogation or examination is to bring out, in the Socratic method, is not so

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much alētheia about the world, but the eteē of a person— the concordance between their words, actions, and character. This is not a trivial matter. As Socrates famously stated in the Apology, “The unexamined life [anexetastos bios] is not livable for a human.”

This incomplete and very tentative gloss allows us to inspect the second part of the phrase. p. is asking D. to reread his work before burning it, “in order to incorporate the letter (like a member of the resistance under torture) and to take it in him by heart.” As Avital Ronell has pointed out, the theme of torture, or basanos (and by extension elengkhos and exetasis), is deeply anchored in Greek origins of philosophical practice; torture, especially the torturing of a slave, was thought to be a fool-proof way at arriving at the truth. In his contribution, Wan-Chuan Kao discusses torture in yet another context, that of ecstasy and eroticism. But the way in which Derrida invokes torture here, as a case or example in which the incorporation of a letter, of taking it by heart, which is of vital necessity in order not to reveal its contents to the Gestapo, suggests a different paradigm. Rather than speaking the truth after the first or repeated infliction of pain, D. is asked not to say anything — knowing that all the material evidence has been burned. Derrida thus inverts here the Greek paradigm. Rather than torture being a certain way of arriving at the content of a letter, torture here provides the context in which a letter is incorporated and taken “by heart.” The Greek slave always speaks, whereas the member of the resistance never does. He therefore also highlights a contradiction within Plato’s own stance toward the burning of letters. Whereas in his letter to Dionysius, the burning becomes the guarantee for memorization, the burning of Democritus’s writings would be the guarantee for their oblivion.

Finally, the abbreviation D. suggests a subtext in which Derrida identifies with Democritus, albeit reversing the plot—a
reversal not unlike “S. before p.”—by burning his letters, his correspondence himself. This reading of D. for Derrida is also offered by Dragan Kujundžić, who moreover links it to the da of the Freudian fort–da (and, why not, to Alan Bass’s gloss in his introduction “L before K” on the “prefix of negation” dé- or dé “die”). After first inverting the relation between incineration and memory, Derrida, in the third and final part of the above-cited phrase, appropriates p.’s destructive desire—by burning his own correspondence: “Keep what you burn, such is the demand.”

This collection has tried to obey this impossible demand. To keep what was presumed to be destroyed, on the threshold of to gloss and to gloss over.
