The critical difference: Deconstruction and postmodernism

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Summary

Although deconstruction seems, at first sight, to be a variety of postmodernism, the matter is not that simple. This article attempts to show that, certain similarities notwithstanding, Derridean deconstruction and postmodernism differ in important respects. It therefore first reconstructs the emergence of deconstruction from Derrida's "critique" of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, in the course of which the role played by the problematical status of the written sign and of temporality in Derrida's reading of Husserl is emphasized and linked to the far-reaching spatio-temporal implications of *différance*. In the discussion that follows, postmodernism is placed within the larger conceptual context of modernity, postmodernity, and modernism. The question of modernity's viability is shown to be appraised in divergent ways from the perspectives of philosophical modernism (Habermas) and postmodernism (Lyotard), respectively. With the aid of Johnston the affinity of deconstruction with literary/artistic postmodernism is subsequently explored in preparation for the final stage of the argument, in which deconstruction's decisive irreconcilability with postmodernism (and modernism) is demonstrated. This is done in terms of Allan Megill's notion of crisis, formulated with reference to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, and centres on the latter's attack upon the idea of crisis, presupposed by postmodernism as well as modernism.

Opsomming

Al lyk dekonstruksie aanvanklik na 'n soort postmodernisme, is die saak nie so eenvoudig nie. Hierdie artikel probeer aantoon dat, in weerwil van sekere ooreenkomste tussen Derridiaanse dekonstruksie en postmodernisme, hulle in belangrike opsigte verskil. Daar word dus begin met 'n rekonstruksie van die verskyning van dekonstruksie deur te kyk na Derrida se kritiek op Husserl se transendentale fenomenologie, met die klem op die problematiese status van die skrifteken en van temporaliteit in Derrida se interpretasie van Husserl, wat dan in verband gebring word met die verreikende tydruimtelike implikasies van *différance*. In die daaropvolgende bespreking word postmodernisme binne die breër begripskonteks van moderniteit, postmoderniteit en modernisme geplaas. Daar word aangetoon dat die vraag na die lewensvatbaarheid van moderniteit op verskillende wyses vanuit die onderskeie perspektiewe van filosofiese modernisme (Habermas) en postmodernisme (Lyotard), benader word. Daarna word met die hulp van Johnston die affiniteit van dekonstruksie met literêre/artistieke postmodernisme ondersoek ter voorbereiding van die finale stadium van die argument, waar die deurslaggewende onversoenbaarheid van dekonstruksie en postmodernisme (asook modernisme) gedemonstreer word. Dit word gedoen met behulp van Allan Megill se begrip van krisis, wat met verwysing na Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault en Derrida geformuleer word, en die resultaat is van laasgenoemde se aanval op die krisisidee as vooronderstelling van sowel postmodernisme as modernisme.

"Yet, I do not believe that Derrida can finally be seen as a postmodernist." This remark by Alan Megill (1985: 337), here quoted out of context, will (I hope) prompt the obvious question, why one should suspect Derrida of being a postmodernist in the first place. An intelligible answer to this question

presupposes a knowledge of deconstruction, the reading-strategy introduced and practised by Jacques Derrida, as well as of the cultural phenomenon referred to as postmodernism. Megill's observation also suggests a *prima facie* similarity between deconstruction and postmodernism. Such a similarity could be formulated in a preliminary manner by pointing to the "value" of deconstruction as a critical tool capable of producing the hidden contradictions which systematically undermine the overt meaning of a text, and, on the other hand, to the expectation voiced in some circles that postmodernist practices (which include "theoretical practices") may prove to have the critical potential to challenge and significantly modify the technocratic culture of "enlightened modernity" towards a less violent, more habitable world (Huyssen 1984: 50–51).

With this pre-judgement (as Gadamer would call it) in mind, I intend fleshing out the notions of Derridean deconstruction and postmodernism to enable a critical assessment of Megill's view that they are in the final analysis incompatible. In the process, the issue of modernism will unavoidably have to be addressed as well, not only because it is inscribed in the concept of postmodernism, but especially because the hope attaching to the critical dimension of postmodernism is intrinsically linked to questions concerning the enduring viability or the failure of modernism. I would like to stress from the outset that I do not, as some scholars do who are rather dismissive of any "theorizing" regarding postmodernism, look upon the present issue as mere academic, ivory tower intellectual amusement. This issue relates in a crucial way to the socio-political landscape of contemporary "postmodern" culture. As Jonathan Arac (1986: xxxix) puts it: "... what we do to change our academic habits and disciplines, the questions we dare to ask or allow our students to pursue, these are political and make a difference, too, for the academy itself is in the world".

As already intimated, deconstruction is first and foremost associated with the French thinker, Jacques Derrida, but secondly also with American figures such as the so-called Yale deconstructionists – J. Hillis Miller, Geoffrey Hartman and the late Paul de Man – as well as with Barbara Johnson, Shoshana Felman and Joseph Riddel, to mention but a few. It is fairly well known that deconstruction is not so much a philosophy or a school of thought, as a specific way ("strategy") of reading, a practice with regard to texts and by implication to institutions. Perhaps I should not be so tentative about the latter, though. Derrida's admonishing remark to two (rather uncomprehending) would-be critics[1] of his earlier text on *apartheid,*[2] is quite emphatic in this regard: "... deconstructive readings and writings are concerned not only with library books, with discourses, with conceptual and semantic contents. They are not simply analyses of discourse such as, for example, the one you propose. They are also effective or active (as one says) interventions, in particular political and institutional interventions that transform contexts without limiting themselves to theoretical or constative utterances even though they must also produce such utterances." Again, "... people get impatient when they see that deconstructive practices are also *and first of all* [my italics, G.O.] political and institutional practices" (Derrida 1986: 168).

It is probably the case that very few of the scholars who have followed the remarkable trajectory of Derrida's ("poststructuralist") deconstruction would have gauged that it was "first of all" a political and institutional practice. In fact, it is sometimes explicitly regarded as "politically weak" (Huyssen 1984: 39; Foley 1985: 113–115). And, judging by appearances one can hardly blame these critics, for Derrida "discovered" – i.e. first formulated the crucial features of – deconstruction in the course of his *Introduction* to Husserl's essay, *The origin of geometry,* which seems to be as far removed from institutional and political practices as anything can be. Derrida's *Introduction* consists of a close reading and extended commentary on, and finally a devastating critique of Husserl's text. His intimation of the practical status of this kind of reading, which signals the collapse of traditional boundaries between theory and practice – something which, incidentally, postmodern thinkers such as "neopragmatist" Richard Rorty[3] also recognize – should not come as too much of a surprise, however. In his last great work, *The crisis of the European sciences and transcendental phenomenology,* which, together with the shorter texts from this period, marks the apogee of his project (the innovativeness of which does not obscure its exemplary participation in the subject-centred tradition of modern Western philosophy) Husserl himself insists that philosophy and science are first and foremost *practices* (albeit theoretical ones). In other words, they are primarily modes of behaving, acting, or practising in the world (Husserl 1970: 110–111, 121). To be sure, this is an indication of Husserl's attempt, in the face of what he saw as a resurgent irrationalism in the work of Heidegger and others, to convince his readers and critics that, far from alienating modern man from the concreteness of his "life-world", phenomenology demonstrates the rootedness of all theory and science in the richness of that very world of practical involvement (Husserl 1970: 121–147).

Ironically, Husserl's effort to reconcile theory and practice is symptomatic of what Henry Staten (1985: 31–63) aptly terms "the opening of deconstruction in the text of phenomenology". The fact is that, as already noted, the main contours of deconstruction first showed themselves in Derrida's painstaking working-through of Husserl's text – a labour which exposes unbearable tensions within this text, so much so that its conceptual fabric comes apart. Hence his "radicalization of phenomenology" (Descombes 1980: 136, 141) takes the form of traversing it.

Briefly, Derrida's critique of Husserl's phenomenology – with its emphasis on intuition as the source of (the reactivation of) meaning (in science), and the concomitant distinction between the inessential (written) sign and the (essential) act of consciousness – focuses on the ambiguity of the sign's ideality and of (Husserl's treatment of) time or temporality as the "matrix of all object constitution" (Staten 1985: 50). In Husserl's account of the genesis of ideal geometric concepts – through three stages, viz. in the individual consciousness of the "first geometer", then the recognition of identity in the re-production of the object and its linguistic communication to others, and eventually the enduring existence of ideal objects in writing (Husserl 1970: 355–361) – the written sign proves to be problematical because, while it

makes a scientific tradition possible, it also threatens to separate a science from its "instituting sense". Derrida is quick to point out the tension in Husserl's text between the necessity of written embodiment for ideality and the moment of crisis which such embodiment of meaning introduces (Derrida 1978: 87–90). Whereas, for Husserl, meaning is essentially, albeit not factually, independent of signs, Derrida goes on to argue, contrariwise, that it is essentially bound up with the sign (Derrida 1973: 92). In Staten's words (1985: 47), "the essence of meaning is precisely its ability to function in the absence of the object meant ...". The "opening of deconstruction" thus appears when Derrida moves away from Husserl's preoccupation with the presentness of meaning in intuition, to the point where he thinks, i.e. conceives of, "signification *as such*" ... "the essence of standing-for short of what is stood-for..." (Staten 1985: 47). Derrida's originality lies in the fact that he does not shift the investigation completely away from ideality – even Husserl recognized a level of ideality (repeatability) in the sign (cf. Derrida 1973: 52), viz. that of the signifier – but affirms instead that the sign has a strange in-between status with regard to ideality and materiality (Staten 1985: 49).

In this way Derrida can treat the sign as "the limit point of the movement of idealization, from Plato to Husserl", in view of the fact that the notion of infinite repeatability of the conscious reactivation of intuition with regard to the present object as *telos* of meaning, shatters in the face of his (Derrida's) determination of the structure of signs as "repetition of what is not fully present". And, because he is working within transcendental philosophy (and not merely within the domain of texts in the narrow sense of the word), Derrida is then able to reinterpret experience itself in terms of the structure of the sign (cf. Mandel 1984: 93; Staten 1985: 50).

The model which Derrida ultimately sets against Husserl's model of meaning as presence cannot be fully grasped, though, unless his critique of Husserl's notion of time as the source of object constitution is also understood. In severely condensed terms, Husserl came to see consciousness as depending upon the primacy of an absolute "now" within which an object is impressed on consciousness, and which always makes possible its own regeneration by moving off into a series of "retentions" (a "just-past" now, its own immediately preceding now and so on; cf. Staten 1985: 50–51; Mandel 1984: 100–108). In addition to these, the "complete" now formed in this way also contains an horizon of anticipations of the future called "protentions" by Husserl, with the consequence that he can claim to have uncovered the phenomenological-temporal locus of direct intuition: in the composite now is constituted originarily the objects of consciousness, immediately perceived with regard to their "living" now, as well as the not-now of the having-been and the not-yet (Staten 1985: 50–51; cf. Husserl's distinction between "primary remembrance", i.e. retention, and "secondary remembrance" or recollection in the ordinary sense of the term which, unlike retention, is not continuous with the ideal limit of the absolute now; Mandel 1984: 104–105).

What interests Derrida in Husserl's uncovering of the formal structure of

time- (and hence, unified object-) constituting consciousness is the phenomenologist's claim that retention is characterized by full perceptual presence. Derrida challenges this assertion: to be sure, there is no perception without retention, but the latter is then precisely the moment of non-fulness, the "trace" of nonpresence which is essential to the presence of the perceptual now. The now depends for its originarity on the repetition or repeatability of the not-now (Staten 1985: 52; Derrida 1973: 66–67). Derrida therefore turns phenomenology on its head – not in arbitrary, nonsensical fashion, but via an analysis as rigorous as Husserl's. The result is that: "The nonpresent not-now thus becomes the condition of possibility for the appearing of the phenomenon ..." (Staten 1985: 52). In this way Derrida reinterprets the structure of transcendental consciousness, beginning with an analysis of the sign and adding to this his revision of Husserl's phenomenology of time-consciousness. The upshot is far-reaching. No longer are self-identity, immediacy and presence the basis of meaning and being (-in-consciousness). Hence Derrida's concept of the divided essence with its trace structure: "The trace structure is the transcendental structure of experience; no this-here is given to experience except as its identity is marked by *différance,* by reference to a not-this and a not-now. The trace structure, as the structure of the Now and of the sign, is the possibility of experience and meaning" (Staten 1985: 53; cf. also Derrida 1973: 146–147).

It should now be apparent how Derrida's critical activity attains its "deconstructive" character: his close analysis of Husserl's text brings to light the fact that phenomenology's claim to rigorous scientific disclosure of the intuitive grounds of all objecthood rests, not on incontrovertible evidence, but on a decision (Husserl's, but one reinforced by the metaphysical tradition) to accord a privileged status to full perceptual presence. As Derrida demonstrates, this decision can, with equal force, be reversed. The force of his "critique" may then be generalized to mean a rigorous dismantling of truth – from which it follows that, as Derrida has pointed out, it cannot be *critique,* because "a critique denounces an error in the name of truth" (Derrida 1986a: 32). In any case, the deconstruction of phenomenology is an exemplary instance of what has become a specific mode of questioning of language's assumed capacity to represent an intuitively accessible reality outside of the linguistic sign-system. Which inevitably brings to mind Derrida's notorious "There is nothing outside of the text" (Derrida 1980: 158) – a patently absurd claim, at least in commonsensical terms. Derrida himself has warned (1986: 167) against naively taking his use of "text" to mean "book", however. He "recast the concept of text by generalizing it almost without limit...". And the extent of his refusal to allow hostile critics to imprison deconstruction within the enclosure of language's own limits is brought home powerfully to a South African audience when he continues: "That's why there is nothing '*beyond* the text.' That's why South Africa and *apartheid* are, like you and me, part of this general text, which is not to say that it can be read the way one reads a book. That's why the text is always a field of forces: heterogeneous, differential, open, and so on" (Derrida 1986: 167–168). Anyone who accuses Derrida of not reaching the "real" world with his (textual)

deconstructions has therefore not grasped the significance of the fact that he has deconstructed the boundaries between language (or text) and world, between inside and outside.

Perceptive (and informed) readers will have noticed by now that I have shifted the discussion to a terrain which is at least partly shared by deconstruction and postmodernism, indicated by questions concerning representation and boundaries (cf. Arac 1986: xx-xxviii). More should be said about postmodernism, though, before its relationship with deconstruction can be assessed.

Postmodernism is best understood in relation to its counterpart, modernism. Both are aesthetic or philosophical subcategories within the encompassing conceptual field of "the postmodern" and "the modern" (or "postmodernity" and "modernity") which describe conditions marked by certain sociopolitical, scientific and technological features. Modernity was shaped by three mutually dependent historical developments: the Enlightenment, which saw scientific reason triumph over religion; the French Revolution with its championing of individual freedom and equality; and the industrial revolution, marked by the emergence of modern industrial production (Love 1986: 1). None of these has been an unqualified historical improvement, though, and in the eyes of thinkers as divergent as Marx and Nietzsche, conditions in modern society have led to various forms of alienation by thwarting man's creative capacities (Love 1986: 1–5).

To be sure, there are (contemporary) thinkers such as Habermas who believe that something worthwhile may yet be salvaged of the "project of modernity"; that an exploration of the possibilities of distortion-free communication may enable us to avoid the historical errors of Western rationality (Habermas 1981). Habermas believes that interaction between the autonomous rational spheres of science, morality and art could promote an optimal degree of communicative understanding and, perhaps most importantly, help preserve the pre-reflexive sphere of man's life-world, which is constantly threatened by foreign imperatives (e.g. technological ones).

In opposition to Habermas, the French philosopher Lyotard has serious doubts about the prospects of modernity. According to Lyotard (1984), the "postmodern condition" – i.e. the "condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies" (p. xxiii) – is characterized by "incredulity toward metanarratives" (p. xxiv), i.e. toward those typically modern metadiscourses of legitimation ("grand narratives") which posit some goal toward which rational subjects are working (e.g. "unanimity between rational minds" or "universal peace"), or which justify the belief in, e.g., progress through science and technology. Lyotard believes that contemporary society may be best understood in terms of competing, destabilizing language games, comprising a Heraclitean process in which science, too, participates, and is encouraged (by Lyotard; 1984: 60) to participate by promoting "paralogy" or the search for instabilities. While this is clearly the diametrical opposite of Habermas's consensualism – which, in Rorty's phrase (1985: 175) seeks "beautiful social harmonies" – Lyotard's call (1984: 82): "...let us activate the differences...", i.e. his valorization of "paralogy" and the search for the

"unknown", seems to correspond to the ubiquitous indeterminacy indicated by Derrida's (non-) concept of *différance* (which is said to instigate "the subversion of every kingdom"; Derrida 1982: 22).

Similarities between deconstruction and postmodernism are not restricted to this philosophical (or theoretical) variety. John Johnston's informative discussion of "Some versions of postmodernism" (Johnston 1986: 10–14) brings others into view. Of the three main versions distinguished by Johnston – literary/aesthetic postmodernism, historical (cultural) postmodernism and theoretical postmodernism – Derrida's influence is most clearly visible in the literary variety, constituted, for example, by the "philosophical" critic Riddel's insistence that poets such as W.C. Williams and Charles Olson ought to be understood "... in terms of a 'double deconstruction', both of themselves and of their immediate predecessors, undertaken in order to problematize a poetry of the Word (in the sense of *logos*), and such notions as 'tradition', 'origin' and 'citation'" (Johnston 1986: 10). Derrida's work is further suggested by the (literary) postmodernists' self-conscious emphasis on "the conventions, assumptions and strategies of *writing*", which robs the (creative) mind of its freedom and autonomy as "a privileged source of order or an aestheticizing instrument", accorded to it by modernism, which saw in the aesthetic order a compensation for the collapse of order in the "real" world (Johnston 1986: 10). It should be apparent that this "dispersion" of the unified subject of modernism in the "multiple signifying systems of postmodernism" is indeed linked to Derrida's (philosophical) dismantling of the unified ego of transcendental phenomenology.

Even Megill, who (as will be remembered) denies that Derrida can ultimately be regarded as a postmodernist, detects a "postmodern impulse" in his work: Derrida prefers postmodern artists such as Magritte and Titus-Carmel, with their ironic spirit, to modernist ones. Moreover, his "commentary" on Hegel and Jean Genet can (*should,* according to Megill) be read as "a literary-philosophical *collage*", i.e. "as a postmodern work of art, designed not to reconstitute an order (however provisional) in the mind of the reader/viewer but rather to generate an infinite free association" (Megill 1985: 282–283). Add to this the fact that Derrida is responsible for "importing into the realm of ideas ... what was already present in the realm of art" – specifically the deconstruction of the frame, i.e. the division between art and non-art (a division questioned by postmodernists, too; Megill 1985: 336–337) – and one starts wondering about the consistency of Megill's interpretation. Why *does* he then decline to view Derrida as a postmodernist? The answer requires an excursion into the conceptual landscape of what Megill terms "crisis theory", and particularly of Derrida's deconstruction of the notion of crisis – as articulated by Nietzsche, Heidegger and Foucault – a deconstruction which undermines the rationale for postmodernism (as well as the rationale for modernism).

Obviously, then, in Megill's assessment of the situation postmodernism (as well as modernism) presupposes a sense of crisis. He sees crisis as arising out of the demise (in the late 19th century) of historicism and the faith in progress, both of which imply historical linearity. "Crisis thinkers" therefore

conceive of the present in terms of a break: the history of Western culture is "broken, ... undirected, null, degraded" (Megill 1985: xii–xiii). In other words, these thinkers regard modernity as a derelict project, and respond to this awareness in different ways, just as modernism and postmodernism instantiate different responses to crisis. Following Robert N. Berki's schema, which differentiates between an "imaginative" (i.e. embracing the new) and a "nostalgic" (i.e. attempting to revitalize the old) response to crisis, Megill (1985: 114–115) sees Nietzsche as ambiguously adopting both stances simultaneously, failing "... to make a definitive choice between the imaginative notion of the will to power and the nostalgic notion of eternal return" (Megill 1985: 115). Foucault is said to respond imaginatively in terms of an as yet indiscernible "future thought" while Heidegger's answer to the state of crisis lies in a nostalgic return to an idealized pre-Socratic past. Derrida seems to do the impossible, according to Megill (1985: 115), by (ambiguously) following these thinkers in their "refusal" of the derelict world in which we live while, at the same time, refusing the imaginative as well as the nostalgic option. This double refusal of Derrida is related to the question of his position regarding postmodernism. Whereas modernism – which (like postmodernism) may be imaginative (Joyce) or nostalgic (T.S. Eliot) – recognizes the crisis-condition of a nihilistic culture and responds by reconstituting a realm of truth in art and literature, postmodernism shares its sense of crisis but rejects the "aironic" attempt to secure a safe aesthetic haven for truth and being. Instead, it regards fiction to be merely fiction (e.g. Borges; cf. Megill 1985: 282), and tends to extend the idea of fictionality in self-conscious terms to the world in general. (This also means that postmodernism contests the distinction between scientific and non-scientific discourse.) The critical difference between Derrida's position and postmodernism comes into view when we consider that, despite the fact that he once again reveals his affinity with that movement by similarly questioning the Kantian dichotomy between art and reality (Megill 1985: 263), he nevertheless attacks the notion of crisis, thus undercutting both modernism and postmodernism.[4]

How does he do this? Keeping in mind that the notion of crisis – a break, a turning-point (Megill 1985: 265) – is predicated upon a linear conception of history, it should be clear that a dismantling of the concept of such historical linearity will remove the grounds of crisis thought, and hence rob modernism and postmodernism of their justification, which is paradoxical, anyway: "... the convincing power of the crisis notion depends on one's prior belief in the linear or directional character of history, yet the whole point of the crisis notion is to undermine any such belief" (Megill 1985: 296). Because of his generalization of the notion of textuality, Derrida is able to deny that reading can "transgress the text toward something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) ..." (Derrida 1980: 158). This is not to deny history as such, except in the traditional sense of history as a rational, logocentric concept, of which the historicist, linear model is an example. To re-interpret history – as Derrida does – in terms of his generalized version of textuality, i.e. in terms of writing, is not to deny history; it is to understand it in terms of the interplay of a field of

heterogeneous forces. But this undermines the basis on which the thought of crisis – central to modernism and postmodernism – rests, viz. the historical model of linearity (which they also, paradoxically, question). Derrida's deconstruction of history is also implied by his reading of Husserl, of course, which exposes the unfoundedness of the privileged status Husserl attributes to the temporal "now", as well as the unfoundedness of the teleology of phenomenological investigation, forever caught in the "infinite" tension-field between a refinement and reactivation of intuitions relating to the past, and a never-ending description of (the essential structures of) future experiences (Mandel 1984: 131). "It is precisely the notion of history as an ordered line of presents – history with a capital H – that Derrida criticizes in *Of Grammatology*", says Megill (1985: 297), and he quotes a most pertinent passage from this book: "... the word *history* has no doubt always been associated with a linear scheme of the unfolding of presence, where the line relates the final presence to the originary presence according to the straight line or the circle" (Derrida 1980: 85).

Megill further shows that Derrida's dismantling of the traditional myth of "rational history" is also linked to literary criticism via the question of the theme. In short, by denying history in the traditional sense, he denies that an "historical" crisis can take place ("outside" the text, that is). This, according to Megill (1985: 290), is to question the possibility of a theme, in this way depriving literature of any (historical) foundation outside itself (p. 291). Admittedly – Megill carefully points out – Derrida ambivalently talks *as if* there has been a crisis in literature since Mallarmé and works out its implications (whether it exists or not): "Literature is at once reassured and threatened by the fact of depending only on itself, standing in the air, all alone, separated from being" (quoted in Megill 1985: 291). At any rate, this means that traditional "thematic" criticism, which, by constantly seeking a theme outside itself, subjects itself to foundationalistic Western philosophy, has become obsolete (Megill 1985: 291–292). To be sure, one should not exaggerate Derrida's position here. Megill (1985: 292) cautiously remarks that Derrida "seems", at times, to suggest that, *if* there is a crisis in literature, there is one in Western culture as a whole. "The logic of his stance", Megill continues, "and the sensitivity of his intelligence oblige Derrida to say simultaneously that there is a crisis and that there is not a crisis". But in any event, he undermines the crisis view, and in this way, again ambivalently, differentiates between his own position and postmodernism. One could say that he is *and* is not a postmodernist, a formulation which tellingly flies in the face of identity-centred traditional logic.

One important distinction still has to be added here. Having deconstructed the traditional barriers between theory and practice, art and reality, Derrida displays an affinity with postmodernism, as I have already pointed out. Unexpectedly, though, this consideration marks the very place where Derrida's continuing significance for questions pertaining to morality, politics and truth announces itself, for his deconstructions do not simply fictionalize (or aestheticize), as postmodernism tends to do; they have the effect of showing that aesthetic questions are simultaneously ethico-political questions as well

as questions concerning truth and reality, but then precisely not in the presence-oriented, logocentric sense of traditional philosophy. Megill has this in mind where he writes (1985: 37): "... postmodernism still retains a residual attachment to the 'Kantian' division between the theoretical, the practical, and the aesthetic realms, for in its peculiar sort of playfulness and laughter it treats art in isolation from ethical considerations. It practices a demoralized, derealized, dehistorical art". He continues: "This is not, I think, the end toward which Derrida's work points. If Derrida champions a postmodernist, 'poetic' interpretation, he also champions, as Reb Derrida, the 'rabbinical' interpretation that still seeks a truth in things." Megill is here thinking of Derrida's anagrammatical references to himself in the quotations from an imaginary rabbi, with which he – Derrida – concludes his essays on the work of Edmond Jabès; essays which, uncharacteristically, do not "deconstruct", but instead reveal great appreciation. What these essays further uncover, are the similarities between Judaism and writing, between Derrida's "labyrinthine text" and the "labyrinthine wanderings of the Jew", but *also* the "irreducible difference" between the poet and the rabbi, both of whom will "always be there" – the rabbi recognizing an "original text" while the poet eliminates the distinction between "original text" and "exegetical writing" or interpretation (cf. Megill 1985: 316–320).

It is the sustained ambivalence in Derrida's writing which allows Megill to conclude (1985: 337): "One therefore has, in Derrida, the sense of an ending – an ending not only of Hegelianism and Kantianism but also of the Nietzscheanism that followed these. But one also has – having worked through the Derridean critique – what is perhaps the possibility of a beginning: one that would liberate us from the historicism and aestheticism that, in one way or another, have dominated Western thought since the beginning of the nineteenth century".

In the final analysis it is precisely the portentous "logic" of Derrida's stance that impels Megill to speak (rather paradoxically) of his "awe and rapture before a truth unveiled by Derrida" (Megill 1985: xv). It is the logic of *différance,* described by Derrida (1982: 21–22) in the following familiar passage: "... *différance* is not. It is not a present being however excellent, unique, principal, or transcendent. It governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority. It is not announced by any capital letter. Not only is there no kingdom of *différance,* but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom. Which makes it obviously threatening and infallibly dreaded by everything within us that desires a kingdom, the past or future presence of a kingdom. And it is always in the name of a kingdom that one may reproach *différance* with wishing to reign, believing that one sees it aggrandize itself with a capital letter". It is this (non-) logic of *différance* that enables Derrida to deconstruct the idea of crisis presupposed by modernism and postmodernism.

His characterization of *différance* also reveals the distance between himself and modernism/postmodernism in so far as modernism's (re-)location of truth in the autonomous realm of art, as well as postmodernism's extension of fictionality to the world at large can be seen as different manifestations of the

"desire for a kingdom". And to the extent that certain contemporary movements for social change – such as those singled out by Huyssen (1984: 50–51), viz. the women's movement and the ecological movement (and one may add the gay movement) – form part of the postmodern landscape around us, Derrida's *différance* would equally undermine any totalizing claim to authority on their part (cf. Derrida 1986a: 34–35). Needless to say, the same applies to Marxism. In this respect Derrida's difficult thought is what one may call a practice of radical humility and a celebration of radical finitude.

Notes

1. Cf. McClintock, A. & Nixon, R.: "No names apart: the separation of word and history in Derrida's 'Le Dernier Mot du Racisme'."
2. Cf. Derrida, J.: "Racism's last word."
3. Cf. for example Rorty, R.: "Pragmatism, relativism, and irrationalism", in the collection of essays, *Consequences of Pragmatism.*
4. I must take this opportunity to point out that modernist readings of Derrida's position are also possible. Cf. for example Huyssen 1984: 36–47; and Mellville 1986: 3–33.

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