
In this address to a landmark conference which ultimately served as the death-knell of the hegemony of Structuralism in North American academe, Derrida begins by asserting that an “event” (278) (the very “meaning” [278] of which “it is precisely, paradoxically, the function of structural – or structuralist – thought to reduce or to suspect” [278]) has occurred. This event, he argues, has taken the form of a “rupture and a redoubling” (278). Derrida argues that the “concepts of structure and even the word ‘structure’ itself are as old as the episteme – that is to say, as old as Western science and Western philosophy” (278) and their “roots thrust deep into the soil of ordinary language” (278). Up to the event which he would like to discuss structure – or rather the structurality of structure – although it has always been at work, has always been neutralised or reduced, and this by a process of giving it a centre or of referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin. The function of this centre was not only to orient, balance, and organise the structure . . . but above all to make sure that the organising principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. By orienting and organising the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any centre represents the unthinkable itself. (278-279)

However, the centre “also closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible. As centre, it is the point at which the substitution of contents, elements or terms is no longer possible” (279). At the centre, the “permutation or the transformation of elements” (279) is “interdicted” (279). This is why it has always been thought that the centre “which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality” (279). This is why the centre is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its centre elsewhere. The centre is not the centre. The concept of centered structure – although it represents coherence itself, the condition of the episteme as philosophy as philosophy or science – contradictorily coherent. And as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire. (279)

The concept of centered structure is, Derrida argues, the “concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play” (279). It is “on the basis of this certitude” (279) that “anxiety” (279), which is the “result of a certain mode of being” (279), can be “mastered” (279). Whether one conceptualises the centre as an “origin or end, arche or telos” (279), whether one accordingly engages in an “archaeology” (279) (in which case, the “origin may always be reawakened” [279]) or “eschatalogy” (279) (the “end may be anticipated” [279]), one is involved in a “reduction of the structurality of structure” (279) by conceiving of structure “on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play” (279).
Derrida contends that there is a “history of meaning” (279) in the course of which many names/concepts have been substituted for that of the ‘centre’: the “entire history of structure must be thought of as a series of substitutions of centre for centre. . . . Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the centre receives different forms or names” (279). Alluding to the work of Heidegger which had an enormous influence on him, Derrida contends that the “history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix . . . is the determination of Being as presence in all senses of this word” (279). The result is that “all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated an invariable presence – eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, and so forth” (279-280).

Derrida writes that the rupture or break (he is alluding here to the views of one of his teachers Althusser) of which he speaks came about when the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought. . . . Henceforth, it became necessary to think both the law which somehow governed the desire for a centre in the constitution of structure, and the process of signification which orders the displacements and substitutions for this law of central presence – but a central presence which has never been itself, has always already been exiled from itself into its own substitute. The substitute does not substitute itself for anything which has somehow existed before it. Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no centre, that the centre could not be thought in the form of present-being, that the centre had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a centre of origin, everything became discourse . . . that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (280)

This “decentering, this thinking the structurality of structure” (280) is a product of the “Nietzschean critique of metaphysics, the critique of the concepts of Being and truth, for which were substituted the concepts of play, interpretation, and sign (sign without present truth)” (280), the “Freudian critique of self-presence, that is, the critique of consciousness, of the subject, of self-identity and of self-proximity or self-possession” (280) and, last but not least, the Heideggerean destruction [the word used most often today would be ‘deconstruction’] of metaphysics, of onto-theology, of the determination of Being as presence” (280).

Derrida points out, however, that “all these destructive discourses and all their analogues are trapped in a kind of circle” (280) which “describes the form of the relation between the history of metaphysics and the destruction of the history of metaphysics” (280). There is no sense, Derrida argues, in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. (280-281)

For example, the
metaphysics of presence is shaken with the help of the concept of sign. As soon as one "seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word 'sign' itself – which is precisely what cannot be done. For the signification 'sign' has always been understood and determine, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified. If one erases the radical difference between signifier and signified, it is the word 'signifier' itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept. (281)

It is not possible to “transcend” or “surpass this opposition between the sensible [the signifier] and the intelligible [the signified]” (281) for the simple reason that the “concept of the sign, in each of its aspects, has been determined by this opposition throughout the totality of its history. It has lived on this opposition and its system” (281). But, he stresses, we "cannot do without the concept of the sign, for we cannot give up this metaphysical complicity without also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity, or without the risk of erasing difference in the self-identity of a signified reducing its signifier into itself or, amounting to the same thing, simply expelling its signifier outside itself” (281). He stresses in this regard that there are two differing ways of erasing the difference between signifier and signified: the “classic way consists in reducing or deriving the signifier, that is, ultimately in submitting [surrendering] the sign to thought” (281), while the “one we are using here against the first one, consists in putting into question the system in which the preceding reduction functioned” (281), not least, the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible. The “paradox is that the metaphysical reduction of the sign [to pure thought] needed [in fact depended on] the [very] opposition it was reducing” (281).

Derrida stresses that “what we are saying here about the sign can be extended to all the concepts and all the sentences of metaphysics, in particular to the discourse on ‘structure’” (281). However, he points out that the great deconstructors (he calls them ‘destroyers’ below but the term which is commonly used today would be ‘deconstructors) found themselves caught up in and tainted by the very metaphysics which they sought to critique for the simple reason that they “worked within the inherited concepts of metaphysics” (281). Since they are “taken from a syntax and from a system, every particular borrowing brings along with it the whole of metaphysics. This is what allows these destroyers to destroy each other reciprocally – for example, Heidegger regarding Nietzsche . . . as the last metaphysician, the last ‘Platonist’” (281).

At this point, Derrida asks what is the “relevance of this formal schema to what are called the ‘human sciences’” (282). In other words, what are the implications of this attempt to critique the metaphysics of presence for the production of knowledge in the so-called ‘human’ (or ‘social’) ‘sciences’? He turns his attention in particular to “ethnology” (282) (anthropology). He is interested in anthropology because he it is ironic that “ethnology could have been born as a science only at the moment when a decentering had come about: at the moment when European culture – an, in consequence, the history fo metaphysics and of its concepts – had been dislocated, driven from its locus, and for forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference” (282). There is “nothing fortuitous about the fact that the critique of ethnocentrism – the very condition for ethnology – should be systematically and historically contemporaneous with the destruction of the history of metaphysics” (282). Derrida stresses that “ethnology – like
any science – comes about within the element of discourse. And it is primarily a European science employing traditional concepts, however much it may struggle against them” (282). This is why the “ethnologist accepts into his discourse the premises of ethnocentrism at the very moment when he denounces them. This necessity is irreducible; it is not a historical contingency” (282). Hence, he argues, the quality and fecundity of a discourse are perhaps measured by the critical rigour with which this relation to the history of metaphysics and to inherited concepts is thought. Here it is a question both of a critical relation to the language of the social sciences and a critical responsibility of the discourse itself. It is a question of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself. (282)

He turns his attention, in particular, to the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss not merely because his “thought . . . weighs heavily on the contemporary theoretical situation” (282) but because a “certain choice” (282) has been “declared” (282) in his work “as concerns both this critique of language and this critical language in the social sciences” (282).

Derrida tackles Lévi-Strauss’s focus on the “opposition between nature and culture” (282), one “congenital to philosophy” (282-283) which dates back beyond Plato to the Sophists: the “opposition physis/nomos, physis/techne . . . has been relayed to us by means of a whole historical chain which opposes ‘nature’ to law, to education, to art, to technics, – but also to liberty, to the arbitrary, to history, to society, to the mind, and so on” (283). Derrida stresses that Lévi-Strauss both accepts the “necessity of utilising this opposition and the impossibility of accepting it” (283). In The Elementary Structures of Kinship, for example, he advances the view that “that which is universal and spontaneous, and not dependent on any particular culture or any determinate norm, belongs to nature. Inversely, that which depends on a system of norms regulating society and therefore is capable of varying from one social structure to another, belongs to culture” (283).

However, from the very outset of this book, Lévi-Strauss encounters what he calls a scandal, that is to say, something which no longer tolerates the nature/culture opposition he has accepted, something which simultaneously seems to require the predicates of nature and of culture. This scandal is the incest prohibition” (283) which is “universal; in this sense one could call it natural. But it is also a prohibition, a system of norms and interdicts; in this sense one could call it cultural. (283) The incest prohibition is a scandal only “within a system of concepts which accredits the difference between nature and culture” (283): Lévi-Strauss places himself at the point at which this difference, which has always been assumed to be self-evident, finds itself erased or questioned. For from the moment when the incest prohibition can no longer be conceived within the nature / culture opposition, it can no longer be said to be a scandalous fact, a nucleus of opacity within a network of transparent significations. The incest prohibition is no longer a scandal one meets with or comes up against in the domain of traditional concepts; it is something escapes these concepts and certainly precedes them – probably as the condition of their possibility. It could perhaps be said that the whole of philosophical conceptualisation, which is systematic with the nature/culture opposition, is designed to leave in the domain of the unthinkable the very thing that makes this conceptualisation possible: the origin of the prohibition of incest. (283-284)
What this episode demonstrates for Derrida is that “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (284) which may be undertaken in two “manners” (284) once the “limit of the nature/culture opposition makes itself felt” (284). In the approach which Derrida favours, one would “question systematically and rigorously the history of these concepts” (284), that is, engage in a “systematic and historic questioning which would be neither a philological nor a philosophical action in the classic sense of these words” (284). To “concern oneself with the founding concepts of the entire history of philosophy, to deconstitute them, is not to undertake the work of the philologist or of the classic historian of philosophy. Despite appearances, it is probably the most daring way of making the beginnings of a step outside of philosophy” (284), a move “much more difficult to conceive than is generally imagined by those who they made it long ago with cavalier ease” (284) (this is an allusion to Heidegger’s claims that he abandoned philosophy and the tradition of metaphysics). Notwithstanding such claims, Derrida asserts, such thinkers are “swallowed up in metaphysics in the entire body of discourse which they claim to have disengaged from it” (284).
The other approach, adhered to by Lévi-Strauss but which Derrida is questioning here, involves conserving all these old concepts within the domain of empirical discovery while here and there denouncing their limits, treating them as tools which can still be used. No longer is any truth value attributed to them; there is a readiness to abandon them, if necessary, should other instruments appear more useful. In the meantime, their relative efficiency is exploited, and they are employed to destroy the old machinery to which they belong and of which they themselves are pieces. This is how the language of the social sciences criticises itself. Lévi-Strauss thinks that in this way he can separate method from truth, the instruments of the method and the objective significations envisaged by it. . . . Lévi-Strauss will always remain faithful to this double intention: to preserve as instrument something whose truth value he criticises. (284)

On the one hand, Derrida argues, Lévi-Strauss will continue to interrogate the nature-culture opposition in later works like The Savage Mind, while engaging in “what calls bricolage” (285), “what might be called the discourse of this method” (285): the bricoleur . . . is someone who uses ‘the means at hand,’ that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous – and so forth. (285)

“If one calls bricolage the necessity of borrowing one’s concepts from the text of a heritage which is more or less coherent or ruined, it must be said that every discourse is bricoleur” (285). Opposed to the bricoleur would be the “engineer” (285), who is supposedly the “one to construct the totality of his language, syntax, and lexicon” (285) and who is in the final analysis nothing more than a “myth” (285) in that a “subject who supposedly would be the absolute origin of his own discourse and supposedly would construct it ‘out of nothing,’ ‘out of whole cloth,’ would be the creator of the verb, the verb itself” (285). The reality is, Derrida points out, that “every finite discourse is bound by a certain bricolage and that the engineer and the scientist are also species of bricoleurs” (285). In this way, the “very idea of bricolage is menaced and the difference in which it took its meaning breaks down” (285).

Derrida then turns his attention to the “mythopoetical” (285) nature of this bricolage. Although his work aspires to be a “structural science of myths and of mythological activity” (286), his “endeavour also appears . . . to have the status which he accords to his own discourse on myths” (286). His “discourse on the myth reflects on itself and criticises itself” (286) in a manner “of concern to all the languages which share the field of the human sciences” (296). In works like The Raw and the Cooked, Lévi-Strauss abandons “all reference to a centre, to a subject, to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an absolute archia” (286) outside myth itself. He comes to the realisation in particular that there is, in no culture, no one myth that functions as the “reference myth” (286) which grounds all the other myths. Instead, each such putative ‘reference myth’ is merely a “transformation, to a greater or lesser extent, of other myths originating in the same society or in neighbouring or remote societies” (286). From this point of view, any
myth may be thought to function as the key myth. Derrida puts the consequence of this this way:

There is no unity or absolute source of the myth. The focus or the source of the myth are always shadows and virtualities which are elusive, unactualisable, and nonexistent in the first place. Everything begins with structure, configuration, or relationship. The discourse on the acentric structure that myth itself is, cannot itself have an absolute subject or an absolute centre. It must avoid the violence that consists in centering a language which describes an acentric structure if it is not to shortchange the form and movement of myth. Therefore it is necessary to forego scientific or philosophical discourse, to renounce the episteme which absolutely requires . . . that we go back to the centre, to the founding basis, to the principle, and so on. In opposition to epistemic discourse, structural discourse on myths – mythological discourse – must itself be mythomorphic. It must have the form of which it speaks. (286)

Derrida quotes Lévi-Strauss’s own strictures in this regard when he contends that the study of myths raises a methodological problem, in that it cannot be carried out according to the Cartesian principle of breaking down the difficulty into as many parts as may be necessary for finding the solution. There is no real end to methodological analysis, no hidden unity to be grasped once the breaking down process has been completed. Themes can be split up ad infinitum . . . . Consequently the unity of the myth is never more than tendential and projective. . . . It is a phenomenon of the imagination, resulting from the attempt at interpretation; and its function is to endow the myth with synthetic form and to prevent its disintegration into a confusion of opposites. (Qtd. in Derrida, 287)

Derrida concludes that the “absence of any real and fixed centre of the mythical or mythological discourse” (287) is the “absence of a subject and the absence of an author” (287). The “mythopoetical function” (287) of “ethnographic bricolage” (287) majes the “philosophical or epistemological requirement of a centre appear as mythological, that is to say, as a historical illusion” (287).

The foregoing prompts Derrida to ask: if the “mythological is mythomorphic, are all discourses on myth equivalent?” (287). In other words, are some discussions of myth (what he terms ‘mythology,’ or the study of myth) more accurate than others? That is, Derrida is interested ultimately in the putative scientific status of, in this instance, of ethnography and, by extension, of the so-called human and social sciences more generally. “Empiricism” (288), he argues, is the “matrix of all faults menacing a discourse which continues, as with Lévi-Strauss in particular, to consider itself scientific” (287). Structuralist anthropology gives rise to a “number of absolutely contradictory propositions” (288):

On the one hand, structuralism justifiably claims to be the critique of empiricism. But at the same time there is not a single book or study by Lévi-Strauss which is not proposed as an empirical essay which can always be completed or invalidated by new information. The structural schemata are always proposed as hypotheses resulting from a finite quantity of information and which are subjected to the proof of experience. (288)

The classic defence in this regard, Derrida argues, consists in the claim that “totalisation”
(289) is “impossible in the classical style: one then refers top the empirical endeavour of either a subject or a finite richness which it can never master. There is too much, more than one can say” (289).

However, Derrida insists that there is another way of conceptualising the impossibility of totalisation:

no longer from the standpoint of a concept of finitude as relegation to the empirical, but from the standpoint of the concept of play. If totalisation no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalisation. This field is in effect that of play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite, that is to say, because instead of being an inexhaustible field, as in the classical hypothesis, instead of being too large, there is something missing from it: a centre which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. . . . [T]his movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a centre or origin, is the movement of supplementarity One cannot determine the centre and exhaust totalisation because the sign which replaces the centre, which supplements it, taking the centre’s place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a supplement. The movement of signification adds something, which results in the fact that there is always something more, but this addition is a floating one because it comes to perform a vicarious function, to supplement a lack on the part of the signified. (289)

Derrida points out that Lévi-Strauss himself seems to be aware of the supplementarity which is crucial to signification, speaking in works like his “Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss” of the “overabundance of signifier, in relation to the signifieds to which this overabundance can refer” (qtd. in Derrida, 289) and of a “surplus of signification” (qtd. in Derrida, 289) at man’s disposal in “his endeavour to understand the world” (qtd. in Derrida, 289), a “supplementary allowance [ration supplémentaire]” (qtd. in Derrida, 289) which is “absolutely necessary in order that . . . the available signifier and the signified it aims at may remain the relationship of complementarity which is the very condition of the use of symbolic thought” (qtd. in Derrida, 289-290). Arguing that “this ration supplémentaire of signification is the origin of the ratio [latin for ‘reason’] itself” (290), Derrida contends that the “overabundance of the signifier, its supplementary character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be supplemented” (290).

Derrida notes that, from this point of view, Lévi-Strauss’s many references to ‘play’ and games in general may not be accidental. He notes, too, the “tension” (290) between this emphasis on ‘play’ and “history” (290):

by reducing history, Lévi-Strauss has treated as it deserves a concept which has alway sbeen in complicity with a teleological and eschatological metaphysics, in other words, paradoxically, in complicity with that philosophy of presence to which it was believed history could be opposed. The thematic of historicity, although it seems to be a somewhat late arrival in philosophy, has always been required by the determination of Being as presence. . . . [T]he concept of episteme has always called forth that of historia, if history is always the unity of a becoming, as the tradition of truth
or the development of science or knowledge oriented toward the appropriation of truth in presence and self-presence, toward knowledge in consciousness-of-self. History has always been conceived as the movement of a resumption of history, as a detour between two presences. (291)

If it is legitimate, on the one hand, to be suspicious of “this concept of history” (291), we must be wary of “falling back into an ahistoricism of a classical type” (291), on the other hand. In the work of Lévi-Strauss, the respect for structurality, for the internal originality of the structure, compels a neutralisation of time and history. For example, the appearance of a new structure, of an original system, always comes about – and this is the very condition of its structural specificity 00 by a rupture with its past, its origin, and its cause. Therefore one can describe what is peculiar to the structural organisation only by not taking into account, in the very moment of this description, its past conditions: by omitting to posit the problem of the transition from one structure to another, by putting history between brackets. In this ‘structuralist’ moment, the concepts of chance and discontinuity are indispensable. (291)

Though Lévi-Strauss is not unaware (in works like Race and History) of the “slowness, the process of maturing, the continuous toil of factual transformations” (291) that comprise history, his normal strategy is to set aside diachrony in order to focus on synchrony in an effort to “recapture the specificity of structure” (292). For this reason, he “must always conceive of the origin of a new structure on the model of catastrophe – an overturning of nature in nature, a natural interruption of the natural sequence, a setting aside of nature” (292).

If there is a tension between ‘play’ and history, Derrida also notes a tension in Lévi-Strauss between ‘play’ and presence:

Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around. (292)

Though Lévi-Strauss has brought to light the play of repetition of and the repetition of play, one no less perceives in his work a sort of ethic of presence, an ethic of nostalgia for origins, an ethic of archaic and natural innocence, of a purity of presence and self-presence in speech – an ethic, nostalgia, and even remorse, which he often presences as the motivation of the ethnological project when he moves towards the archaic societies which are exemplary societies in his eyes. (292)

Derrida characterises this yearning for the “lost or impossible presence of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediacy” (292) as the “saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauistic side of the thinking of play” (292). He counterposes to this another way of thinking about the absence of presence, that of Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of the play of a
world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. This affirmation then determines the noncentre otherwise than as loss of the centre. And it plays without security. For there is sure play: that which is limited to the substitution of given and existing, present, pieces. In absolute chance, affirmation also surrenders itself to genetic indetermination, to the seminal adventure of the trace. (292)

There are, accordingly,

two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology . . . has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and end of play. The second interpretation of interpretation, to which Nietzsche pointed the way, does not seek in ethnography, as Lévi-Strauss does, the ‘inspiration of a new humanism.’ (292)

These “two interpretations of interpretation – which are absolutely irreconcilable . . . – together share the field which we call, in such a problematic fashion, the social sciences” (293). Derrida concludes, drawing upon the notion of “différance” (293) which he explicates elsewhere, that it is not a “question of choosing” (293) between these two paradigms but of trying to “conceive of the common ground, and the différance of this irreducible difference” (293). We are entering, he believes, a zone of great uncertainty “whose conception, formation, gestation, and labour we are only catching a glimpse of today” (293). Acknowledging his use of metaphors of “childbearing” (293), he stresses that one cannot help but conceive of the confrontation with the “as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself” (293) only “under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity” (293).