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DECONSTRUCTION AS SYMBOLIC  
PLAY\*:  
SIMMEL/DERRIDA

At the end of his writing, “La Différance,” Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup> deconstructs his text by taking on an authoritative rhetorical tone. Reflecting back on his discussion of metaphysics, Derrida announces that “(t)here will be no unique name, even if it were the name of Being”.<sup>2</sup> And then he takes a surprising phenomenological turn and advocates a privileged attitude or disposition towards his reflection:

\* The authors here use the Derridian “deletion” which “allows what has been cancelled to be read”, suggesting without question the possible “deconstruction” of their own text. (Editor’s note).

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, “La Différance”, *Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, Evanston, Northwestern University Press (French ed. 1968), 1973, pp. 129-160.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

And we must think this without *nostalgia*, that is, outside the myth of a purely maternal or paternal language, a lost native country of thought. On the contrary, we must *affirm* this, in the sense in which Nietzsche puts affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance.<sup>3</sup>

Derrida's moment of decision, his taking a position, his exclusion of alternatives, and his move to closure occur in the brief and rounded paragraph quoted in full above. On the side of negation one is to reject nostalgia, which, although Derrida's project includes "decapitâ(liz)ation", is *italicized*. And one *must* think without it; there is some kind of necessity here, either a willed coercion or the blind force of historical circumstance. On the side of affirmation one is to affirm, with the same "must", Derrida's prediction, or perhaps it is an eternal counter-*logos*, that there will be no unique name. One must affirm a negation, but not in the sense of recording a disembodied judgment; one must give more than cognitive assent. One must put affirmation into *play*, laughing and dancing in a certain way.

Derrida issues the sweet command to liberated play in his decisive and sacrificial paragraph. The violence that attends deconstruction, and, for Derrida, the written word itself aggresses against *nostalgia* by virtue of its very italicization, which exposes it and sets it off as the victim of the piece. Nostalgia, that backward-looking pining that preens itself, is put into play as the binary opposite of... play. Derrida here privileges play—play is that for the sake of which deconstruction is undertaken; deconstruction is a form of play. When one gives up the nostalgia, not even the search or the hope, for "a lost native country of thought", one plays. Deconstruction is the play-form of metaphysics.

"Play-form" is a term from Georg Simmel's writings. The importance, indeed, the centrality of play for Derridian deconstruction leads to the possibility that deconstruction can be enlightened by the philosophy of play, by a text that interrogates the structure of play; and that, in turn, that text can be enlightened by deconstruction. Georg Simmel is an apt figure with whom to pair Derrida. Both are socially marginalized Jews, accused by

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

many of their respective contemporaries of being unsystematic, unserious, irresponsible, and impressionistic. Both are hyper-cosmopolitan sophisticates. And both privilege play, from a Kantian background, though neither is a Kantian. Simmel, the high modernist, and Derrida, the post modernist, will be put into reciprocal play here through appropriate writings. They will be permitted to inform, criticize, and supplement each other, creating a field for their ideas of play, embracing both discourses but preserving the distinctiveness of each. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the import of play in philosophical discourse.

The play within and between the texts of Simmel and Derrida will proceed as a game of relays. Derrida, whose metaphysical-play/play-with-metaphysics is the frame of this writing, will pass the baton to Simmel, who will provide an exposition of play-form as a distinctive form of life in dialectical relation to its binary opposite, natural-form. Then Derrida will take the baton back, with all of Simmel's tracings on it, and will offer an explication of deconstruction informed by Simmel's account of play-form. And, finally, Simmel will grasp the deconstruction-inscribed baton and have one of his metaphysical texts, embodying his textual strategies, liberated for a form of not-quite-Derridian philosophical play. The writing itself will be meant to exemplify this not-quite-Derridian play, which is the fruit of the inter-play between Simmel and Derrida. That is, by way of negation, there will be no effort to reduce the different texts to one another—Derrida's deconstruction will not be made a simple example of Simmel's play-form, nor will Simmel's strategy of textual analysis be understood as a simple instance of Derridian deconstruction. It is merely that their "distance" (Simmel) or "difference" (Derrida) from each other is sufficiently small to put their texts into play with each other, to their mutual and singular intelligibility.

#### SYMBOLIC PLAY

When Derrida hands the baton to Simmel one is thrust back into the discourse of high modernism, which is still stamped with the metaphysics of presence. But what is held to be present to the

author/reader and also, in a sense, to the text is not amenable to the imposition of a logocentric structure; that is, what is deemed to be presented is not capable of being described without falling into logical contradictions. High-modernist philosophy is Janus-faced. It is committed to the logocentric discourse of modernity and of the West more generally, but its starting point is a presence that cannot be consistently defined. For the Derridian sensibility, high modernism is tainted with nostalgia, the nostalgia for a discourse issuing in a writing that inscribes a “master-name”, putting presence under control. For Simmel that master-name is “Life”, capitalized in every sense. But not capitalized enough, since it cannot be defined so as to capture itself consistently in signifiers. The Simmelian idea of life instances Derrida’s *brisure*, a severing connection. “Life” is a flux, generating ever more of itself as process, but it also produces what exceeds itself, “more-than-life”, which is from channeling processual content into its structures. Life on its own terms is an indescribable being-between more-life/more-than-life, a logically contradictory union of opposites, a figure of Camusian absurdity; the demand for unity, not pervaded by silence, but frustrated in its activity.

Simmel’s discourse remains logocentric, not because of its ground but because of the language in which it interprets that ground. Life is conspicuous by *not* being amenable to logically consistent definition. The negation of logocentrism’s aim of the intellectual intimacy of thought and its prime content is performed by affirming logocentric discourse. Nostalgia is inscribed within the high-modernist text regardless of the author’s intention because the text does not problematize logocentric discourse but accepts its authority: any thought will be judged according to its success or failure in fulfilling the logocentric project of portraying a present Being with logical consistency and necessity. A presence that cannot be defined with logical consistency will appear to be important just because of its failure to fulfill logocentrism. An element of tragedy will enter the text, the tragedy of the heroic philosopher who storms Being for its *logos* and must admit failure. Yet there is another element in high modernism, which is introduced in the interstices of tragedy: Life, in the most mundane sense of the word, goes on through its configuring tragedy, and the author writes about everyday things in terms of that

configuration, producing philosophies of all the topics that capture interest, including play, which is the opposite of tragic nostalgia. In Simmel one finds a logocentric analysis of play that is founded on an inability to grasp the *logos*.

The text for Simmel's philosophy of play is his essay "Sociability", which appeared as a section in his *Soziologie*.<sup>4</sup> Simmel imbeds his discussion of play within an early version of his dialectic of more-life/more-than-life, resting it on the binaries content/form and natural-form/play-form. Play, for Simmel, will be thought under the sign of nostalgia, but just because of this it will gain a conceptual fixity that is lacking in Derridian deconstruction. The essay begins with a reprise to Simmel's fundamental categories, placed in dialectical relation. The "contents" of life, primarily the manifold of human interests, gain relative satisfaction through patterns of their pursuit, that is, forms. For example, the human desire for food may be pursued through the socially organized form of the hunt; the hunt undertaken with the purpose of procuring food is a natural-form. Natural-form is privileged, made foundational, by Simmel:

On the basis of practical conditions and necessities, our intelligence, will, creativity, and feeling work on the materials that we wish to wrest from life. In accord with our purposes, we give these materials certain forms and only in these forms operate and use them as elements of our lives.<sup>5</sup>

Natural-form is practical, indeed technical: it is a device by which human interests are satisfied, exclusively.

But then Simmel introduces a complication into his text, which he calls "the autonomization of contents". Continuing through the paragraph just quoted, Simmel breaks with the practical viewpoint, stating:

But it happens that these materials, these forces and interests, in a peculiar manner remove themselves from the service of life that originally produced and employed them. They become autonomous in the

<sup>4</sup> Kurt H. Wolff, ed., "Sociability", in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, New York, The Free Press (German ed. 1908), 1950, pp. 40-57.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

sense that they are no longer inseparable from the objects which they formed and thereby made available to our purposes. They come to play freely in themselves and for their own sake; they produce or make use of materials that exclusively serve their own operation or realization.<sup>6</sup>

Simmel here presents his genealogy of play: In a *peculiar manner* (that is, the *logos* is breached), the contents configured in natural-forms are separated from their practical ends and play freely in themselves and for their own sakes. As a preliminary indication, one might hazard that play-form “deconstructs” natural-form, rather than replacing it, by removing it from its practical import. Play-form is play within the natural-form, in opposition to the use of natural-form to satisfy an ulterior aim. It turns against life, as a child against a parent, making it incipiently tragic; but it also affirms life, as a child delighting a parent. Play is the transient redemption of tragedy, the possible remediation of nostalgia. It is not merely one of the many expressions of life, as it is commonly understood, but a crucial operation of Life on life, a “peculiar” operation insofar as Life/life is essentially practical and must deconstruct itself to be something other than its essence... playful.

The deeper binary in Simmel’s discussion of play-form is practical/impractical. Must the impractical be playful? Simmel appears not to be sure. As he continues his writing he instances science, art, and law as examples of the autonomization of contents. Science removes cognition from its service to “the struggle for existence” and makes “exact knowledge of the behavior of things” a “value in itself”; art relieves perceptual interpretation from subservience to practical needs and renders interpretations “purposes in themselves”; and law may forget the origins of the conduct it prescribes in practicality and make the observance of its prescriptions an end-in-itself. But Simmel does not identify any of these important instances of autonomization with play. Indeed, science, art, and law, echo the serious Platonic triad of truth, beauty, and goodness. They illustrate the “complete turnover, from the determination of the forms by the materials of life to the determination of its materials by forms that have

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

become supreme values”, which “is perhaps most extensively at work in the numerous phenomena that we lump together under the category of *play*”.<sup>7</sup> Play occurs when autonomization is “most extensively at work”; that is, science, art, law, and (might one add?) metaphysics are incomplete forms of play, still clinging to some seriousness, to something that they are called upon to accomplish, be it exact knowledge (science), faithful expression (art), or strict observance (law). They can be tragic, tyrannizing over life, as well as expressions of its florescence. And play?

In Simmelian play the forms produced by the “(a)ctual forces, needs, impulses of life” become “independent contents within play itself or, rather, *as play*”.<sup>8</sup> The other kinds of autonomization—science, art, and law—are in some way perfections of natural-forms, free in the sense that they are relieved of practical purport, but bound by a (transcendent) value principle: science perfects cognition, art perfects the forms of perception, and law perfects obedience. Play does not perfect—it plays. Among other examples, Simmel instances the hunt. Here a form is “lifted out of the flux of life” and liberated from its “material with its inherent gravity”.<sup>9</sup> The sportive hunt is not the perfection of the natural-form of hunting, as science might be considered to be the perfection of the natural-form of cognition. The sportive hunt plays with practical hunting, making all of its moves but transposing them into an order of significance that privileges the pleasures and excitements of pursuit, without concern for the object of procuring food. It approaches a deconstruction of the natural-form, releasing it from the spirit of gravity and infusing it with “gaiety and symbolic significance”.<sup>10</sup> It is not tragic, either in the sense that it turns against life or in the sense that it submits its contents to a new regimen, though it must draw its “depth and strength” from life on penalty of becoming “empty” play. By Derridian analogy, play must bear the “trace” of its origin without reproducing it. If gravity is a physical emblem of centrality, then play eludes centrality by removing practical ends and holding back from imposing any new (spiritual) ends.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Simmel's general remarks on play are merely prefatory sketches of the concept to guide the reader into his discussion of "Sociability", the essay's title. Sociability is the play-form of the process of sociation, which constitutes all the forms of society or of social life. As sociation is encountered in its natural-forms of human pursuit and avoidance it is never conspicuous for itself because it is erased or written over by the practical viewpoint. It becomes conspicuous when it breaks down (as Simmel's discussion of "the metropolis"<sup>11</sup> illustrates) or when it becomes its own object of pursuit, when it plays with itself as a structured process with no ulterior object. Concretely, the game of sociation (sociability) is played primarily in civilized social gatherings through the counters of conversational speech. It evinces an open texture, taking up all the interests that go into natural-forms and replaying their discourses as means to keeping the gathering going with gaiety, rather than pursuing their original objects. Sociability sweeps its actors into its play of itself, requiring of them a tact that substitutes for the discipline exerted by objects of natural interest:

*Tact*, therefore, is here of such a peculiar significance: where no external or immediate egoistic interests direct the self-regulation of the individual in his personal relations with others, it is tact that fulfills this regulatory function. Perhaps its most essential task is to draw the limits, which result from the claims of others, of the individual's impulses, ego-stresses, and intellectual and material desires.<sup>12</sup>

Tact, indeed, is what makes sociability possible as a free play of sociation which at the same time is limited by its own inherent form. It is the ethic or ethos of social play, an inherent disciplinary code prescribing a dance in the chains of gaiety. Through tact sociability becomes the *brisure* between life and form: "Sociability is a *symbol* of life as life emerges in the flux of a facile and happy play; yet it also is symbol of *life*".<sup>13</sup> Simmel's play of italicized stresses marks the privilege that he gives to play as

<sup>11</sup> Kurt H. Wolff, ed., "The Metropolis and Mental Life", in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, New York, The Free Press (German ed. 1908), 1950, pp. 409-424.

<sup>12</sup> Kurt H. Wolff, ed., "Sociability", *op. cit.*, p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.



the manner in which life doubles back on itself, which cannot be described univocally, but can only be inscribed by a difference in stress marks intimating what Derrida calls *différance*.

Sociability in Simmel's paradigm for play, which, since his master-name is "life" must be living play (*living* play and living *play*), playing-at-living/living-at-play. For Derrida, the paradigm for play is deconstructive writing, a relation of his writing to another writing, the text that he deconstructs. If he has one, Derrida's master-name is "writing", and he practices a form of writing that is a play-form of writing, that is the play-form of metaphysics. The baton that Simmel will pass back to Derrida will be inscribed with the ethic of tact: deconstruction is tactful writing, which takes the place of a writing disciplined by something ulterior to itself, a presence which speaks to the writer, a *logos*. Toward the end of "Sociability" Simmel intimates the possibility of deconstruction by working his binary life/symbol into the term "symbolic play". In sociability "the independent and self-regulated life, which the superficial aspects of social interaction attain" may be regarded, from the practical viewpoint, as "a formula-like and irrelevant lifelessness" or, from the perspective of play, as "a symbolic play whose aesthetic claims embody the finest and subtlest dynamics of broad, rich social existence".<sup>14</sup> And just as critics may, from the vantage points of political programs, find Derridian deconstruction to be formula-like and irrelevant manipulation of texts, so more tactful writers may regard it as a pleasurable symbolic play, a writing that symbolizes writing, that plays with symbols in the absence of their referents.

## DECONSTRUCTION

John W. Murphy has remarked: "Obviously, Derrida desires to 'deconstruct' the tradition inspired by Saussure, so that the impulse of language is free to follow its own self-appointed destiny".<sup>15</sup> The Saussurian tradition, which Derrida identifies with

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> John W. Murphy, "Jacques Derrida: a Rhetoric that Deconstructs Common Sense", *Diogenes*, 128, 1984 (pp. 125-140), here p. 132.

“the West”, is founded on a distinction between the thing that is signified by language and the linguistic signifier, assuming that “an obstrusive *object* of signification exists in the world, and an equally *a priori* concept represents it”.<sup>16</sup> That assumption is what Derrida calls “logocentrism”, the doctrine, to use Richard Rorty’s words,<sup>17</sup> that philosophy is the mirror of nature. Murphy’s interpretation of Derrida’s “project” is appropriate here because he is a sociologist who appropriates Derrida for the discourse of symbolic interactionism, which was influenced greatly by Simmel’s writings. He is a good mediator, able to connect Derrida to the desire to play, which demands submission to the play of language, its freedom “to follow its own self-appointed destiny”; just as the desire to play society, to enjoy sociability, demands submission to the play of sociation. Murphy provides the clue to, or the point of fixation for, the Simmelian Derrida, for it is that Derrida who is addressed in this writing, the playful Derrida. Deconstruction is the play-form of metaphysics, now specified as the freedom of language, not the freedom of the one who speaks or writes the language; just as sociability is the freedom of those who sociate, who must be self-disciplined to enjoy its freedom, to participate in it.

Derrida provides a felicitous and accessible account of what might best be called the *praxis* of deconstruction in an interview with Herni Rouse,<sup>18</sup> where he links his deconstructive writing to pleasure and play. The format of the interview frees Derrida to speak about writing, knowing that his speech will be inscribed into a written text. He is permitted and constrained here to engage in conversation, to be sociable enough to try to satisfy a demand for a more common intelligibility than he might want to achieve in his writings. “Implications”, the title of the interview, is a privileged text in which one encounters Derrida on the turf of speech, off his own turf of writing but incessantly referring to it.

Derrida’s first approach to describing deconstruction is to call

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1979.

<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Implications”, (interview with Henri Rouse), in *Positions*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press (French ed. 1972), pp. 3-14.

it “a unique and differentiated textual ‘operation’, if you will, whose unfinished movement assigns itself no absolute beginning, and which, although it is entirely consumed by the reading of other texts, in a certain fashion refers only to its own writing”.<sup>19</sup> Here, at the outset of his comments, there is an approximation of deconstruction to play-form. Deconstruction which, like sociability, is open-textured, an “unfinished movement”, exhausts itself in the contents of anterior forms while referring to itself, as sociability takes up the contents of natural-forms and uses them to perpetuate itself. It is an instance at least of the “autonomization of contents”, through which elements that were regimented by a textual code are freed, at least provisionally, from that code to play. They are freed by a writing which dances within other writing. Derrida continues that

above all it is necessary to read and reread those in whose wake I write, the ‘books’ in whose margins and between whose lines I mark out and read a text simultaneously almost identical and entirely other, that I would even hesitate, for obvious reasons, to call fragmentary...<sup>20</sup>

Here again is an approximation to Simmelian play-form. Take the example of the sportive hunt, which is almost identical to the hunt for food but entirely other from it. No more than the play-form can deconstruction detach itself from its antecedents. Deconstruction is a playing in and with texts, not apart from them; just as the play-forms are play in and with natural-forms. Derrida does for writing what human beings do for sociation when they are sociable—he lets it be itself. But this Simmelian reading of Derrida brings out something perhaps unsuspected. Derrida privileges the texts in which he dances, just as Simmelian play finds itself on natural-forms. Are the texts that Derrida reads and writes in like natural-forms?

There can be no deconstruction without constructions to deconstruct. And just as the play-form must deny, remove itself from, and exclude from itself the ulterior object of the natural-form, so deconstruction must close off from itself that to which the metaphysical text (the text of metaphysics) purports to refer.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

Reverting to the point of fixation of the Simmelian Derrida, deconstruction must negate the assumption that “an obtrusive *object* of signification exists in the world, and an equally *a priori* concept represents it”. The Derridian negation of the “metaphysics of presence”, in which the writing is a transcription of the discourse ruled by the “master-name” (be it God, Nature, Spirit, Life, Existence, Reality, or Being), which reveals its object through itself, is not a criticism, but a displacement of writing, a tactful writing. That is, Derrida does not negate the metaphysics of presence in order to substitute a new metaphysics (which would have to be a metaphysics of presence), but refrains from obtruding any metaphysical interest he might have on the text he is deconstructing. He is thereby freed for play, but only on condition that he relieves himself of seriousness, not, perhaps, all seriousness, since tact is serious, but of the seriousness of metaphysics. And that seriousness of metaphysics in the interest of the writer in producing a transcription of the speech that speaks that to which the capitalized master-names refer or, in the supreme instance of Logocentrism, that which they *are* (“In the beginning was the word...”). Derridian writing “assigns itself no absolute beginning,” whereas logocentric texts record the pursuit of absolute beginnings that lie beyond the pursuit, but somehow are supposed to, though Derrida does not allow them to, enter the texts or *be* the texts. Western metaphysics is like a natural-form, prescribing a code for the pursuit of presence, which Derrida takes up, abstaining from pursuit, as “a system of fundamental constraints, conceptual oppositions, outside of which philosophy becomes impracticable”.<sup>21</sup> Deconstruction is play with those conceptual oppositions, such as nature/culture, reality/illusion, being/nothing, spirit/matter, existence/essence, tracing how each member of an opposed pair asserts itself, despite, indeed, in the face of, any intention by a writer to suppress one or another of them. Deconstruction is the play of the language of metaphysics, liberated from the nostalgia for presence but faithful to the “system of fundamental constraints”, just as the sportive hunt is faithful to hunting’s constraints and sociability to the demands of sociation.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Deconstruction, to remind, is, first of all, a “textual ‘operation’”. But it is more than that, if by “operation” is meant a mere technique devoid of the possibility for description in ethical discourse. By drawing out the Simmelian Derrida the ethical elements of the deconstructive operation become prominent. Perhaps “operation” should be thought more in terms of a medical procedure that constitutes a moral relation of agent and patient than through the notion of “operational definition” from the philosophy of science, as has been implicit in this writing up to now. Derrida operates on texts by deconstructing them. But deconstruction is a form-of-play/play-form and, as such, is constituted by an ethic/ethos. The Derridian ethic of textual play is brought forward in a passage in the Rouse interview where Derrida elaborates on deconstruction as a writing with two hands. Noting the violence that attends deconstruction when it inscribes, through *erasure*, that “within the text which attempted to govern it from without” (the “master-name” of presence), he then switches to moral discourse saying:

I try to respect as rigorously as possible the internal, regulated play of philosophemes or epistemes by making them slide—without mistreating them—to the point of their nonpertinence, their exhaustion, their closure.<sup>22</sup>

Here is one of Derrida’s clearest expositions of what he does when he deconstructs a text: It is framed by the “etheme”, respect, the Kantian virtue, which, when one is playing is called tact. Deconstruction is tactful play with the text of metaphysics, which does not *mistreat* its counters, the epistemes and philosophemes, but lets them play to exhaustion, that is, until they lose the traces of their others, their binary opposites, and close in upon themselves. Then they are not pertinent—they are isolated (dead?) and ready for *erasure*. Completing the move, deconstruction is play, but it is a play that has, as one of its dialectical moments, a violence imposed from the outside, an erasure. Put-into-play/erase/put-into-play/... in an open-textured way. Very much a surgical play, but also very much like sociability, in which themes

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

and particular conversations are put into play and then dropped as the sociable actors circulate and recirculate.

Continuing his moral interpretation of deconstruction Derrida next remarks that

(t)o ‘deconstruct’ philosophy, thus, would be to think—in the most faithful, interior way—the structured genealogy of philosophy’s concepts, but at the same time to determine—from a certain exterior that is unqualifiable or unnamable by philosophy—what this history has been able to dissimulate or forbid, by making itself into a history by means of this somewhere motivated repression.<sup>23</sup>

Here the virtue of fidelity is added to respect, a fidelity to the *construction* of the logocentric text, just as sociability involves loyalty to the ruling spirit of sociation, to the process of constituting society. Yet again, and here there is a difference from Simmelian play, there is the violence of an exterior determination—the erasure—because, although the text must be respected in-itself, as text, it must not be respected for-itself, as its pretensions might make it out to be. That is, Derridian play cannot affirm its “natural form” in the way that sociability affirms sociation. There is a difference between deconstructive writing and the logocentric written that cannot be bridged because the logocentric text represses that which is not itself in the very proclamation of a “master-name” that pretends to... liberate: it dissimulates or forbids in the name of freedom—a “somewhere motivated repression”. The therapeutic element in Derridian deconstruction—the release from repression through erasure— makes it, from the vantage point of the Simmelian paradigm, an imperfect form of play. There is something ulterior about it: it must attack the text from the outside to liberate the philosophemes (even as it is faithful to the text) by “putting into question the major determination of the meaning of Being as *presence*, the determination in which Heidegger recognized the destiny of philosophy”.<sup>24</sup> Sociability, by contrast, puts nothing “into question”, but simply removes the objects of natural sociation, the natural interests, from consideration.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

Yet, Derrida continues, “this simultaneously faithful and violent circulation between the inside and the outside of philosophy” produces “a certain textual work that gives great pleasure:”

That is, a writing interested in itself which also enables us to read philosophemes—and consequently all the texts of our culture—as kinds of symptoms (a word which I suspect of course, as I explain elsewhere) of something that *could not be presented* in the history of philosophy, and which, moreover, is *nowhere present*...<sup>25</sup>

The pleasure of deconstruction is diagnostic and, perhaps, therapeutic. Might it be figured as playing doctor with a dying (dead?) patient... “the West” and the Western(ized) writer? And simultaneously keeping the patient alive beyond any intellectual dream by writing the servant-word “*différance*”, the other of presence, over the erasure of the master-name? Or perhaps the pleasure of deconstruction can be figured in the image of regicide, as Derrida invites when he concludes his exposition of deconstruction by identifying it with play:

To risk meaning nothing [to write *différance* as a self-prohibiting inscription (proscription)] is to start to play, and first to enter into the play of *différance* which prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern from the theological presence of a center the movement and textual spacing of differences”.<sup>26</sup>

Or maybe not exactly regicide despite Derrida’s “decapita(liz)ation.” Derridian deconstruction is permanent revolution in the text produced by erasure and enabled by the permissive word *différance*, the joker in the pack, which permits “the movement and textual spacing of differences” to play. And now deconstruction looks more like the Simmelian play-form, interpreted in a last approximation as the play-form of logocentrism, only possible by means of an anti-logocentric deed that preserves and emphasizes the binaries master/servant, King/joker. Doctor, regicide, servant, and joker—all of these are the Derridian deconstructionist, and none of them is privileged.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

STALEMATE

When the deconstruction-inscribed baton is handed back to Simmel for the last stretch of the relay it is to the Simmel who works on texts other than his own, the textual strategist. What is in question here is the set of operations that Simmel employs when he writes about the texts of metaphysics that have so preoccupied Derrida. Is there an opening to deconstruction in Simmel's textual strategy? Does his writing on writings evince a form of play and is it a play-form of philosophy? Can the Simmelian Derrida bring forth a Derridian Simmel? The above thoughts are put as questions because Simmel, a foundationalist with the master-name *life*, did not explicitly treat metaphysics as pure play. Instead, he desublimated the master-names of other writers, interpreting them as the expressions of each writer's vital temperament, which had been projected into the cosmos by the form-giving intellect. That is, Simmel de-objectified metaphysics, just as other high-modernist critics and philosophers of life, such as Nietzsche, Freud, Unamuno, Dewey, and Santayana did. But he did that to let *life*, not writing, have its freedom. His textual work on metaphysics was a means to an ulterior end, the vindication of *life* as Being, which cannot be captured in any intellectual constructs, but can be articulated in paradoxes, formal contradictions, and absences. He is, in Derrida's sense, a critic, who speaks for, of, and in the presence of Being and then inscribes his master-name in a text. Metaphysics for Simmel is an expression of *life*, presupposing a metaphysics of *life* to interpret it, even if (only) as a failed effort to present Being as an intelligible unity.

If Simmel's writing is to show an opening to deconstruction, then his writing about writings must be deconstructed to free his writing about writings for play. That is, one must indicate how Simmel does something supplementary to what he claims that he will do when he works on another writer's text, that he engages in a form of deconstruction or in a textual work that supplements deconstruction or shows unsuspected possibilities in it. In one way of putting it, Simmel might permit a broader interpretation of deconstruction, freeing it from localization in Derridian texts; or put another way, Simmel might help to open a field of textual operations with family resemblances to deconstruction, ranged



under the broader term symbolic play. Which way of putting the possibility of a Derridian Simmel is a matter of textual rhetoric, depending on which texts are informed and which ones are the informers. Both strategies will be used here to produce a free interplay of Derrida/Simmel in a writing on Simmel's text, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*,<sup>27</sup> in which Simmel wrote on the two dominant philosophers of life in nineteenth-century Germany. *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* is a privileged text because it embodies Simmel's way of treating the texts from which he extracted the materials for his own metaphysics. What is of concern here is his manner of treating the texts, not what he extracted from them or his metaphysics.

Simmel's methodological "Preface" to *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* stands in the way of any easy deconstructionist reading of the main text. Indeed, Simmel proposes to do everything that Derrida would try to forbear from doing. His "Preface" is devoted to declaring and defending the project of finding for Schopenhauer and Nietzsche the "positive core" where the "nucleus" of each one's "doctrine, its subjective center, coincides with the center of its objective importance, as occurs in the case of every original philosopher who answers questions about 'things out there' 'from his own inner depth, from the inner depth of mankind', as Goethe once remarked concerning Schopenhauer".<sup>28</sup> And the "aim" of his project is to make "a contribution to a general cultural history of the spirit and at the trans-historical importance of the two philosophers in question".<sup>29</sup> Objective (trans-historical) importance, the notion of a general cultural history of the spirit as the repository of importance, and a "subjective center" with a "positive core" as the origin of history are just the kind of terms that define the metaphysics of presence for Derrida. Simmel firmly emplaces his writing within logocentrism, attempting to control the texts on which he will work from the outside by his own master-names, exposing, as he says, a "philosophy about" each philosopher, based on what

<sup>27</sup> Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, Amherst, University of Massachusetts Press (German ed. 1907), 1986.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. LIV.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. LIII.

he finds important in them for a general cultural history of the spirit.

In order to accomplish his project Simmel announces a strategy that violates every rule of Derridian deconstruction. Admitting that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche “very often discussed problems that were not necessarily connected to the central cores of their respective thought and were even quite distant from them”, he “presupposes” that the “very few *leit-motivs* at the innermost cores of the doctrines of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are the most objectively valuable parts of these doctrines and the parts that will endure”.<sup>30</sup> Simmel, it seems, will not in Derridian fashion make philosophemes *slide* “to the point of their non-pertinence, their exhaustion, their closure”; but will hold fast to them to the point of retextualizing them as a philosophy of the philosopher. His final definition of his program is to compose

into a single coherent picture which has no immediate counterpart in reality but which is comparable to an artistic portrait providing, instead of the real totality of the object, an ideal interpretation and a meaning derived from the method and the goal of presentation.<sup>31</sup>

Simmel appears to be a constructivist here, someone who plunders the texts of others for his own constructive activity, rather than a deconstructionist who respects and is faithful to a text, but who is also free to write in its margins and between its lines, and to erase its master-names. The deconstructionist does construct a new text, but it is in and around the old text, not above or beneath it.

Up to the point at which he announces his project of portraiture Simmel is a prime exemplar of logocentrism, but then he suddenly exceeds his project and prepares his text for deconstruction. He continues:

One must select from the totality of the philosopher’s utterances those that form a coherent, uniform, and meaningful context of thought—and it does not matter if the totality also includes contradictions, weaknesses, and ambivalence.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. LIII; p. LIV.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. LIV.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. LIV.

Simmel's text has slid from "central core" and "objective importance" to "a coherent, uniform, and meaningful context of thought" rendered in "an ideal interpretation and a meaning derived from the method and the goal of presentation". And then he acknowledges the field for Derridian deconstruction, the totality that "includes contradictions, weakness, and ambivalence". If one erases the words "objective importance" from Simmel's text, his program becomes a work of composition, the portrait of the philosophical objectification of a vital temperament. And if one erases the word "subjective center" from Simmel's text, his composition becomes one of "utterances" (still phonocentric, but very close to Derrida), of epistemes and philosophemes. And if one then makes the pair composition/totality one grasps the possibility of deconstruction through the back door; that is, in order for Simmel to create his composition he must deconstruct the totality, respecting it for what it is, including its "contradictions, weakness, and ambivalence", and refusing to force on it a unity that it does not display. And here is the opening for the Derridian Simmel, in the textual work that he must do in order to extract a nucleus for his philosophy of the philosopher, in his acknowledgment that the text he works on is different, exceeds, that which he will make of it, that it does not close itself, but that he will have to close it in a different text.

Simmel, too, is a tactful writer, preserving the autonomy of the other text. He must "respect as rigorously as possible the internal, regulated play of philosophemes or epistemes" in order to demarcate a core; he must trace contradictions, weakness, and ambivalence to compose coherence. And, as it turns out in the main text of *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, his composition is composed strictly within his deconstruction, his putting into play of the texts on which he works. Relieved of making a contribution to a general cultural history of the spirit, *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* is a play within and between texts. A central core is, indeed, described (but doesn't Derrida also depend on the master-names of other texts to center his decentering?), but it is then played off against counter-texts. Simmelian deconstruction is an operation of stalemating core by recurring to periphery and counter-core. That is while he could have simply written a straightforward exposition of the philosophy of the philosopher, he

proceeded instead to put his composition into play with the textual totality from which he constructed it.

A first approximation to Simmel's textual strategy of stalemating can be made by recurring to his discussion of non-partisanship in *Soziologie*. Similar to the way in which sociability makes the process of sociation conspicuous, non-partisanship brings out the structure of the more specified process of conflict. The non-partisan is either a mediator who

produces the concord of two colliding parties, whereby he withdraws after making the effort of creating direct contact between the unconnected or quarreling elements, or an arbiter who 'balances', as it were, their contradictory claims against one another and eliminates what is incompatible in them.<sup>33</sup>

From a reading of his program Simmel would appear to be an arbitrator, whose portrayal or philosophy of the philosopher eliminates contradictory claims, composing a coherent unity of thought. But in practice he is a mediator who brings epistemes and philosophemes into contact with each other so that they can play off each other.

There is, however, a difference between social mediation and the textual strategy of stalemating. Whereas the natural-form of mediation in society has the ulterior object of a voluntary concord among the conflicting parties, the mediation of intra- and inter-textual conflict of logocentric philosophical texts does not produce concord, but a heightening of differences that cannot be reconciled and that the stalemater refuses to arbitrate. Stalemating is the play-form of philosophical mediation, the deconstruction of any Hegelian presumption to unify opposites, Hegel stripped of his dialectical *logos*. For Simmel, as for Derrida, Western metaphysics has been the effort to define "ultimate reality" in consistent terms by privileging a master-name. The non-partisan stalemater is a tactful writer, exercising the self-prohibition against arbitrating the conflict among philosophemes by choosing one of the contending master-names or by imposing a new master-name from the outside. Instead, stalemating con-

<sup>33</sup> Kurt H. Wolff, ed., "the Triad", in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, New York, The Free Press (German ed. 1908), 1950, pp. 145-160, here pp. 145-47.

structs scenarios in which contending philosophemes are continually brought into a play in which they cancel each other out continually as they displace one other from privileged spaces in the logocentric text. The stalemater perfects the ethic/ethos of Simmel's non-partisan who fuses "personal distance from the objective significance of the quarrel [which master-name will win] with personal interest in its subjective significance".<sup>34</sup> That is, the stalemater makes sure that no master-name wins, becoming a partisan of the continuing play of the philosophemes; but finds the pursuit of the master-name significant. Stalemating is the mutual and ever-renewed cancelling of master-names, metaphysical play and play with metaphysics.

Simmel sets up his scenarios for stalemating by a three-step operation that he follows throughout his specific discussions of philosophical questions in *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*. He initially constructs his composition of the philosopher's "own center", understanding the philosopher as presenting an intelligible response to a genuine problematic. Remaining faithful to the text on which he works, Simmel does not at first bring any external perspective to bear on it but attempts to describe its internal meaning. He does as little synthetic reconstruction as possible, stating major doctrines clearly and avoiding efforts to reconcile contradictions while correcting the misinterpretations of other critics. But once Simmel has taken up the philosopher's position he proceeds to a second and more deconstructionist operation showing that the very assumptions of the position permit at least one other substantive alternative than the one asserted by it to follow logically from it. By revealing that the unity of the position has not been achieved by logical necessity Simmel relieves the position of its pretension to objective truth and retextualizes it as a speculative possibility expressing the philosopher's temperament. Then, in his last move, he states what he has found to be tenable and significant in the position. The moves of retextualization and judgment about tenability are extraneous to the deconstructive operation of submitting speculative alternatives that cancel the one that appears in the analyzed text. Indeed, when the speculative alternative comes from a counter-text, as when Simmel plays off

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Schopenhauer and Nietzsche against one another, he becomes a purely playful mediator, at a concerned distance, putting the philosophemes of others into play and stalemating their master-names. He engages in inter-textual play, writing as Derrida does with two hands, but instead of wielding a pen and an eraser, he brandishes two pens that cancel/inscribe, inscribe/cancel, in an open process of mediating play that succeeds by virtue of its failure to reconcile the conflicting philosophemes. Simmel's play is as violent as Derrida's, but it is a non-partisan proxy violence.

At the conclusion of *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche* Simmel summarizes the stalemate that he has set up between the two philosophers. The core of Nietzsche is the "dogmatic value-presupposition" that "Life shall be", whereas the core of Schopenhauer is the equally dogmatic negation that "Life shall not be". For Simmel, the stalemate of core and counter-core reveals "the limits of logical understanding", indicating "an opposition of being which cannot be bridged by the intellect".<sup>35</sup> Schopenhauer's conviction that "life is valueless, which is based on selecting from all of the diverse and non-observable meanings only monotony, the preponderance of suffering and failure" is met by Nietzsche's belief that "life is a value and that every deficiency is but a step towards a new attainment, every monotony but an interplay of infinite vitality, and every pain inconsequential in light of the surge of values in the process of realization in being and action".<sup>36</sup> Schopenhauer and Nietzsche cancel and recancel each other, making a "search for peace" between them a "meritless venture", which is "worse than useless because it falsifies the meaning of their opposition and, thus, the meaning of each one of them".<sup>37</sup>

The tactful stalemater deconstructs to heighten difference, respectful towards and faithful to the conflict and the participants in it, a mediator of the irreconcilable. The playful mediator remains at a distance from the conflict, achieving the only unification possible here, as "a subject who can regard both positions". Simmel closes his book with a stalemater's credo:

<sup>35</sup> Georg Simmel, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>36</sup> Georg Simmel, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

<sup>37</sup> Georg Simmel, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

By sensing the reverberations of spiritual existence in the distance opened up by these opposites, the soul grows, despite, indeed, because of the fact that it does not decide in favor of one of the parties. It finally embraces both the desperation and the jubilation of life as the poles of its own expansion, its own power, its own plenitude of forms, and it enjoys that embrace.<sup>38</sup>

The mediator takes the cancelled checks, the texts, and plays with their exchange. There is no ulterior Being for them to draw upon, only the pleasure of regarding the interplay of sentiments of life through the philosophemes that stand for them. The therapeutic pleasure of Derrida cedes to a more erotic pleasure between the texts in the “distance opened up by these opposites”. Perform a Derridian erasure of “soul” and write in the word “*différance*” and one engages in a not-quite-Derridian play, not-quite-Derridian because it also permits the sentiments to play through the philosophemes, a play of *life* taken up into philosophy. Might this not approach a Derridian thinking “without *nostalgia*”, putting “affirmation into play, in a certain laughter and a certain step of the dance”?

Is the stalemating operation a form of deconstruction or are they both symbolic play-forms? Does this question matter any more?

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<sup>38</sup> Georg Simmel, *op. cit.*, p. 181.