

# Derrida's Wake

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The manifold operations with, and upon, a whole chain of representative texts which Jacques Derrida has been performing for more than a decade now,<sup>1</sup> converge and conspire to outwit the continuing force of received metaphysical discourse. On every side, from Carnap to Heidegger, metaphysical discourse has been denounced and repudiated, but, as Derrida writes, 'the way out of metaphysics is much more difficult to conceive than is generally imagined by those who think they made it with cavalier ease long ago, and who are in general sunk in metaphysics by the whole weight of the discourse they claim to have disengaged from it' (E. D., page 416). Just how difficult the break with metaphysical discourse must be it is Derrida's purpose to demonstrate in a multiplicity of contexts. But since it turns out that our whole notion of 'sign' is systematically as well as historically implicated in the hegemony of metaphysical discourse, and that 'sign and deity have the same place and the same time of birth' (*Grammatologie*, page 25), one's theological curiosity cannot fail to be aroused.

Put briefly, Derrida's programme is to dislodge the last vestiges of idealist metaphysics from our field of discourse, in order to open the way to a 'materialism' like Nietzsche's affirmation of the 'innocence of becoming'.

For Derrida, in Nietzsche's wake, the discourse of 'metaphysics' has reigned supreme since Plato in the hermeneutic space sustaining the tradition of meaning which is implicit in, and in complicity with, the economy and regime of 'the West'. This whole way of life—of thought, work and feeling—seems, to Derrida, an order—a 'politics'—of experience which is inveterately *idealist*. By this he means that, whether it be Plato's *topos hyperouranios*, or Descartes' *ego cogitans*, or Hegel's *absoluter Geist*, or even J. L. Austin's 'utterance-origin', there is always a reserve of meaning which is exterior and anterior to the whole system of actual meaning. What constitutes 'idealism', and thus establishes the domain of metaphysical discourse within which our experience occurs, is that the order of meaning as intelligible *signatum* is never contemporary with, but always prior to, the order of meaning as perceptible *signans*—to borrow de Saussure's pair of terms for expounding the nature of sign (itself of Stoic provenance). This allegedly 'natural' priority of *signatum* over *signans*, of idea over material, interlocks, according to Derrida, with a systematic playing-down of the *materiality* of sign. It is in this partiality for a meaning external to, and finally independent of, any materialisation of it, that he finds the defining thrust and distinctive obsession of the metaphysical tradition of discourse which is our field of play. This pre-

<sup>1</sup>L'Origine de la Géométrie, 1962; La Voix et le Phénomène, 1967; De la Grammatologie, 1967; L'Écriture et la Différence, 1967; La Dissémination, 1972; Marges de la philosophie, 1972; Positions, 1972.

dilection for the transcendentality of meaning over expression is interwoven with widespread disparagement of the material signs by which significance is realised. Though systematic and pervasive, the disparagement is also covert and disseminated. It is part of Derrida's skill to detect and expose it in a variety of representative texts from Plato to de Saussure and Lévi-Strauss. What he fastens on is the strange way in which the sign-production which is writing is constantly belittled, while the materiality of the voice is all but obliterated.

*The tyranny of script in de Saussure*

Ferdinand de Saussure's famous *Cours* (1916) is the foundation document of modern linguistics. The text was put together after his death mainly from students' notes of his lectures, but it does not matter whether the animosity against script is his or only his students, for it appears in many other introductions to linguistics and would in any case be regarded as natural by anybody whose suspicions had not been aroused by the virulence of the tone.

In the sixth chapter of the *Cours*, de Saussure writes about how the function of script is simply to represent speech. Talking and writing are two distinct sign-systems, but script is the secondary and derivative one, entirely parasitic upon speech. But the word committed to writing is so intimately involved with the spoken word that it ends by usurping the principal role. More importance is then given to the graphic and visible representation of the vocal sign than to the sound itself: 'it is as if one believed that, to get to know a man, it was better to look at his photograph than his face'. De Saussure goes on to account for this 'unmerited' prestige of script, and to denounce *la tyrannie de la lettre*.

The graphic image or visible trace of the living word strikes us as being something permanent and solid, more lasting and enduring, thus more appropriate than sound to constitute the unity of a tongue through the changes of time and history. But this link between language and script is 'superficial'; it creates a purely 'factitious' and 'artificial' unity, though admittedly it is easier to grasp than the 'natural bond', 'the only true bond', which is the bond between language and sound. But in Derrida's wake one begins to question all the tacit assumptions here—for instance, what reason is there for assuming that the production of meaning by the voice is any more 'natural', any less 'artificial', than the production of meaning by writing or drawing or tracing? What are the presuppositions about 'nature' and 'art' that govern de Saussure's argument? It is true, of course, that he is polemically ensuring space for his new science of linguistics in a scholarly world then dominated by classical philology. His insecurity shows through. Literary language—'letters'—increases the unmerited importance of writing: 'it has its dictionaries, its grammars; it is from and by the Book that they teach in schools; the tongue appears to be ruled by a code; the code itself is a written rule subject to rigorous application—*orthography*; which is what confers primordial importance on writing'. And when there is a difference

between speech and spelling, between the spoken word and orthography, 'the argument is always difficult to settle for everyone but the linguist; but since he has no voice at the chapter, the written form almost inevitably wins, for any solution supported by it is easier; and thus script arrogates to itself an importance to which it has no right whatever'.

This arrogant and usurping sign-system which is script must be put in its place. It has become so bad that 'script veils our view of speech, it is not a garment but a disguise, *pas un vêtement mais un travestissement*'. The written word leads to 'vicious pronunciations' (the family name Lefèbvre thus mistakenly becomes Lefébure, so he says). Such 'phonic deformations' then belong to the language—'but they do not stem from its natural functioning, *son jeu naturel*; they are due to a factor which is external to it'. Linguistics (he concludes) should put such instances into a special compartment for observation; they are 'teratological cases' (i.e. monsters).

The passion and indignation with which de Saussure puts down the pretensions of script cannot fail to strike the reader. Script is a sign-system external to the natural play of language; it is unnatural, artificial, secondary, derivative, not content merely to represent speech, not content to be simply a garment, but given to veiling and travesty the language which is united most properly, naturally and intimately with the living voice (*phonè*).

At the same time, however, de Saussure cannot dispense with recourse to script. The tyranny of the letter has been exposed and denounced, and the natural covenant between meaning and sound solemnly proclaimed, but the following chapter opens with a somewhat chastened return of the vanquished: 'Whoever deliberately suppresses script is deprived of that sense-perceptible image and thus risks being left with nothing but a formless mass (i.e. of sound) which he doesn't know what to do with'. Detached from their graphic equivalents, so we are now told, sounds, *words*, represent no more than 'vague notions', and the 'prop of script', though 'deceptive', is preferable to that.

What fascinates Derrida, then, in this key document in the influential science of linguistics, is the violence of de Saussure's determination to restrict script to something external and secondary (external to the constitution of meaning and secondary to the speech in which alone meaning is properly created), and the tacitly intertwined belief in the special relationship between meaning and the spoken word. Where script as a sign-system seems to represent meaning only at one remove, and always to remain outside the constitution of meaning, the voice apparently enjoys a privileged bond with the meaning with which it is naturally congenial. And yet it is the same de Saussure who writes of speech as a system of signs 'comparable to a system of writing, the alphabet of deaf-mutes, symbolic rites, polite formulas,

military signals, etc.', and goes on to imagine some future study of 'the life of signs within society' which he proposes to call 'semiology'. Linguistics, the science of spoken language, the study of human sound, he finally envisages as one day finding its place in a general science of *signs*—including gesture, posture, marking, etc. This would surely be to relativise the supposed privileged bond between meaning and speech.

### *Nostalgia for illiteracy in Lévi-Strauss*

No less prestige-laden than linguistics is the science of anthropology; we are all 'structuralists' now. But structuralism, for Derrida, is only the latest guise of idealism. His way of broaching the metaphysical discourse in the apparently scientific observations of Claude Lévi-Strauss is again to follow out his comments on the value of writing and literacy. In *Tristes Tropiques*, for example, there is a very remarkable account of how the phenomenon of deceit was introduced into his favourite Brazilian tribe when they were given a writing lesson. Literacy goes with sin. He regularly insists on the connection between literacy and hierarchy: 'when we consider the first uses to which writing was put, it would seem quite clear that it was connected first and foremost with power: it was used for inventories, catalogues, censuses, laws and instructions', etc.; and he constantly says that humanity had already made its most essential and fundamental discoveries before the invention of writing. Fair enough; but it depends on how we are to define writing. Lévi-Strauss frequently distinguishes writing as it is 'in our civilisation' from various notations and systems of hieroglyphic markings to which he is not prepared to grant the status of script. Even on that narrow, Europe-centred conception of script it seems odd not to mention the liberating potential of literacy as well as the socially divisive and retarding effects. But surely, on a wider understanding of writing as graphic sign, such 'primitive' marking, whether on totem poles or on faces and bodies, constitutes a notation and a significance but for which humanity could never have happened at all. If the incest taboo was decisive in the formation of distinctively human societies what else can have permitted it but facial and bodily designs that enabled there to be mutual recognition such as does not occur among cats and dogs? Tattoo is perhaps the original script. It is significant, at any rate, that Lévi-Strauss did not have to teach his 'primitives' that tracings on materials could produce meaning; they evidently understood that already; the 'zigzags on their gourds' may have been as crude as he says, but they were enough to let them into the secret of how marks can make sense. The tribesmen were illiterate, but they understood the principle upon which reading and writing 'in our civilisation' depend.

Thus, in the case of Lévi-Strauss too, persistent association of writing with wickedness goes together with half-concealed allusions to other

material productions of meaning which are denied the status of 'proper writing' though historically they most probably originated it. As in the case of de Saussure, the iniquity of script is deplored and its authority in the constitution of meaning denied, but it returns in disguise looking at least as plausible a factor in the production of significance as the living voice itself. But what is most striking, in *Tristes Tropiques*, is an almost embarrassing nostalgia for a paradisaical innocence ascribed to the immediacy of intercourse among illiterate people. 'The couples embrace as if seeking to recapture a lost unity, and their caresses continue uninterrupted as one goes by. One can sense in all of them an immense kindness, a profoundly carefree attitude, a naive and charming animal satisfaction and—binding these various feelings together—something which might be called the most truthful and moving expression of human tenderness', etc. Once again, in fact, the living voice, face to face intercourse, is unconsciously interpreted as being so full of meaning that meaning is 'immediate', i.e. unmediated, unmaterial. The voice seems not to be a medium at all, i.e. it has ceased to be bodily and material. The living word—*sound*—comes to seem the most 'natural', the most 'proper', production of meaning because it appears to be 'immaterial', i.e. ethereal, spiritual, purely noetic. Is it not strange that the materiality of the voice should be denied altogether while the materiality of script should weigh so heavily? One sign or signifier ceases to be a sign at all and dematerialises in the meaning, while the materiality of the other signifier keeps it outside the domain of meaning. The *signifiant* which is speech disappears in what it signifies, but the *signifiant* which is writing or marking remains painfully distinct from what it signifies. Either way the materiality of the sign is denied—for Derrida, the sign par excellence of *idealism*.

*Plato: the condemnation of letters and protection of the soul*

That texts of the founding fathers of two such modish modern sciences as linguistics and anthropology should betray this confusion about the relationship of signifier to signified, of material expression to meaning, must delight Derrida and surely count as 'textual work that gives great pleasure' (*Positions*, page 15). In the unfinished and no doubt unfinishable catena of texts upon which he has worked (Lacan, Heidegger, Husserl, Austin, Hegel, Rousseau, etc.), he keeps returning to Plato and particularly to the famous discussion towards the end of the *Phaedrus* where Socrates contrasts the power of speech as soul-guiding (*psychagogia*) with the frivolity and sterility of reading and writing.

Having discussed at great length the art of discourse (*logos*), Socrates comes now to examine the status of writing (*graphè*). He begins by citing a 'tradition of the ancients'—'whether true or not they only know'—according to which the use of letters was the discovery of a famous demi-god in Egypt whose name was Theuth (alias

Thoth and identified by the Greeks with Hermes Trismegistus), the ibis-headed moon-god, spokesman of the gods and their archivist. Since he wanted the people to have the benefit of his inventions he went to submit them first to the judgment of Thamus, the king of the gods (alias Amon-Ra, the sun-god, whom the Greeks later identified with Zeus, the source of light and fertility). The inventor showed his arts to the king, who inquired about their various uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. But when they came to the art of letters the inventor said to the king: 'O King, this is the form of knowledge which will make people wiser and improve their memories; here both memory and wisdom find a specific (*pharmakon*)'.

But the king condemns the art of letters. The specific is not a stimulus but a poison. The effect of reading and writing will be to introduce forgetfulness (*lethe*) into people's souls because they will no longer exercise their memories. Having learned to put faith in script they will no longer remember from inside (*endothen*), but will on the contrary be brought to remember from outside (*exothen*), relying upon alien and alienating marks (*hyp' allotrion typon*). They will become dependent on something external, something as extrinsic and as material as marks, *typoi*, instead of being able to summon up knowledge from within. The soul becomes estranged from itself and its memory of truth if it comes to rely upon material signs. There is a kind of 'fall' into the materiality of script which estranges the soul from its own inwardness.

Besides this, as Socrates goes on to say, writing can never be any more than a reminder to one who already knows the meaning; the one grave fault that books have in common with pictures is that they preserve one unvarying meaning—if you look a second time, with a fresh question in mind, they give no new information; and, worse still, when ideas have been committed to writing they fall into the hands of those who are not equipped to understand them properly . . . There, clearly, is the censoring instinct; the determination to protect innocent souls from what they might read. The strange notion that a text has only one sense, and that a book can tell you only what you already know, though not entirely defunct, has been seriously eroded by the centuries-long experience of responding to the demands of the sacred text of Scripture. In fact Derrida's textual operations are just such multiple interpretations.

Thus the technique of script is condemned by the supreme authority of the king of the gods, partly to protect the souls of innocent people from being corrupted by wrong ideas, partly because of an associated myth about the relationship between meaning and the soul. For Socrates goes on further to say that there is another *logos*, related to the true *logos* but this time not unlawfully begotten, i.e. like writing. This is the *logos* that goes together with knowledge (*episteme*) and is



written in the soul of the student. It is 'the living, ensouled word of one who knows', and of this the written word in the ordinary sense is merely a simulacrum. So once again we find the same set of moves as in de Saussure and Lévi-Strauss: in the very act of dismissing *graphè* as misbegotten and illegitimate, as poisonous and corrupting, and as he adulates the living word, Socrates cannot help falling back on a metaphor which allows for the inscribing of meaning in the soul. He goes on to argue that a man who has knowledge might plant his seeds in 'the garden of letters', but only for recreation and amusement, for writing is a game, a pastime. If he is really in earnest then he will select a soul of the right type and plant in it the word of knowledge. It is by cultivating the soul of a congenial student that the man who knows disseminates his wisdom, not by writing books. The word he implants in his soulmate is 'a word that can help itself as well as him who planted it, and instead of being sterile it has in it a seed from which others may grow, thus making a man as happy as can be'.

Derrida's most elaborate analysis of the *Phaedrus* text runs to well over a hundred pages (*La Dissémination*, pp. 69-197) and it is cruel to summarise it like this. It is only as one follows him through the dense undergrowth of the metaphorical texture of the text that one begins to gauge the animosity against the materiality of graphic sign, and to perceive the corresponding acceptance of the omnipotent myth of the soul's immediate relationship with meaning. The radical intuitionism of the metaphysical tradition is ubiquitous. The trail always leads to something like the experience of thought as the soul's dialogue in silence with itself (*Sophist*, 263 E). In such private communing the meaning is presumed to occur without the intervention either of the voice or even of discourse. The resistance to the materiality of sign implicit in the flight from script and literacy interlocks with the dematerialisation of sign in the myth of the soul's unmediated communion with the *origin* of all meaning.

### *Eliding the theology*

The very notion of sign, then, without which we cannot communicate at all, is deeply and fishily implicated in a double movement of flight from materiality and nostalgia for a message that can dispense with mediation. The grammatophobia of the metaphysical tradition goes with a dream of total meaning being given without the use of signs. While the more blatant modes of idealism are easily discredited—neither Plato's 'supercelestial realm' nor Descartes' 'conscious I' can impose itself now as the original source of meaning—the spell of metaphysical discourse has not been broken so long as we remain suspicious of script and persuaded that meaning is immediately and substantially present in speech in a privileged degree because of the natural bond between mind and voice (spirit and breath). In other words, Derrida has discovered a new, very telling and somewhat

alarming method of interrogating our received and continuing tradition of meaning, and of exposing its irrepressible metaphysicality.

The operation has only started. Derrida insists that there is no easy method of thinking oneself out of the metaphysical-idealist way of thought. On the contrary, those who fail to realise how pervasive and inclusive it is are only the more duped. We have to go on talking within the bounds of metaphysical discourse but with a certain scepticism about what we hear ourselves saying. It is obvious that whenever we speak or think we set off a whole chain of interlacing concepts such as speech, thought, language, meaning, sign, voice, body, soul, etc., and it is far from easy to plot the moves in the game and even less so to justify them.

The belief that it makes sense to think of a reserve or an origin of meaning that would always be anterior and exterior to the whole ongoing system of actual sense-making is what Derrida most wants to disturb and dissolve. So far in the history of the meaning of meaning, at least in the West, we have worked with expressionist or representationist concepts of meaning (reducible to one another and traceable to Plato's notion of *mimesis*). In effect that is to think of some already existing *signatum* of which every act of meaning is always only the transcription or imitation. It is upon the elimination of any such *primum signatum*, or original and ultimate fulness of meaning, regarded as antecedent to and independent of all actual meaning, that Derrida makes the possibility of some future move out of metaphysical thinking depend. Whether this plenitude of meaning appears as Plato's realm of Ideas ('out *there*') or as Descartes' thinking Self ('in *here*'), it is, for Derrida, nothing other than the residual trace of *God*. With Nietzsche, Derrida's foreclosure of the metaphysical tradition is a wake for *God*.

The privileged bond posited between voice and sense, between speech and meaningfulness, is linked, according to Derrida, with a whole chain of concepts and distinctions of which the force is not only 'metaphysical' but essentially religious and theological. As we have noted, it is the concept of sign, and the received distinction in the sign between what is signified (the intelligible *signatum*, the *signifié*) and the actual signifying of it (the sense-perceptible *signans*, the *signifiant*), that is offered as the handiest lever to prise open the metaphysical system. What Derrida tries to do, in detailed work upon specific texts, is to show how the notion of sign, and thus of language and meaning and truth, belongs to a concatenation of distinctions such as those between soul and body, idea and material, intention and expression, and so on, all of which are much less easy to separate than we commonly imagine from nostalgic recourse to a meaning conceived of as existing, in meaning-fulness, prior to exteriorisation (expulsion, 'fall') in, or representation (imitation, copying) by, that which is *material*. This 'pure' meaning, this fulness of mean-



ing, is unmistakably the presence, the pre-existence, of 'God', whether as *logos spermatikos* or *veritas prima* or whatever. But, as Derrida says (*Grammatologie*, page 25): 'it is not a question of "rejecting" these concepts; they are necessary and today at least, for us, nothing is thinkable without them. It is a question rather of bringing out the systematic and historical solidarity of concepts and acts of thought that are often believed to be separable *innocently*'. We cannot renounce the very concepts we need to shake up the tradition of which they are part. 'Inside the enclosure, by an oblique and always risky movement, always liable to fall below what it is dismantling, we must surround the critical concepts with a prudent and meticulous discourse, marking the conditions, the milieu and the limits of their effectiveness, indicating exactly how they belong to the machine that they allow to be dismantled—indicating at the same time the chink through which the light of what lies outside the enclosure, *la lueur de l'oultre-clôture*, breaks through'. It is as a *clôture*, an enclosure, that Derrida imagines the domain of metaphysical discourse, and he pictures us as having to chip away at the whole conceptual framework until some other way of thinking, *encore innommable*, begins to penetrate. He is presumably aware of the reminiscences, ironically, at least in the metaphorical tissue, of the allegory of the Cave in book seven of Plato's *Republic*.

The concept of sign, then, grows out of the same clump of notions of which another branch, or perhaps even the main stem, is the divine truth which exists prior to, and independently of, all actual truth: 'Sign and deity have the same place and the same time of birth' (*ibid.*). The concept of sign was born with the concept of God; *l'époque du signe est essentiellement théologique*.

#### *The centreless game*

But Derrida does not write off any of his predecessors—not even Plato. Every 'metaphysical' text he works on seems to contain some opening towards some other way of thought ('materialism' in fact). There is, as we have seen, an idealist component in the structuralist anthropology of Lévi-Strauss. There is also a structuralism which is only metaphysical discourse disseminated and disguised because the structurality of structure is systematically, though unwittingly, disrupted and neutralised by the structure's always being given a *centre*, by its always being slanted towards a fixed point. What Derrida wants us to imagine is a structure which would not have any fixed point which governs but transcends it. The concept of a centred structure, to which we are so accustomed that 'even today the notion of a structure lacking any centre represents the unthinkable itself', is in fact the concept of a free-play, *un jeu*, which is *founded*—which is constituted upon a fundamental immobility and therefore upon a reassuring certitude ('the still point of the turning world'), which is itself abstracted from the game. This is the point at which the substitutions

and permutations and alterations within the moving structure *stop*. At this point the transformation which is all right everywhere else is suddenly taboo. At this point, which is why it is so shocking to touch it, the unmoved mover suddenly becomes present. But there is another structuralism, and Derrida finds it in Lévi-Strauss, where there is a methodological wager that we can have a discourse in which all recourse to *un hors-jeu* becomes unnecessary. As seems to happen in Lévi-Strauss' voluminous *Mythologiques*, the structuring of the myths by translating and transforming them into one another can go on ad infinitum—in 'declared abandonment of all reference to a *centre*, to a *subject*, to a privileged *reference*, to an absolute origin or *archè*' (E. D., page 419). As Lévi-Strauss says, there could be no term to his study of myths; there is no *principle* which one could attain at the end. It is no coincidence that he works with the analogy of music in mind—the song or the symphony ends, it constitutes a whole, but is it possible to say there is any point upon which the significance depends? Every significant moment in the song, every significant sound, depends for its significance on every other moment, every other sound. In fact every sound is significant; every sound is given its significance by the others upon which it helps to give significance. The notion of a piece of music, still more the notion of play (*jeu*), allow Derrida to imagine any system or structure of meaning as a round or chain of endless permutations, in which every element depends for its meaning on the others and in turn helps to complete theirs.

Meaning, then, wherever it occurs, would be the creation of some such interplay of elements, each of which would both signify and be signified, but none of which would have the privilege of being outside the game. *Every* signifier can be signified, and (on this view) there is nothing signified that cannot become in turn a signifier. Any system of meaning is a round of references from one thing to another and back again—a chain of differences, in the sense that each element is defined by its relation to, and difference from, all the others. The 'origin' of the system has to be traced from the effect one element leaves upon another, but all the way round, endlessly, because the interaction is mutual. The origin of meaning is not some fixed point, some source, outside the system, but the 'trace' each element in the system shows of the effect upon it of the others. The 'origin' of meaning in the system is the difference by which each element marks its identity; and it is the way in which the 'original' or supposedly 'initial' difference constantly remains just one element beyond the next—the way in which the originating difference is constantly deferred—that has enabled Derrida to celebrate his concept of the 'origin' with the non-existent or somewhat Joycean word: *différance*.

In the *Grammatologie* Derrida refers to the work of Charles Saunders Peirce, which allows the Anglo-American reader to find his bearings, and he quotes approvingly the famous passage from *Elements*

of *Logic* in which Peirce insists, first, that 'we think only in signs' (thus ruling out any would-be signless intuitionism); secondly, that 'symbols grow' (i.e. come to be without any more reason than trees or birds); and thirdly, that 'it is only out of symbols that a new symbol can grow, *omne symbolum de symbolo*' (insisting, then, on the autonomy of the symbolic order once it has so gratuitously appeared). Elsewhere (E.D.) Derrida says that this programme of *decentring* is beginning to spread—'it belongs to our epoch': 'it is necessary to forego scientific or philosophical discourse—the *episteme*—which has the absolute requirement—which is the absolute requirement—that we go back to the source, to the centre, to the foundation, to the principle, etc.' (page 420). And if he had to cite some 'names' then he would mention Heidegger's critique of onto-theo-logical discourse, Freud's critique of the self-consciousness of the Subject, but first of all Nietzsche's critique of the concepts of being and truth, 'for which were substituted the concepts of play, interpretation, and sign (sign without truth present)' (page 412).

It is on Nietzsche that Derrida always relies when he comes to sum up his case—'the notion of play, *Spiel*, the joyful affirmation of the playsomeness of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation' (page 427). There are two interpretations of sign, structure, play, interpretation . . . 'The one seeks to decipher—dreams of deciphering—a truth or an origin that escapes from the play and the order of sign, and endures the necessity of interpretation like an exile'. 'That is clearly the metaphysical-idealist tradition. 'The other, no longer turned towards the origin, affirms the freedom of play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism—the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of onto-theology, i.e. of all his history, has dreamed of the fulness of being, the one sure foundation, the origin and the end of the game'.

#### *Christianity in a decentring age*

In one sense, clearly, Derrida is simply continuing to clear up after the 'death of God'. One way of dealing with his case would simply be to say that he is wrong. One would proceed to show how every system of meaning must have a 'principle', etc., and that may be the case, though one would only be falling more deeply into his trap. But supposing that Derrida is in fact right, and that the nostalgia for a fixed centre is a residue of Platonist idealism, what would happen to Christianity in the wake of radical displacement and decentrement of our thought towards Nietzschean notions of life as play?

Theology is certainly one 'science' that has already lost its centre; theological pluralism has ensured that! There is no immediate reason for a theologian to want to contradict Derrida; on the contrary, theology may be farther advanced in decentring than any other

science. But five other lines of reflection or enquiry occur in this context. In the first place, Catholic Christianity as a system of meaning surely could do with considerable decentrement. In Catholic consciousness and practice it often seems as if the whole system were dependent on some privileged element such as the principle of authority or the dogma of papal infallibility. In fact, of course, 'Catholicism' is a much more amorphous and heterogeneous phenomenon than that—a ramification of concepts and customs of which one or other may become privileged in a given context, but in which none can make sense but for the interplay of all the others.

Secondly, need a theologian be alarmed when a residually idealist notion of transcendental origin is questioned? Could this not in fact be an invitation to let the world be a self-sufficient system, an 'order of causes', such as St Thomas Aquinas suggested? A world that does not require 'God' either to plug the gaps in the system or to be the key-stone?

For thirdly, the campaign that Nietzsche and Heidegger as well as Derrida wage against all theological attempts to provide a 'reason' for the existence of the world, and to justify the ways of God to man (every kind of onto-theo-dicy), while it undoubtedly meets resistance from some kinds of theologian, might not be so different from a joyful acceptance of the sheer gratuitousness—the 'grace'—of what is and what happens. The notion of the playsomeness rather than the rationality of the world is not unfamiliar in Christian tradition.

Fourthly, the concept of 'origin', the notion of 'beginning', certainly requires much more prudent and meticulous discussion than has often been recognised (cf. Stanislas Breton, 'Origine et principe de raison', in *Revue des Sciences Philosophiques et Théologiques*, Janvier 1974). And fifthly, and for the time being finally, it is perhaps no coincidence that Jacques Derrida has an interest in his Jewish background (he has recently been described as 'Lévinas less God'—Emmanuel Lévinas is the most distinguished living Jewish philosopher). The stress on *script* as the sign-system that reminds us of the *materiality* of all sense-making may perhaps enable us to find our way of thought into a Christian *materialism* that would not be *unscriptural*.