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Reading – Thinking

> That everyone is allowed to learn to read ruins not only writing in the long run, but thinking too.
>
> – Nietzsche

LIRE BLANCHOT

In 'Desistance', his 1987 essay on the work of Lacoue-Labarthe, Derrida appears to make a remarkable assumption: it is only by *reading* Lacoue-Labarthe that one can register his *thinking*. Derrida writes: 'Lacoue-Labarthe's work, his oeuvre, resembles, for me, the very *trial* of the ineluctable: insistent, patient, thinking – the experience of a very *singular* thought of the ineluctable'. It is *only* through reading that one encounters 'the experience of a very *singular* thought'. Whatever thinking does, or has done to it, it only takes *place*, or has its place *taken*, in reading.

On 16 August 2004, in his last interview, Derrida says, 'from the start, and well before my current experiences of surviving, I marked that survival is an original concept, that constitutes the very structure of what we call existence, *Da-sein*, if you like'. Derrida begins again,

leaving us with the future possibilities of *la survie* as the immense re-translation of Heidegger's *Dasein*. To mark this labour, which occupied much of his work in 1970s and the 1980s, he goes on to single out one essay, 'Pas'. First published in 1976, 'Pas' appeared in a special issue of *Gramma* entitled *Lire Blanchot*.

How does one *read* Blanchot? How does one read? Amongst its definitions of *lire*, *Le Robert* offers this remarkable and profound platitude: to read means 'being capable of reading a writing'. There is something very compelling about this simple statement: reading, it seems, is being *capable* of reading a writing. Being capable, from the Latin *capabilis*, takes us back to *capere*, to take. To read, I must capture and take hold of writing: of letters, words, content, meaning. And it is perhaps only by being capable, by taking, that one can then become *capacious* and, like a leviathan, take *in*, swallow, what Plato called the 'ocean of words'. I am large, I contain multitudes. By taking and then taking in, my language, my mind, my thoughts become spacious, roomy, expansive, expanding. I have room, I have space: I can invite in others, and welcome the other. Welcome to the roomy room of my own! I am reading.

This notion of reading of course would fail Hillis Miller's ethics of reading, because it assumes, from the start, not only the impossibility of misreading, of *mis-taking*, but also the terrible good conscience of hospitality, of graciously inviting the others in, of making room for the other, and feeling very moral about one's own morality. As Derrida suggested, hospitality begins with an *unavoidable* hospitality. Turn around, they are already there: already there wasn't enough time for good conscience.

In the opening pages of 'Pas', Derrida refers to an 'incapability' in Blanchot's work that cannot be described merely as the absolute other of capability. He also links this incapability not only to a reading again, a re-reading, but also to an other thinking of thought. Echoing the well-known opening words of *Specters of Marx*, 'someone, you or me, comes forward

and says: I would like to learn to live finally', in 'Pas' Derrida warns that in reading Blanchot we will need 'to learn to read'. Learning to read *in the midst* of reading, the *possibility* of reading can only be found – already – *in* reading: there is no 'Idea in the Kantian sense', no pure possibility or not x but the possibility of x for reading. There is rather a finitude, an indefinite finitude in reading. We are always *waiting* to learn to read, *while* we are reading.

It is through the steps and negations of the *pas*, a moving and movable negative, that Derrida gestures to a relation between reading and thinking. He writes:

> More than thirty years after *Thomas the Obscure* we could still have reread all the steps of distancing: '… as I was only real under the name of death, I let shine through, *blood mixed with my blood*, the deadly spirit of shadows, and the mirror of each of my days will reflect the confused images of death and life. […] This Thomas forced me to appear […] body *without* life, insensible sensibility, *thought without thought*. At the highest point of contradiction, I was this *illegitimate* death. Represented in my feelings by a double for whom each feeling meant as much an absurdity as a death, I suffered, at the height of *passion*, the height of strangeness and I seemed abducted from the human condition for having truly fulfilled it. Being, in each human act, the dead one who at once makes it possible and impossible and, if I walked, if I thought, the one whose complete absence allowed only the *step* and the *thought*, faced with beasts, beings who did not carry within them their double death, I lost my last reason for being. There was between us a magical *interval*'. This interval has the form of an absence that allows 'the *step* and the *thought*', but it first intervenes as the relation of step to step or of thought to thought, step without step [*pas sans pas*] or 'thought *without* thought'. This play (*without* play) of the *sans* in his texts, you will come to see that it disarticulates all the logic of identity or contradiction and that he starts

> from ‘the name of death’ or the non-identity of the double in the name. This is a reading that it is still necessary to keep patiently in reserve.

Derrida frames this passage on the interval of the *pas* of the *sans*, the step/not of the without, as the *possibility* of the ‘relation… of thought to thought’, with two suspended readings. We start with a re-reading, a reading again that evokes a still unread future of the past: ‘we could have reread the *pas*’. We end with a reading that is held back, still reserved, put to one side, for a future that has yet to come. In the interval that marks the relation of thinking to thinking, no reading takes place. In other words, no reading as a present event, as an event of the present. Reading does not *take* place, does not take *the* place, in the interval that makes thinking possible.

Later in ‘Pas’ Derrida quotes from Blanchot’s Literature and the Right to Death’. Blanchot is touching on the strange resistance *of* things in literature, and for Derrida, ‘this singular materiality of the step [*pas*] goes beyond any “materialist thesis” ’. Blanchot writes:

> Where in a work lies the beginning of the moment when the words become stronger than their meaning and the meaning more physical than the word? … At what moment, in this labyrinth of order, in this maze of clarity did meaning stray from the path, at what turning did reason become aware that it had stopped “following,” that something else was continuing, progressing, concluding in its place, something like it in every way, something reason thought it recognized itself as itself, until the moment it woke up and discovered this other that had taken its place? But if reason now retraces its steps in order to denounce the intruder, the illusion immediately vanishes into thin air, reason finds only itself there, the prose is prose again, so that reason starts off again and loses its way

> again, allowing a sickening physical substance to replace it, something like a walking staircase, a corridor that unfolds ahead.

At what moment in reading does the reader become aware that it has lost its place, that it has lost the place, that the other has 'taken its place'? Reading as the other always taking the *place* of the reader. As Blanchot suggests, this losing the place, this twisting and turning of the place, cannot be registered, recovered or retraced. We always have to start reading again, to read on – and lose our place.

Where was I?

Reading is the labyrinth *of* order, the maze *of* clarity. Order and clarity, so indispensable and necessary to reading, cannot posit a place, a position beyond the labyrinth or the maze. There are only the ingenious bends and curves, the twists and turns, of order and clarity within the labyrinth. Between philosophy and literature, there is always the *between* of reading.

READING: THE *COGITO*

In 'Pas', Derrida suggests that the interval of *pas*, or what one might call the *intervalling* of the *pas*, as the possibility of the 'relation … of thought to thought', also precedes and exceeds the *Cogito* and *its* other. Within the citations and re-citations, the cuts and re-cuts, of reading, Derrida writes: 'I have cut out this passage from the middle of the one that displaces the step (the not-step rather, because the step of a not-step is not in itself negative) between the *I am* and the *I think* … until the alternation of the not-step affecting the *I am* or the *I think* lets itself be described as not-walking without step, certainly counting its steps, but steps carried beyond themselves'.

For Descartes, when it comes to *Meditations on First Philosophy*, reading is always at once before *and* after the *Cogito*: the problem of re-reading never stops. The presentation of the *Cogito* can also be seen as the re-invention of reading. In stating that the reader must have 'a mind which is completely free from preconceived opinions and which can easily detach itself from involvement with the senses', Descartes anticipates the very conditions for announcing the *possibility* of the *Cogito*. Without a certain kind of reading there can be no *Cogito*.

Descartes can only repeat and extend this precarious reliance on 'a very attentive reader' in the 'Preface to the Reader': 'I would not urge anyone to read this book,' he writes, 'except those who are able and willing to mediate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions. Such readers, as I well know, are few and far between'. Descartes cannot extricate the *Cogito* from a conflict of reading. On the one hand, he requires the 'attentive reader' who is free of 'preconceived opinions' and the influence of the senses. Without any prior opinions or senses, this newly born and blind reader becomes the ideal other, a diaphanous other, who is *always* 'willing to mediate seriously with' Descartes. Always *with* Descartes, this ghostly other can only reflect the ideal objectivity of the mind. On the other hand, this reader cannot avoid being read by a still prejudiced, stubbornly resistant reader, as the never ending 'Objections and Replies' suggest.

The sheer scale of the demands of these other readers is extraordinary: while some sixty pages are devoted to the *Meditations*, some three hundred and thirty pages are given to the 'Objections and Replies'. Descartes can never stop replying to his objecting readers, and can never stop losing hold of the ideal objectivity of the reader. 'I would have done better to avoid writing on matters which a large number of people ought to avoid reading about', he complains in the midst of these objections. All he can do is evoke an endless injunction to be read again, to call for 'a careful and repeated re-reading of my arguments'. The *Cogito*: a re-

reading that never reads *with* Descartes. As Descartes later observes, to read the *Cogito*, 'we should need more time for reading … than our present life allows'. Reading the *Cogito*: *la survie*, if you like.

DOES *DASEIN* READ?

In ¶ 35 of *Being and Time* Heidegger argues that idle gossip, a communicating with and being with another without primary understanding, 'spreads to what we write' and 'feeds upon superficial reading' [*Angelesenen*]. Talking *spreads* – perhaps even like a Cartesian *extensio* – *into* writing, it moves into writing, it takes up room in writing, like a capacious parasite. Beguiled by this 'superficial reading', Heidegger adds, 'the average understanding of the reader will *never be able* to decide what has been drawn from primordial sources with a struggle and how much is just gossip'.

One the one hand, for Heidegger, reading as idle talk is "a positive phenomenon" because it defines "the kind of Being of everyday Dasein's understanding and interpreting" and indicates what exceeds the everyday "understanding and interpreting" *of Dasein*. On the other hand, how are *we* – who may or may not have an "average understanding"– to keep reading after this? How are we to avoid this mis-reading of *Dasein*, this reading as presence. Heidegger leave his readers with the possibility that they too are not immune to the force of idle talk, to its power to take up the space of writing and make reading, always, undecidable.

But if this was the case in 1926, by 1935 Heidegger had made a decision. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he takes a position; he gives reading its place, or at least the teleology of its proper place. In the fourth chapter, which is concerned with the 'restriction of Being through an Other', Heidegger identifies four distinctions or divisions 'between Being and its Other': Being and becoming; Being and seeming; Being and thinking; Being and the ought. He goes

on to challenge the apparent opposition between each of these four meetings or duels. In each case there is a 'belonging-together', a 'concealed unity', a prearranged *rendezvous*.

Despite the Platonic associations of seeming with multiplicity and distortion, Heidegger argues that *thinking*, or the thinking of the difference between Being and thinking, begins when seeming becomes at once self-aware, when 'seeming covers itself over as seeming' and, at last, 'shows itself as Being'. For Heidegger, this is the *polemos* before the difference of Being and thinking, a simultaneous risk and *overview* of not two but three paths: of being, of not-being *and* of seeming, or what he calls the way of the *doxa*. The way of the *doxa* is a sliding back and forth on the path, a blind mixing of being and seeming in which they both *lose their place*. One could, with all the precautions for the gathering that is to come, call this the *advent* of reading. Reading as the logos losing its way. Reading as the loss of the place, of the temple, and the advent of the book that moves and moves away with what Lévinas called 'an oceanic rhythm'.

Everything changes with thinking. Everything takes on a 'definite form'. Being is represented, and it is now that we freely choose, at our own disposal, to represent Being as an object before us, as a universal and within the grid of logic. Today we have lost our way Heidegger intones, and it all began by confusing the original unity between Being and *phusis*, and *phusis* and *logos*. It is time for the harvest, for the gleaning, for the re-gathering.

Heidegger must re-invent reading, he must call on reading to bypass language and find its way back to what gathers itself. *Logos*, he argues, did not 'originally and authentically mean thinking, understanding and reason'. He writes:

> What the word means has no immediate relation to language. *Legō*, *legein*, Latin *legere*, is the same word as our *lesen* [to collect]: gleaning, collecting wood, harvesting grapes, making a selection; "reading [*lesen*] a book" is just a variant of

> "gathering" in the authentic sense. This means laying one thing next to another, bringing them together as one – in short, gathering'.

For Heidegger, reading is 'just a variant of "gathering" in the authentic sense'. Reading is just a variation on a theme of *Versammlung*, but its task is immense and serious: reading saves the logos for Being.

Timothy Clark has characterised Heidegger's definition of reading as the preservation or *holding open* of a singular force of defamiliarisation. Heidegger's reading of Hölderlin, he argues, brings to light "an action whose effect is to open and to hold open a space – that of the absence of gods – in which the poem will unfold." Can one *hold* open a space, and most of all when reading? As one can see in Agamben's attempts *to hold on* to potentiality, such a holding open already assumes a profound calculation *on* absence, whether it be in the name of the poetic, singular creativity or a perfect ethics. And while Heidegger does not begin with reading as the already-gathered into one, as in his reading of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, the many ways of authentic reading still give way to a gathering *towards* a single guiding meaning. One may have lost one's place, but only in order to be guided back to the proper place of reading. Learning to read is always a re-collection.

In his readings of Heidegger, Derrida distinguishes Heidegger's emphasis on *die Versammlung des Denkens*, the gathering or re-collection of thought, as a return to the *logos*. As he writes in 'Heidegger's Ear' (1989): 'At bottom logocentricism is perhaps not so much the gesture that consists in placing the *lógos* at the center as the interpretation of *lógos* as *Versammlung*, that is the gathering that precisely concenters what it configures'. One could say that from Descartes to Heidegger and beyond, philosophy has assumed that it already knows how to read. For Derrida, one never stops learning how to read.

Recalling what he had written in 'Pas', in 'Desistance' Derrida argues that not only thinking, but the singularity of the thought of the other, can *only* be approached through *learning* how to read: 'One must learn to read Lacoue-Labarthe, he writes, to listen to him, and to do so at his rhythm … One must learn the necessity of a scansion that comes to fold and unfold a thought'.

Reading the thought of Lacoue-Labarthe, Derrida suggests, begins with the oscillating *impasse* of a double bind that opens every closure *without* giving itself to a hyperbolic opening that would break free of *all* constraint: 'the double bind leaves no way out,' he writes, 'nor does the hyperbologic – one has to know this in order to begin to think'. Derrida insists on this oscillating impasse when reading Lacoue-Labarthe's description of Heidegger's project as 'a thinking concerned with thinking … the *unthought* itself.' In Heidegger's work, Derrida argues, this impasse is *passed over* , 'the *un*-thought is un-*thought*'. Heidegger thinks of the *unthinkable* as that which 'gathers each time in the unity of a single site, as if there were only *one* unthought in which each "great" thought – and herein would lie its very greatness – would find its secret law'. As one of narrators suggests in 'Telepathy' (1981), the 'unique encounter with the unique' is the site, the place *par excellence* for the attempt to *claim* the 'unthinkable', to put it to work for thinking one and for one thinking.

If one *reads* this pull towards unity in Heidegger's work as *always* a pull towards unity or singularity as an absolute resource, one has already passed over the impasse of the oscillating impasse, the hovering at the threshold that loses its place, that gives itself to another place. For Derrida. Lacoue-Labarthe himself is in danger of confirming the possibility of 'the very site out of which a thought gives – or gives itself – to think'. He writes:

> What if Heidegger's unthought (for example) was not one, but plural? What if his *un*thought was believing in the uncity or the unity of the un*thought*? I will not turn my uneasiness into a critique, because I do not believe that this gesture of gathering is avoidable. It is always productive, and philosophically necessary.

Derrida contrasts this necessity to think as and of the gathering back into the unity, the untouchable 'secret law' of the uniquely unthinkable to what he calls a 'thoughtful reading' of Lacoue-Labarthe. A 'thoughtful reading', at the very, is least an interminable demand to 'work at reading and rereading' – of always *learning* to read *in the midst* of reading. Reading as losing the place that is taken by the unique place of re-collection.

(NOT) MEETING AGAIN

Reading, and risking what Derrida called *la chance de la rencontre*, the chance of the chance encounter, I have already lost *my* place, I have already given myself to the other reading, to another reading. As Derrida suggested in a 1999 interview with Dominique Janicaud, the meeting can never gather or re-collect itself into an assured resource: this is its unavoidable distress, its dislocation, *and* its *only* chance to have a chance. He says:

> Resisting gathering can be experienced as distress, misfortune, loss – dislocation, dissemination, the-not-being-at-home, etc. – but this is also a chance. The chance of the encounter [*la chance de la rencontre*], of justice, of the relation to absolute alterity. While, on the contrary, where this risk and this chance are not found, the worst can happen: under the authority of the *Versammlung*, of the logos and of being, the worst can advance in its political forms.

The question of taking place as a taking of the place is also always institutional and political. In his 'Fifty-two Aphorisms for a Foreword', Derrida writes that 'The International College of Philosophy owed it to itself to make space for and give rise to an *encounter*, a thinking *encounter*, between philosophy and architecture'. This countering institution, Derrida suggests, can give place, give the place, give away the place, for a thinking encounter, a thinking of the *chance* or indeed *mischance* of the chance encounters between philosophy and literature. Derrida's essay is also a preface, and he argues that in giving (away) the place for this chance encounter the International College of Philosophy should be seen as a prefatory institution, an institution that gives up the place to take its place at the front, as the *precedant* both of a meeting that has yet to take place and of a book to come: instituted *and* held in reserve for the risks of meeting and not meeting. One is always reading: the prefatory institution as a calculating *from* absence, without rest.

Reading – thinking begins in 'the risk or chance' of losing one's place. As Derrida had written in his reading of the names and texts of Ponge, 'that which interests, or interests us, and engages us in reading, is inevitably what happens in the middle'. Reading, I am always interested, I am always in the middle, in the midst of the chances of the chance meeting or duel, of the words and spaces, of the gaps that move and move *you*, you whom I still don't know how to read. 'We can meet them after having begun to read them'. 'It would be necessary to think (what does this mean here, you, do *you* know?)'.