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**Paradox, Context and Performativity: Tracing the
Ethical in the Work of Jacques Derrida.**

by

Michael Conlon, B.A.

A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English

Carleton University

Ottawa, Ontario

August 31, 1994

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**Paradox, Context and Performativity: Tracing the
Ethical in the Work of Jacques Derrida**

submitted by Michael Conlon. B.A (Hons.)
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts

Barbara Leckie, Thesis Supervisor

Chair, Department of English

Carleton University
August 31, 1994

Abstract

This thesis will examine the "oblique" contribution the work of Jacques Derrida makes to the concept of ethics. The argument of the thesis is that Derrida's work is concerned, through and through, with the "trouble" one encounters, philosophically and personally, when trying to deal with ethics. Derrida's concern with ethics is "practical" in the most disturbing sense. Ethics, for Derrida, can no longer be examined as an object of study in which answers are found. The "true" ethical challenge that Derrida locates in his deconstruction of traditional philosophy and ethics is the imperative to act and interpret without any ontological or epistemological guarantees. The notion of acting without guarantees will form the basis of my argument for the ethical demands and responsibilities engendered by deconstruction. The argument will be supported by three main formulations in Derrida's work: i) his theorization of the act of writing ii) the motif of repetition in relation to his work on language and human structure iii) the place of literary texts in Derrida's conceptions of aporia and undecidability. These theoretical issues will form the basis of my refutation, in the final chapter, of Terry Eagleton's argument that Derridean deconstruction can only shirk in "embarrassment" when confronted with "real" ethico-political dilemmas.

Acknowledgements

Any project of this size accrues many debts along the way. There are several people in particular to whom I owe a special debt of gratitude.

My adviser, Professor Barbara Leckie, has been an incisive and challenging participant in this thesis. Her patience and rigorous commentary throughout this process is integral to any success my argument might enjoy.

Professor Barry Rutland helped shape many of the ideas that inform this thesis and his interest in this project has been a constant source of support.

During my time at Carleton Professor Larry McDonald has provided encouragement above and beyond the call of duty. Without his initial support it is doubtful this project would have ever been completed.

To Professor Jim Leach of the University of Western Ontario, I owe thanks for the "nearly impossible" task of convincing me that Derrida was worth the time and effort.

Finally, I must thank my parents, Patricia and Leo, without whose love and support none of this would have been possible or worthwhile.

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The imperative to read Jacques Derrida as, primarily, a philosopher of ethics demands elaboration and justification. Despite a corpus of over twenty books Derrida has rarely spoken of ethics per se, and when he has, he has done so obliquely. The difficulty of Derrida's style and the unorthodox way he uses terms like ethics, justice and responsibility lead many to dismiss the relevance of deconstruction in the "serious" matter of ethics. One of the central charges brought against deconstruction is its impotence on questions of "real" ethical and political urgency. The point of this thesis, however, will be to demonstrate that the uncertainty (undecidability) Derrida introduces into common sense assumptions about ethics forms the basis for a compelling new way of conceiving responsibility and ethics.

One of the necessary difficulties of Derrida's work is that his methodology performs an inversion of the Western desire for truth and decidability. The point of Western philosophy (and most other disciplines) has been to arrive at some kind of "arche" of knowledge. This point of Truth would then form a horizon onto which the human is grafted. Derrida inverts this (admittedly) rough scheme to suggest that it is at the point of undecidability, when Truth is no longer a tenable object of pursuit, that the human and the ethical emerge in flesh and blood contexts. For Derrida, the compelling irony of traditional philosophical conceptions of human subjectivity is that the most important questions

about the condition and possibility of an ethical subject have been either ignored or deferred. The methodology of Western philosophy literally heaves the human subject out of context in the hope of re-placing him or her in a form that conquers the fallen temporality of ethical and political dilemmas. Kant's separation of pure and practical reason is the most graphic example of the philosophical desire to neutralize (at least temporarily) context, history and ultimately ethics in the hope of something better. In Dissemination, Of Grammatology and elsewhere Derrida relentlessly demonstrates that Plato's notion of the forms, Rousseau's belief that man is born free but everywhere in chains and Hegel's *Aufhebung* all betray the desire to jettison the social and the political for the "purity" of the logos or reason (hence Derrida's term logocentrism). The idiosyncratic movement of Western philosophy is grounded by this desire to fix origins and truths through structures of thought. The problem with such a desire for Derrida is that "the respect for structurality, for the internal originality of the structure, compels a neutralization of time and history [i.e. ethics]" (Writing and Difference 291). The truth and knowledge sought by Western philosophy is not dismissed in Derrida's work, but it is rigorously recast as a matter of contextual and relative interpretation.¹ He reverses the trajectory of traditional conceptions of the ethical by insisting that the dilemma of crafting an ethical

life cannot (and must not) be reduced to or guaranteed by rule governed scenarios announced in the "truth" of Western thought. The (necessary) failure of the Western search for truth is not the end of ethics but it is "at once the remnants of that loss and the resources from which to articulate the future" (Butler, "Poststructuralism" 11).

The absence of "ontological guarantees" becomes, for Derrida, the genesis of what is traditionally called ethical (Caputo 26). Fidelity and responsibility toward ethics involves an allegiance to the dilemma of deciding, prioritizing and constructing independent of any certain knowledge about the "proper" shape of those decisions, priorities and constructions.² It is this trope that will perpetually inform my defence and explication of Derrida's contribution to ethics. For it is in this trope that ethics emerges as a practice and a performative challenge. The central challenge of Derrida's ethics is the need to recast the notion of ethical action beyond the ossified categories of the ethical as an object of knowledge or attainment.

When the dilemma of ethics is returned to the irreducible moment of decision, performance becomes a compelling theorem for distinguishing and defending Derrida's ethics. Derrida's reading of literary texts helps to situate the performative as a key modality in his work by uniting undecidability and performance. Roughly stated, when a decision cannot be guaranteed the act of deciding becomes

a performative (as opposed to constative or descriptive) act. The self-reflexive nature of modernist literary texts forms a focal point for Derrida's insistence on this point. In 1992 Derek Attridge assembled the first anthology of Derrida's writing on literature, entitled Acts of Literature. This aptly named collection emphasizes the dialogic exchange between Derrida's literary criticism and the performative imperative he brings to philosophy and ethics. Literature (most especially modern literature) for Derrida, performs a kind of suspension of categories of decidability with the paradoxical intention of demonstrating the ubiquity and undecidability of decision. Rodolphe Gasche characterizes this relation as follows:

literature becomes a radical interrogation of philosophy, and of most past literature as well, not only by refusing its foundation in a preceding and prior being of meaning but also by any formal essence as concerns its substance of expression.

(258)

Literature, for Derrida, does not ground itself in any epistemic, ontological or structural reality outside of its own referential context. It is this privileging of non-privilege that attracts Derrida to literature and allows his reading of literary texts to bolster his larger project of destabilizing the philosophic conceptions of what truth, knowledge and ethics mean. The "unfinalizable" nature of

literature and ethics complement each other in a movement that, in Richard Kearney's words, is best characterized as an "ethical re-turn". The structure of modern literary texts refuse to yield a fully present and immanent meaning in the same way that ethical dilemmas refuse to yield a "proper" prescription for action. The ethical, like the literary, is a return to what remains uninterrupted and unsettled, what remains to be decided when decision is shown to be a moment of "madness."

The challenge offered by Derrida's reading of ethics has generated a great degree of suspicion about the practice of deconstruction. The tone of this hostility, however, provides a compelling incentive for establishing the ironic credibility of Derrida's contribution to ethics. The idea of an ethical resonance in Derrida's work has inspired responses that range from outright hostility to total dismissal. John Searle has characterized Derrida's work as "obviously false" (200) and Michel Foucault regarded deconstruction (ostensibly) as apolitical "terrorist obscurantism" (Limited Inc 92). In two recent and important studies of contemporary ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue and Bernard Williams' Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, Derrida and the insight of deconstruction are completely absent. The salient point of that absence is not so much the exclusion of Derrida's work per se, but rather the larger exclusion of poststructuralist conceptions of

language and human subjectivity. The implicit suggestion in most critiques of Derrida's work is the idea that a unified and fully intentional subject is necessary before one can talk "responsibly" of ethics. The unifying point in all of these critiques is that the work and methodology of deconstruction is incompatible with the "responsible" theorization of ethics. In a foundational irony, Derrida's critics are unable to reconcile his doubts about the ambition of Western philosophy with the emergence of an oblique but invigorating conception of ethics, a conception of ethics in which the terms of the ethical inevitably return to a practice and a performance.

The importance of ethics in Derrida's work has not, however, been ignored and, in fact, it is becoming one of the central motifs in evaluating his work.³ In The Ethics of Deconstruction Simon Critchley cogently uses Derrida's relationship with the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas to argue for the importance of ethical concerns in Derrida's work. Critchley traces the relationship between Levinas and Derrida in order to argue for the dialogic dependence of Derrida's ethics on Levinas's notion of infinity and the Other. My initial reading of Critchley confirmed many of the suspicions I had about the ethical sensibility that informs Derrida's work. Critchley, however, makes his case for the ethics of deconstruction based primarily on the relationship between Derrida and Levinas. He unequivocally asserts that

the argument of his book "is that Derridean deconstruction can, and indeed should, be understood as an ethical demand, provided that ethics is understood in the particular sense given to it in the work of Emmanuel Levinas" (xi). What Critchley does not address in his book is how Derrida's reading of literary texts and performance not only informs the ethics of deconstruction but remains consistent with the more "traditional" philosophic arguments Derrida advances.

In The Ethics of Reading, on the other hand, J. Hillis Miller employs the tone of Derrida's literary criticism to link deconstruction with ethics. Miller's book approaches the issue of ethics in Derrida's work from the vantage point of literature. He privileges Derrida's reading of literature and literature in general as the ethical site of deconstruction. The problem, from my point of view, with Miller's approach is the opposite of Critchley's: Miller prioritizes literature at the expense of Derrida's engagement with philosophy. Miller operates within a binary that sets literature against philosophy in a manner that Derrida has thoroughly deconstructed. Miller inadvertently (I think) maintains the category of ethics as a "region of philosophic or conceptual investigation" (Miller 3) in order to posit literature as the "proper" guardian of that category (Critchley 3). Literature, pace Miller, does not have the power to teach us the ethics of reading but it does have the power to invigorate what we call the ethical by

undermining the sense in which we thought we could rely on categories and "conceptual investigations". Derrida's philosophic work constantly undermines the traditional category of the ethical and it is here, paradoxically, where I will argue that the ethics of deconstruction is to be found. Derrida questions the very categories of philosophy and literature as repositories of human knowledge in a way that challenges the ontological and epistemological and ethical efficacy of both categories. The challenge, as I see it, in reading Derrida as an ethical thinker is to balance the contribution both styles of reading and writing make to the ethos of responsibility that permeates the deconstructive oeuvre.

Although the political and ethical efficacy of a deconstructed human subject is by no means a done deal, I want to situate my study in the "emergent" context of thinkers who locate the de-essentialization of the human subject as the very condition of ethical and political agency.⁴ The terms for negotiating and theorizing ethical and political agency are being recast to interrogate why universal gestures of ethics, politics and subjectivity have tended (both theoretically and historically) to be so inadequate for women, colonized people, homosexuals etc.

The most innovative developments in this area are to be found in the work of Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Hommi Bhabha and Slavoj Zizek. These thinkers share

the common concern of demonstrating that the political and ethical agency of the human subject is dependent on the absence of determinate and decidable programs of action. Theorizing undecidability as the foundation of subjectivity need not be (although it can be) apolitical and it is certainly not politically paralyzing if we accept Michel Foucault's classic maxim that "there is no great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary" (History of Sexuality 96). The concern with the (non) foundations of ethical and political agency represents, to my mind, the second wave of deconstruction. The first phase of deconstruction focused on the epistemological gaps and fissures in traditional conceptions of human knowledge and subjectivity. The second phase of poststructuralist thinkers are employing the insights of the initial phase (led by Derrida, Barthes and Lacan among others) with an increased vigilance about the political risks and opportunities announced by deconstruction. Judith Butler articulates the political dimension of deconstructive thinking when she suggests:

This [the deconstruction of the humanist subject] is not to say that there are no foundations, but rather, that wherever there is one, there will also be a foundering, a contestation. That such foundations exist only to be put into question is, as it were, the permanent risk of the process of

democratization. To refuse that context is to sacrifice the radical democratic impetus of feminist politics [and progressive politics in general]....To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it: rather, it is to free it up from its metaphysical lodgings in order to occupy and to serve very different political aims. (Feminists Theorize 16)

The deconstructive gesture, I will argue, throws off "metaphysical lodgings" and inevitably compels the question: What is to be done? Upon what basis can we justify what we do as political and ethical subjects? These are the questions that violently thrust themselves upon the contemporary mind when the "protocol of code...and context" are no longer enough to explain political, social and ethical dilemmas (Limited Inc 8). The political need and opportunity to resist and question is opened by a fundamental ontological disturbance. Deconstruction takes that disturbance as the starting point for an ethics and posits a "strange" ethics that emerges in direct contradiction of any view of ethics which refuses to engage the undecidable reality that makes human beings ethical and political subjects in the first place.

When the protocol of old codes and particular (vs. unconditional) imperatives are rendered untenable the dilemma of ethics, pace Searle and Co., becomes the issue.

The movement in deconstruction to disturb the ontological safety of ethical and philosophical categories can and, I will argue, must be viewed as the positive moment in the emergence of a performative conception of ethics. The performance of the ethical actor becomes the focus when onto-theological categories are hollowed out. The deconstructive moment becomes the ethical moment par excellence because the human subject can longer vouchsafe his/her actions outside of the performative inscription of any given action. Deconstruction limits and criticizes certain moves in philosophy but it also enunciates the positive limits of inscription that allows political, ethical and literary meaning to emerge. In the course of this thesis the act of writing, repetition and the performative nature of Derrida's literary criticism will emerge as the key theorems of Derrida's oblique ethical episteme. Before pursuing this main line of argumentation some background work is needed in order to clarify my conception of the term ethics and to situate Derrida's work in the context of Western philosophy.⁵

The first is an (almost) etymological problem. The debate over the meaning of ethics and the possibility of ethics as a term and an epistemology is far from closed. In the simplest, yet most profound, sense ethics and morality are in the philosophical business of investigating and determining the Good and what it might mean to be a good

person. The debate began in the Greek academy and remains with us today. In Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality Michel Foucault makes a crucial distinction between ethics and morals in the Western tradition: "By morality one means a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies such as the family (in one of its roles), educational institutions, churches and so forth." Ethics, by contrast, is the "work that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one's conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behaviour" (25, my emphasis). The distinction I wish to emphasize, and one which inheres in the Greek tradition, is the slippage between a transcendental foundation and a rhetorical, practical (but no less orderly) foundation for the ethical subject. In Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality Foucault traces this curious vacillation between rigid moral codes and the performative "ethos" of the daily struggle for excellence. Ethics, in its various guises, offers no overarching "set of values and rules of action" but attempts to investigate the singular (vs. universal) criteria involved in establishing a good, harmonious and ethical mode of being. Morality supplies answers to such dilemmas whereas ethics asks after the answers. The move that, in effect, spawned Western philosophy was the move away from an immanent and purely

self-present unity toward the rational work of achieving that unity. The moral or the Good was no longer something simply given in the socio-political rules: it was a rational progression, led by the philosopher-king, toward the goal of a moral Being. It is in this sense that the epistemological investigation of Western philosophy becomes cognate with ethics: TRUTH/KNOWLEDGE = GOOD/UNITY/HARMONY.

The Greek mind was perpetually troubled about the slip between the rhetorical and transcendental ground and this anxiety formed the dynamic of their episteme. It was a tradition inspired by the contradictions of trying to achieve the ideal of Moral perfection within the secular ethos of the polis and the human body. When the Greek tradition went "undercover" Christian morality and teleology captured the Western imagination (Rajchman 91). Roughly speaking, this paradigm remained intact until the symbolic re-discovery of Greek philosophy in the library at Alexandria. The conception of ethics I wish to work with grew up in this period and remains with us today. Plato's distance from this tradition is purely temporal; his articulation of what it means to think and act underwrites the logocentric forays of the Western tradition. The meditations of modern Western philosophy inevitably return, implicitly or explicitly, to the questions engendered by the Greek academy. I will, in the course of this thesis, analyze Plato's legacy explicitly in his encounter with Socrates and

implicitly when we examine the striking influence of his view of writing in Rousseau and others. The secular spirit of the Greek episteme inspired the origin-ary deconstruction of morality and the primacy of the ethical questions: What does it mean to be a good person? How does one become a good person? What is Good? Such questions haunt Western philosophy with a spectre so daunting that "the nightmare of history" becomes the nightmare of Western philosophy.

Derrida's work tropes the tradition of ethical investigation announced in the Greek oeuvre by poisonously/piously questioning the poetic, epistemological and, indeed, ethical validity of lusting after a system of ethics. Derrida re-writes, or writes for the first time, the non-linear history of philosophy that is strictly anomalous to traditional histories of philosophy.⁶ In an interview from Acts of Literature Derrida states: "Deconstruction calls for a highly 'historian's' attitude. (Of Grammatology, for example, is a history book through and through") (54). What distinguishes Derrida from Durant, and just about everyone else in the philosophic tradition, is the unprecedented attention Derrida pays the act of writing. Derrida focuses on the singularly "strange" treatment writing has received from philosophers. Writing has been variously dismissed as a dangerous distraction, distortion and supplement to the serious business of Truth.

Beginning with Plato on through Descartes, Rousseau,

Kant and Hegel, philosophy has performed an elaborate shadow dance with writing that avows and prioritizes in the same gesture as it dismisses and ostracizes. In Limited Inc Derrida characterizes the relation between writing and philosophy as follows:

This essential drift bearing on writing as an iterative structure, cut off from all absolute responsibility, from consciousness as the ultimate authority, orphaned and separated at birth from the assistance of its father, is precisely what Plato condemns in the Phaedrus. If Plato's gesture is, as I believe, the philosophical movement par excellence, one can measure what is at stake here. (8)

The problem of writing and its devaluation is never far from the scene of truth, unity and harmony. In writing the kind of history Derrida's readings perform, the "scene of writing" returns to haunt the site of its exclusion. Derrida enunciates the double-bind writing places upon philosophy by suggesting that philosophy needs writing to proclaim Truth; yet the structural conditions of intelligible communication always already disturb, internally and inherently, all claims to truth and univocality. Although the tenor and intention of modern Western philosophy varies greatly, it is the moment of truth and self presence, without exception, that underwrites (or, more accurately, attempts to

underwrite) an ethico-political system (Caputo 29). Derrida relentlessly demonstrates that the veracity of an ethical system is dependent on access to the forms (Plato), Spirit (Hegel), Categorical Imperatives (Kant) or Being (Heidegger). The structural laws of such edifices seek to domesticate the oscillation between singular and general (an oscillation which, ironically, was opened in the transition from moral to ethical investigations) and the disturbing implications of having to use writing to proclaim or insinuate Truth.

The movement that Derrida traces through the history of Western thought is the obsession with devising universal and totalizing pronouncements on ethics. Even in the latter stages of modern philosophy, inaugurated by Kant, when questions of ethics were given a more concrete shape, the emphasis was always on deriving what we ought to do from what the world is. The desire to derive ought from is represents the central conceit of Western philosophy and it is a motif that unites all branches of philosophy (materialist, idealist or otherwise). As Slavoj Žižek reminds us in Tarrying With The Negative, it was Kant who "liberated" ethics from the demands of universal pronouncements but it was also Kant who smuggled the universal in through the back door by resort to categorical imperatives. The Kantian gesture of retrieving the universal from the particular is the modern philosophic

gesture from Hegelianism to dialectical materialism to formalism to logical positivism to speech-act theory. Roughly summarized, I would characterize these ethical investigations as the phenomenology of the singular. The emphasis was on the singular in and of itself but always with the phenomenological dream of extrapolating a kernel of universality from the singular.

In this thesis the argument will follow Derrida's troping of philosophy to demonstrate that the "Real" dilemmas of ethics are actually deferred and domesticated by the desire for totality. I will distinguish what I take to be the ethics of deconstruction by arguing the primacy of the performative in Derrida's work. It is this performative that is repressed in the modern tradition of ethical philosophy. Ethics has traditionally taken the form of an object of study or a branch of ontology and in the process it is the human subject that becomes objectified, foreclosed in overly optimistic schemas of universality and emancipation. All manner of intellectual ruses are employed to deny that, as Leonard Cohen suggests in "Everybody Knows", "the war is over and everybody knows the good guys lost". Ethics is without guarantees and the responsibility of ethical theory must account for that reality if our discussion of the topic has any hope of carrying the heavy burden engendered by the term. Derrida's ethical work (and in the sense that I will be employing the term ethics) is

not an investigation into what would allow good and just decisions to occur but rather to demonstrate that what we traditionally call ethical is a product of the necessary absence of any positive knowledge about how to live in the world and with each other. In The Ethics of Reading J. Hillis Miller echoes this logic by suggesting: "[n]o doubt the political and the ethical are always intertwined, but an ethical act that is fully determined by political considerations or responsibilities is no longer ethical. It could even in a certain sense be said to be amoral" (4).

When the particular is jettisoned or transcended (consciously or not) for the sake of universality or decidability, ethics becomes a clandestine morality. In this thesis I will set my conception of Derrida's ethics over and against the desire for such domestications of ethical dilemmas. My argument is informed by the sense that ethics and the desire for ethical discourse is a product of our "throwness" in the world. Derrida's philosophy attempts not only to document that fact but to argue that it is this "throwness", our alterity from any essence of what it means to be human, that forms the structural possibility of what we call ethics and, ultimately, subjectivity. The absence or lack of a programmable Being is the very condition of the obligation and desire to differentiate between right and wrong, ethical and unethical. Derrida's treatment of ethics is not a philosophy in the traditional sense but it is a

response to the alterity that grounds our being and limits the possibilities of positive knowledge. Deconstruction does not offer a new program in place of the tradition it displaces but rather poses "an ethical demand which provides a compelling account of responsibility as an affirmation of alterity, of the otherness of the Other" (Critchley 189). Derrida's theory of writing and repetition follow this pattern of alterity and response to (and responsibility for) the Other. It is for this reason that I will return to writing and repetition to demonstrate the explicit and implicit place of "alterity" in what I take to be the ethics of deconstruction.

Writing and repetition also figure prominently in Derrida's reading of literary texts. Literary texts form an integral part of Derrida's attempt to rethink the terms of ethics and responsibility in terms of alterity. The attention and respect for alterity in Derrida's writing inspires the ironies and misunderstandings of his work but, I will argue, it is also the foundation for the ethics of deconstruction. Deconstruction posits the ontological basis for a performative vision of ethics on the affirmation of the Other and otherness. The Other is never us and we can never occupy the place of the Other, but without it we are nothing (it is this point that leads Derrida to Joyce's 'Elijah the Other' in Ulysses) and our response before it is perpetual, performative ad infinitum. In "Force of Law: The

'Mystical Foundation of Law'" Derrida locates deconstruction in this context by suggesting that "the aporia of deconstruction...operates on the basis of an infinite...infinite because it is irreducible, irreducible because it is owed to the other, before any contract, because it has come, the other's coming as the singularity that is always other" (25). The notion of the performative is lodged in the apparently negative trope Derrida performs on the traditional idea of ethics and what it means to be ethical. However, the ostensible point of this thesis is to argue that the performative vision that emerges from Derrida's work is worthy of the name "ethics" and the humane connotations that go with the term.

The first chapter will examine the logic of the way Derrida employs the act of writing and the notion of repetition. To this end I will cite his elaborate re-reading of Plato's "Phaedrus" dialogue to show the adversarial place of writing and the irreducible aporia that speaks in the act of writing. I will then discuss Derrida's theorem of repetition and its central place in the emergence of the aforementioned performative imperative. The second chapter will examine how Derrida's reading of literary texts echoes the sensibility of his philosophic insights. In his reading of Joyce's Ulysses and Kafka's "Before The Law" writing and repetition both emerge in a relation to the alterity that informs the ethical demand of deconstruction. For Derrida

literary texts not only perform a certain aporia of language, they also make an integral contribution to the ontological credibility of performance itself. The third, and final, chapter will employ the prevailing notion of the performative in deconstructive ethics in order to refute an uncharacteristically mean-spirited attack on deconstruction by Terry Eagleton. Eagleton's attack comes in the form of a paper delivered at the 1992 Oxford Amnesty Lectures on the relationship between "the subject" and human rights. The issues raised by this encounter will provide a forum to defend the political potential of deconstruction while suggesting openings for further work.

This thesis will proceed on the belief and experience that the rigor and difficulty of Derrida's method has rewards of its own. The seemingly abstract and oblique nature of texts like Limited Inc lays the foundation of Derrida's Copernican attempt to sketch a theory that reworks the conditions under which ethical and political contexts emerge. The efficacy and success of such a project stands in almost mathematical relation to the care and detail one employs in accounting for the terms and conditions of the tradition one is deconstructing. Derrida is almost without rival on that count and the performative vision that will be the "Adriadne's thread" of this thesis always and everywhere returns to the rigor that underwrites the inescapability of the performative. In an essay entitled "The Principle of

Reason" Derrida announces his trope of Western philosophy by asking "Who is more faithful to reason's call...who hears it with a keener ear...the one who offers questions and in return tries to think through the possibility of that summons, or the one who does not want to hear any question about the principle of reason?" (9). In that same spirit this thesis will ask, would it not be more ethical to rigorously, with a keener ear, theorize an ethics of singularity in which performance becomes the categorical imperative? Derrida's relationship to Western philosophy will unearth the answers, if only ironically and rigorously; "always with irony" and rigor.

I

(Re) Writing the Spectre of Philosophy

It turns out that in these innocent looking didactic exercises we are in fact playing for very sizable stakes.

Paul de Man

I can't imagine anything
that I would less like to be
than a disincarnate Spirit,
unable to chew or sip
or make contact with surfaces
or breathe the scents of summer
or comprehend speech and music
or gaze at what lies beyond
No, God has placed me exactly
where I'd have chosen to be:
the sublunar world is such fun
where man is male or female
and gives Proper Names to all things

W.H. Auden from "No, Plato, No"

1. Philosophy and the Act of Writing.

Thus far I have suspended the word strange in quotation marks to denote a certain kind of relationship that philosophy has had with writing and representation. Following Derrida, the point of framing my use of strange with quotation marks is to distinguish it from the normal connotation of something exterior, other and utterly foreign to the matter at hand. Rather, I want to argue that what at first seems strange is shown to be intrinsic: so much so as to be parasitic. In the case of writing and philosophy Derrida demonstrates that there is absolutely nothing strange, illogical or irrational about the antagonistic place writing has in philosophic discourse. It is well known that Derrida's theorization of writing also generates hostility and anxiety in the halls of traditional philosophy. When it comes to the act of writing there is a remarkable internal consistency that marks Western philosophy.⁷ This is not to suggest that the richness and variety of Western philosophy can be reduced to an identifiable homogeneous conflict; on the contrary, the repetition of the conflict itself gives rise to a polyvalence of possibilities which accrue around the question of writing. The specificities of Plato's oeuvre will give a clearer picture of what ties writing to philosophy and what it is about writing that troubles philosophy and the attempts of philosophy to define ethics.

The tension and anxiety marked by the act of writing in Plato's "Phaedrus" is an instructive case of why the act of writing and the discourse of Philosophy/Truth/Ethics are incompatible. Writing is simply not up to the task of devising and underwriting a (however attenuated) system of prescriptive or descriptive ethics. The discourse of truth aims at a relation of sameness, proper identity and the legitimate discriminations of binary oppositions. Writing, for Derrida, introduces a disturbance into the logocentric dream of apriori distinctions and references. In the very act of "telling" the "truth" philosophy is outflanked by the structure of writing and language. The structure of language, as I shall argue via Derrida's reading of Plato, relies on a non-identity (or at least "non-proper" relation) between words and things. It is in this necessary relation, in which writing is other than itself, that Derrida introduces the role of the other and the principle of alterity. For Derrida, it is the chasm between words and things that allows what is traditionally called meaning and reference to emerge. Writing is always already about a relation to the other and that which is not self-identical. If this were not the case, if graphmematic structures of representation were not referring to something outside of themselves, writing would truly be a "supplement" in the negative sense implied by Plato and Rousseau. Writing, in the largest sense, is how we encounter and make sense of the

world, but it is also a limit point at which we encounter a foundational alterity between ourselves and that which supposedly grounds our identity.

The essential problem with Western metaphysics is the constant attempt to annul the "otherness" that opens up the space of writing and thinking in the first place. In an interview with Richard Kearney, Derrida touches on this problem by claiming: "the critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the "other" and the "other" of language" (33). It is in unearthing the other and the irreducibility of the other in language that deconstruction makes its ethical statement in contradistinction to the philosophical search for the ideal. The ethical demand of deconstruction is a turning away from or "forgetting" of the Ideal in the face of alterity and otherness. When the rule-governed scenarios of Western metaphysics are shown to be founded on "otherness" (rather than rationality, or the object in and of itself or dialectical materialism) the locus of ethics and responsibility must shift away from the efficacy of such scenarios. At this moment of turning away, ethics ceases to be an object of study or a "conceptual category" and becomes an imperative to act and decide. What we are as subjects is grounded in our relation to alterity; deconstruction seeks to recast the terms of responsibility in order to respect that reality.

The challenge (and anxiety) of Derridean ethics lies in

the structural impossibility of domesticating alterity for the sake of "safeguarding" ethics. For Derrida, the structure of "responsibility" becomes a matter of acting and deciding in the very absence of "proper" ethical knowledge. The oblique ethics of Derrida's work is always already a response to and before the alterity which grounds us and precludes the human subject from becoming a form or an object. The discrete lessons of writing and the principles of textuality becomes a central site for "locating the other" in Derrida's trope of ethics. He generalizes the structure of writing to demonstrate that "the others coming as the singularity that is always other" founds and funds what we are as ethical, political and human subjects ("Force of Law" 40). The stakes of ethical and political debate and action are engendered and necessitated by this oscillation between alterity and the production of irreducible singularity. Alterity is what undermines any attempt to essentialize identity but it, paradoxically, underwrites the emergence of the singular event, the singular act, the singular decision and, ultimately our singularity as human beings. The singularity of the other, and its commensurate status as a perpetual "to come", prioritizes the need to perform ethics rather than somehow embody it or attain it. Fidelity to ethics, for Derrida, also involves a fidelity to the scene of alterity which conditions ethical dilemmas in the first instance. The antagonistic place of writing in

Plato's lexicon and the attendant attempts to annul the disturbing effects of writing becomes the ironic site of Derrida's re-inscription of ethics and responsibility. Writing is extended as a generalized conception of human subjectivity for Derrida in which alterity and difference lay at the heart of human identity and ethics. The ontological reversal announced in the act of writing is one of the foundational gestures that distinguishes Derrida's idea of ethics from the way ethics has traditionally been conceived.

The structural problems that inhere in the transference of knowledge from Socrates is the philosophic problem "par excellence" (Limited Inc 8). The problem of transference and networks of communication lies at the heart of Plato's "trouble". The most obvious of Plato's philosophical problems was accounting for the credibility of his personal and professional relationship with Socrates. Their relationship raises some special problems for a philosophy that overtly grounds itself in rationality. If we are to believe legend, Plato stands in relation to Socrates as Moses stands in relation to Christ. The contradiction of the Christian tradition is easily explained or accepted, depending on one's willingness to believe in the divine Word of God. In the case of Western philosophy we are obliged to hold Plato and Socrates to a higher standard because they found their transcendence in a highly secular principle.

They ground their access to Truth in human reason and the development of the Logos. The passage of Truth from Socrates to Plato has a distinctly theological tone. Socrates prepares the young Plato to receive the truth of the forms by initiating him into the logos or truth of rationality. Socrates is then martyred for a cause higher than human codes and social laws. Plato perseveres and recapitulates this tautological system of logical (vs. Divine) ascension by placing the philosopher-king at the pinnacle of his Republic.

In Dissemination Derrida delves into Plato's "pharmacy" to explore the medicine that Plato uses to remedy his philosophical "trouble" with Socrates. Plato's doctrine of the forms demanded a methodology that achieved an unmediated relationship between the self and the perfection of the forms. For Plato, writing and other modes of re-presentation are tied to the fallen objects of the temporal world. If language has no mooring in an essence (such as the forms), meaning can only emerge in a differential relation; no self-grounding meaning is possible in a system without a first meaning. The very structure of written communication is founded on the absence of any first meaning and it is this absence which throws the desire for ethical or moral meaning into relief. Writing is simply incapable of providing the kind of knowledge Plato ascribed to the logos and, contrary to popular belief, Plato had a keen sense of the danger

writing posed for a philosophy obsessed with determining what it was proper to do and think. Writing stands in powerful and haunting opposition to moral decidability because it introduces a separation from essence. The primal issue of how to live a life takes on an undecidable tone when writing enters the picture. The very enunciation and adjudication of right and wrong is problematized (to say the least) by the structure of writing. Derrida insists on this point in Dissemination when he argues:

the question of writing opens as a question of morality. It is truly morality that is at stake, both in the sense of the opposition between good and evil, or good and bad, and in the sense of public mores and social conventions. It is a question of knowing what is to be done and not done. (74)

Morality and ethical decidability, as Plato recognized, cannot be accounted for in the structure of writing. Writing occurs in the undecidable relay between our apprehension of the phenomenal world and the structure of grammar and representation through which we re-present the objects of that world in socio-linguistic utterances. The realm of the forms demands a mode of intuition and not a method of representation. In the "Phaedrus" dialogue Plato upholds Socrates' sacred status as "he who does not write" by valorizing logos and speech over writing.

Dissemination offers a reading of Plato's "Phaedrus" that unearths many of the binary oppositions that underwrite the culture of Western logocentrism. In brief, logocentrism denotes the *apriori* belief in reason (independent of and in opposition to writing) to decide between binary oppositions (such as good vs. evil; writing vs. reason; man vs. woman; philosophy vs. literature). The fundamental binary favours logos (i.e. reason, intuition) over writing. The *apriori* intuition of the logos stands in marked opposition to the rhetoricity of writing. Rhetoricity and writing are "sophistic" enterprises seduced by the exigencies of the moment. The logos is that which pursues the perfection of the forms in the hope of transcending the specious and the mortal. The Platonic system is necessarily founded on the devaluation of writing because writing cannot underwrite a program of *apriori* decidability and Truth. The metonymic structure of writing places it in *apriori* relation to alterity and otherness and this structure is unable to bear the weight of philosophy's ambitions - ethical or otherwise.

Plato's dichotomy began a long tradition of scurrilous (but structurally necessary) attacks on written representation because the structural laws of writing preclude "proper" *apriori* distinctions between the real (the forms) and the unreal (copies) and the unforgivable weakness of being unable to distinguish right from wrong. The structural law of writing is "founded and funded" by the

very abyss that opens up between an object and the grammar used to stand in for that object. It is for this reason that writing is assigned the inferior position in a binary opposition that values the intuitive, unmediated presence of logos over written representation. The subversive questions Derrida asks of the Platonic tradition are the following: If Socrates is he who dispenses direct truth to Plato, why must Plato break the mimetic chain by writing? If this passage comes via the pure breath of logos, why must the "truth" be represented in dramatic dialogues? What if the positive term that "guarantees" the priority of writing over logos is itself a rhetorical construct? What is to be done with a text that insists on being written rather than intuited? These questions structure Derrida's deconstruction of "Phaedrus" and, as I shall demonstrate, reverberate beyond pedagogical virtuosity or "terrorist obscurantism".

Derrida's treatment of Plato's conception of writing acknowledges the logical rigour of the Platonic system. The main body of "paraphrastic", descriptive criticism on Plato suggests that his exclusion of the poets and general contempt for writing is a minor structural difficulty (Limited Inc 144). "Phaedrus", a text dedicated to problems of writing and representation, is often dismissed as a weak text written by a lesser Plato weakened by age and the fear of death (Norris 22).⁶ Derrida's radical re-reading of this text suggests that Plato was all too aware of the problems

created by a text that must be written. In Dissemination Derrida acknowledges the logical rigour of "Phaedrus" by turning that rigour back on itself to question the role assigned to writing. In the manner of the Freudian repressed Derrida insures that writing returns to haunt the scene of its exclusion.

The problematic of writing is initially dismissed, in "Phaedrus", as a sophistic enterprise. Writing is portrayed as intellectual masturbation that does nothing to promote the filial chain of truth and authority. However, as the dialogue progresses Phaedrus pushes Socrates to distinguish his thought from that of the Sophists. Socrates would prefer to have "nothing to do with writing" and rhetoric, but the dialogue moves toward a fateful encounter with writing. The structural irony of this text is that it would say very little if it were not for the issue of writing, an issue it attempts to exclude at every turn. The internal dynamic of the dialogue turns into a trial of writing:

This is, in particular the case... with the whole last section, devoted, as everyone knows, to the origin, history and value of writing. That entire hearing of the trial of writing should someday cease to appear as an extraneous mythological fantasy, an appendix to the organism that could, with no loss, have done without it. In truth, it is rigorously called for from one end of the

"Phaedrus" to the other... What is magisterial about the demonstration affirms itself and effaces itself at once, with suppleness, irony, and discretion...Always with irony. (Dissemination 67)

Derrida's interpretative strategy reads against the logocentric intention of Plato's text to show that writing becomes the condition of truth, not a supplement to it. H's reading demonstrates the double bind that Plato finds himself in: he dismisses writing as fallen and secondary but undeniably and necessarily resorts to the structure of writing to make that claim. The differential base of writing is what allows the thematic, political and structural distinction of that text (in short its truth) to be registered. Plato's dilemma is a paradigmatic example of the central contradiction Derrida locates in the desire of the philosophical discourse: "We are dispossessed of the longed for presence in the gesture of language by which we attempt to seize it" (Of Grammatology 141). Above all else, that is the "other" Derrida locates in logocentrism and the "kernel of trauma" he disseminates into the issue of ethics and subjectivity. The "other" scene that logocentrism represses is the dependence on the structure of language and writing and the consequences of that structure on the desire for a "proper" system of ethics and laws of non-contradiction.

In the latter section of the dialogue, Phaedrus leads Socrates out of the city for a discussion of "less serious

matters", away from and "outside" of the stale law of the polis. The images in this dialogue, pace Plato himself, are highly poetic and the dichotomy at work in the opposition between the city and the "fresh air" of the countryside symbolizes a contrast between the fixed nature of the city and the passion of dialogic exchange in the country air.⁹ In a loaded statement Socrates declares "you seem to have found a drug for getting me out". The ambivalence of the Greek term for the word drug leads Derrida to introduce the term "pharmakon" into his interpretation of the text. Pharmakon is a Greek term that can mean either remedy or poison; the meaning of the term (like language itself) is undecidable outside the context of its usage. The structural implications of the pharmakon become one of the operative concepts Derrida employs to understand the process of writing and the emergence of meaning.¹⁰ The inability to decide meaning outside a given context is the cure that allows meaning to emerge, but it is also the poison that radically precludes the domestication of meaning and content. The slippage between remedy and poison structures Derrida's reading of this dialogue and, as we shall see, provides the key link between writing and ethics.

The pharmakon of writing is introduced during the course of "non-serious" discussion when Phaedrus offers to recite, by heart, the text of Lysias - a philosophic rival of Socrates. Phaedrus offers to recite the content and

spirit of Lysias' work without the text itself. Socrates catches Phaedrus in his trick when he spots the text of Lysias under his cloak. The complex play between the physicality of Lysias' text and Phaedrus' inability to recite it by heart announces the entrance of the "pharmakon": "Between the invitation and the start of the reading, while the pharmakon is wandering about under Phaedrus' cloak...the overt presentation of writing as a pharmakon arises" (Dissemination 72). In this case the text itself (and the singular qualities that mark it off as a text) is the pharmakon because it represents the only hope of reciting the text (cure), but it also precludes the possibility of any "pure" unmediated recitation (poison).

On one level the written text is a cure for Phaedrus' desire to recite the text by heart but, within the same horizon of meaning, it also serves as a poison for the desire to recite the work outside of the singular text itself. The insistence of textuality that this "parable" demonstrates goes beyond the physicality of the text. The appearance of the text can be read as a symbolic displacement of the desire for meaning outside of "signature, event and context". Even if Phaedrus could recite the text by heart his recitation would still be tied to the singularity of a text ascribed to the proper name of Lysias - whether or not the text was physically present. Whatever truth or competence that could be ascribed to

Phaedrus' recitation would be tied, inexorably, to the irreducible dialectic between the prevailing linguistic, cultural, philosophic and political codes and Lysias' performative inscription of those codes. The structure and rhetoric of Lysias' text cannot be intuited, analyzed or debated independent of the text itself: "The truth of writing, that is, as we shall see, (the) nontruth, cannot be discovered by ourselves in ourselves" (74). By calling the bluff of Phaedrus, Socrates (of all people!) restores the primacy of the textual event and the singularity of the linguistic performance.

Socrates inadvertently signals a fatal chasm in Plato's dream of a universal system by invoking the "difference" that distinguishes one text from another and points to the irreducibly singular nature of all written texts. Difference is another of Derrida's operative terms that explains linguistic meaning in terms of its ontological difference or alterity from the objects it refers to. Commensurate with this logic is the contention that Meaning is infinitely deferred along this chain of difference that obtains between an object and the language which represents it. The identity of Lysias' text is only intelligible in relation to its difference from Socrates or Plato or Aristotle or Derrida and, moreover, it is only a text in so far as its fully present meaning (i.e. apriori recitable by heart) is deferred. The mere appearance of a rival text is enough to

disturb the chain of pure unwritten passage between Socrates and Plato. In the dialogue, the appearance of Lysias' work forces Socrates to set his own text over and above Lysias'. Phaedrus forces Socrates to enunciate the classic binary of good writing (i.e. writing lodged in the soul of the philosopher) over bad writing (rhetoric tied to the spatial-temporal chaos of the polis and market place) in defence of his philosophy. Good writing is that which is "written in the soul of the learner" but Socrates' "soul" writing is couched in the form a dramatic dialogue. He is forced to employ bad writing (rhetoric) in the service of good writing (the truth of the soul). In a founding onto-theological gesture, the secular and the fallen become tragically mixed with the sacred and transcendental. In the absence of God Socrates/Plato? is reduced to "opposing good and bad writing on the basis of a single term - that of writing itself - whose primary (literal) sense is undeniably that of textual inscription" (Derrida 39). The declaration of truth becomes a textual event rather than something recited from the soul of the learner. Logocentric philosophy tries to transcend the contextual limits of writing but, in the absence of a transcendental signifier, it is always already implicated in the contextual, repeatable structure of language. What Derrida's practice of reading reminds us of over and over again is that the priority of the logos must be invoked in writing. The declaration of truth is a textual event.

The Platonic oeuvre inaugurates the fundamental tragedy of Western metaphysics. The referential quality of language which, like it or not, is the structural condition of every human discourse, is also the parasite philosophy hopes to expel. The problem, of course, with parasites is that to kill a parasite also requires us to kill ourselves. The text that Phaedrus holds under his cloak acts as a summons that brings writing and language into the dialogue and onto the stage of Western philosophy. Socrates is lured out of his chain of linguistic and epistemological circularity and becomes dispossessed of that circularity in the gesture by which he seeks to retain it. The pure unmediated passage of truth from Socrates to Plato takes on the luminous absence of a simulacra - bearing in mind Baudrillard's insight that simulacras are feverish efforts to produce what is not there. Like the concept of time in Borges story "The Garden of Forking Paths", writing is the absent and haunting "truth" of the "Phaedrus" dialogue. Plato's text recites the truth but not the one Plato hoped for or theorized. It is possible to say, with some confidence, that Plato had to write for Socrates because whatever truth Socrates had to tell is inseparable from the rigorous written structure of the Platonic dialogues.

The radical re-reading of Plato that Derrida performs sows the seeds of the oblique ethical imperative that emerges from Derrida's work. The rigor and detail of

Derrida's reading also presents the reader with the risk and opportunity to generalize the case of the Platonic deconstruction. Plato's encounter with writing is a founding gesture but a gesture that disturbs all hope of origins and moral foundation. The stakes in the transfer of pure truth from Socrates to Plato are undeniably moral and ethical. Derrida insists on this point throughout Dissemination by theorizing the relation between linguistic and textual undecidability and the "question of knowing what is to be done and not done" (74). The drive away from writing is the drive toward moral decidability. What Plato inaugurates in the Western tradition is the philosophic imperative "which refuses to acknowledge its own textual status and aspires to a pure contemplation of truth independent of mere written signs" (Norris 33). The particularities of Plato's encounter cannot be reduced when it comes to the structural law of writing: "Far from standing out as a mere freakish episode, Plato's treatment of writing in the "Phaedrus" sets a pattern for similar encounters down through the history of Western thought. It is this pattern that Derrida will trace so intently in the texts of that tradition, from Plato to Kant, Hegel, Husserl and other representative thinkers" (Norris 33). The desire to devise a program of decidability outside the ebb and flow of textual inscription is the stock in trade of philosophy as we know it (or knew it). The disturbance that writing introduces into the machine of

Western thought perpetually disturbs the desire to escape the "white heat" of ethical and historical dilemmas.

The conceptual implications of "pharmakonal" logic extend beyond the pedagogical issue of writing but not beyond language itself. Throughout his work Derrida has been at pains to insist that this deconstruction principle is not simply a negative or destructive linguistic game.¹¹ In his article, "Derrida's Ethical Re-Turn", Richard Kearney argues that there is a consistency in Derrida's work between the more "abstract" conceptions of differance, undecidability and pharmakon that punctuate his early work (pre-1972) and his later work that focuses more specifically on ethico-political issues like racism, justice, democracy and pedagogy. The earlier "abstract" notions form the basis of Derrida's ethical re-turn "which brings what was tacitly there to closer attention" (29). The ambivalence at the heart of the pharmakon can and, indeed, must be extended to matters of ethical and political concern. In her book Essentially Speaking, Diana Fuss advances the convincing argument that any purely academic or semantic deconstruction participates in an essentialism of the most pernicious kind. One of the most difficult "theoretical duties" Derrida leaves his commentators is the tenuous link between the performativity of writing and the performativity of ethics (Limited Inc 135). These two issues can only be separated if we were to accept that there is a separate language for

talking about ethics and politics. The language we use to justify one act, one politics over another, is of the same ontological order as the rhetoric Socrates and Plato denounce on every front. The paradox that unites ethics and the structure of writing is best explained and defended by the dynamics of the pharmakon.

The act, wrenched from all origin and intelligible only within a singular framework, can claim no ontological priority over the problems that beset textual inscription. It is at the level of ethics qua singular act that we can extend the logic of the pharmakon to the problem of ethics. Like the written text, all singular acts represent, in the words of Robert Bernasconi, an interruption in Being and Telos. The singularity of the text destroys the possibility of a "Book of Knowledge" in the same way that the irreducibility of any human action precludes an overarching guide for human activity. Quantum physics and set theorists have been grappling with this problem for some time. In Enjoy Your Symptom Žižek summarizes the doctrine of set theory by suggesting: "there is always One which overdetermines the specific weight and color of the set as such; among the species of a genus, there is always one which overdetermines the universality of the genus" (16). However it is in the discreet movement of irruption, which disturbs the "universality of the genus", that the imperative to write and think and act and love first makes

itself felt. The absence of universal topoi is certainly tragic, but it is also the founding moment of all culture, all history and all ethical acts. It is, on the other hand, the founding moment for the possibility of genocide, patriarchy and racism. The compelling insight generated by that observation returns us to the pharmakon. In both cases it is the negative limit that generates the possibility for further work and "redemptive" action.¹² It would simply be wrong to view the "problems" which inhere in the Platonic system as negative or, even worse, to see their exposure as destructive. Simulacras are never destroyed, they are merely exposed.

The undecidable slippage in the form and content of the pharmakon is what allows us to speak in the first place: "Don't you believe that all language and all interpretation are problematic?...Isn't this a stroke of luck? Otherwise, why speak, why discuss?" (Limited Inc 120). The same could be said of ethics: Don't you believe that action and all attempts at a politics and ethics is undecidable? Otherwise why act, why prioritize one politics or ethics above another? The need to devise political and ethical programs of action and belief can be traced to Heideggerian notions of the "thrownness" and "lack of dwelling place" which underwrite the "need to be" (Caputo 36). These notions found what we so serenely call subjectivity and the possibility of agency and praxis. The singularity of our being and the

commensurate separation from essence positions us as subjects and agents but it also imbricates us into the fold of undecidability and alterity. Ethical responsibility, in Derrida's work, moves away from responsibility to a specific program or ideology toward a responsibility for the alterity and otherness that allow such programs to emerge in the first place. The phenomenon of political and ethical content in Derrida is a given. He acknowledges it as an inescapable and ubiquitous component of any society (Limited Inc 154). The compelling difference with Derrida's ethics is the way he recasts responsibility and ethics in a way that (necessarily) cannot be reduced to the component parts of any given context. He not only moves away from puritan gestures of ethical prescription but also a prevailing tendency to fetishize the ethical decision as the site of potential phenomenological knowledge (John Rawls theory of an "objective veil of ignorance" is an excellent example of the desire to turn the dilemma of ethics into a dissectible, phenomenological object).

Responsibility, for Derrida, is null if it does not account for the alterity that inheres in every human structure. The keen attention Derrida pays to alterity in the scene of writing and elsewhere (if there really is an elsewhere) is the logical base on which he tropes traditional notions of responsibility. Notions of responsibility which, for Derrida, in the end, enclose

ethics and responsibility in a metaphysical or hermeneutic circle. In "Derrida's Ethical Re-Turn" Richard Kearney characterizes the implications of Derrida's conception of responsibility as follows:

To accept such a claim is to acknowledge that 'deconstruction calls from an increase in responsibility'. Such an increased responsibility may well involve a momentary suspension, or even transgression, of the traditional definitions of responsibility....Since moreover it takes two to play the ethical game of responsibility, deconstruction is committed to a reinscription of not only the other but also the subject....The fact that subject and other are reevaluated in the name of an ethics... means that the responsibility they bear to one another is without end. Here we are concerned with an almost impossible responsibility, without the slightest hint of closure or reprieve. (48)

Ethical decision and calculation are only necessary if it can be shown that they are, in the strictest possible sense, undecidable. The ethical pharmakon of Derrida's oeuvre is twofold: i) it instills a respect for the foundational role of "otherness" in the possibility of ethical decision; and ii) it tropes the traditional conception of rule-governed ethics by postulating that ethics and the summons of ethical

responsibility is lodged in the absence of positive and pure imperatives of responsibility.

The ontological equivalence of ethics and writing raises some particular problems and ferocious objections. Derrida's attempt to devise a general theory of textuality, a theory that extends the principle of textuality to all "non natural" human interaction, habitually raises the objection that textuality is an "irresponsible" way of characterizing ethics.¹³ The issue is crystallized when Derrida states, in Of Grammatology, "There is nothing outside of the text" - including ethics. This statement is, perhaps, the most oft quoted and misunderstood in all of Derrida's work. Opponents of Derrida point to it as irrefutable evidence of his flippant sneer at "serious" ethical issues, while some proponents of deconstruction have taken this statement as an invitation to say anything without regard for the "protocol of code and context". The issue of responsibility, politics and ethics in Derrida's work has little to do with either response. Derrida's focus on textuality does not foreclose the challenges of ethics and politics but rather invigorates, secularizes and relieves them of metaphysical baggage. The intensity of the particular situation becomes charged with an imperative that is no longer guaranteed by a resort to an "outside" (whether it be political, ethical, literary, religious). In Limited Inc Derrida offers a definitive defence of this idea by

arguing:

What I call text implies all the structures called 'real', 'economic', 'historical', socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that 'there is nothing outside of the text'. That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed...But it does mean that every referent, all reality, has the structure of a differential trace, and that one cannot refer to this 'real' except in an interpretive experience. (148)

If, as Plato wished, the interpretive process could be short circuited by resort to an "outside", the very spirit of ethical decision would be nullified and hollowed. Responsibility and ethics would truly be enclosed in a book and the process of crafting an ethical life would give way to reification.

In Mark Edmundson's "The Ethics of Deconstruction" the irony of logocentric subjectivity is pronounced:

[Western] culture literalized a trope about the self, the self as knower, and thus became imprisoned within it. An excessive faith in knowledge has, from the deconstructive point of view, becomes the prevailing superstition...as unsettling as [undecidability] sounds, it is much better than what we are headed for by way of the

continued affirmation of the human subject who can know in some absolute sense (631).

As Auden's poem suggests, the Platonic gesture offers a Faustian wager in which the choice is between the sterility of lucidity and the pharmakon of the flesh and undecidability. Derrida's reading of Plato and the role of writing demonstrates that the choice between the two is never free. Our lives are always already imbricated in a fabric of textuality and context that summons us to the site of an unconditional responsibility. It is upon this site, announced in the "secret" of writing, that we must rethink the terms of ethics and responsibility. Derrida sketches out these terms in The Conflict of the Faculties when he asks: "Would it not be more "responsible" to attempt to think the ground upon which, in the history of the West, the juridical and ecological values of responsibility have arisen and imposed themselves?" (4). Such values have arisen and imposed themselves through writing and it is only through rethinking writing and the singularity of the text that a different modality of responsibility can emerge. The irreducible singularity of the text always already limits the textual and "real" effects of human utterance. Responsibility starts where the Book ends and the text of our lives begins. This effect of irreducible singularity leads us directly to the theorem of repetition.

2. Repetition.

I will repeat it, for we are surely here to repeat ourselves. Lovers do almost nothing but repeat themselves.

Kurt Vonnegut

The concept of repetition in Derrida's work signals a further privileging of the singular performance over the universal schema, and all of the attendant paradoxes of such a privileging. At first glance repetition is an unlikely theorem for Derrida to mobilize in his philosophy. However, Derrida's conception of repetition turns on a double gesture in which it is the repeatability of the general rules that renders the singular irreducible and untotalizable. In Rodolphe Gasche's terms we are dealing with a "repetition of repetition" in which what is repeated is the encounter between the singular act, event or text and the general rules that render the singular intelligible (212). The movement between singular and general is, in effect, the Derridean principle of repetition. The encounter between the singular and general is what recurs eternally and, ironically, precludes the possibility of totalizing projects. In Acts of Literature Derek Attridge characterizes Derridean repetition as follows:

[repetition] overruns the conventional borderline between substance and accidents, necessity and chance - both makes meaningful items and events possible, and prevents them from being meaningful in the sense that philosophy or linguistics would

ideally want -single, self identical

representations of prior, whole meanings (18).

The centrality of repetition in the Derridean lexicon is an indispensable clue in deciphering "the mystery to a solution" at the heart of Derrida's contribution to ethics.¹⁴

The theoretical efficacy of repetition is inseparable from the notion of singularity in Derrida's vocabulary. Like repetition, Derrida's conception of singularity owes its intelligibility to a paradoxical principle. At first glance singularity seems to denote a humanist sense of a free floating autonomy, but in Derrida's lexicon it represents the inseparable movement between a particular occurrence and a general reality. The singular event emerges as meaningful and unique because of its mediation through general conventions and structures of interpretation. For Derrida, the ontological condition of a singular event is, paradoxically, made possible by the impossibility of a fully singular, unmediated event. Singularity always already represents the amalgam of the event and the code surrounding the evaluation of that event. It is in this space between the irreducibility of the singular event and the inescapability of general "rules" that my interest in the performative, with regard to Derrida, first emerged and remains central. The motif of performance and practice in Derrida's "ethics" emerges in the paradoxical relay between

the irreducibly unique nature of the event and the ubiquitous rules - cultural, social, political, linguistic etc. - of intelligibility. The paradoxes of performance and singularity and the parallel I have been trying to draw with ethics are structurally analogous. The singularity of an event is possible and indeed unavoidable, for Derrida, because there is no such thing as the fully immanent Presence of an event. He employs the same logic in his criticism of Austin's theory of performance (which I shall examine in detail in chapter 2) when he insists that a linguistic, social performance is only a performance in so far as it takes place in the absolute absence of any "pure" performance. Ethical performance and practice, in the context I have been theorizing it thus far, is, therefore, only possible in the absence of rule-governed, epistemological accounts of ethics and prescriptive morality. A closer examination of Derrida's treatment of repetition will draw out the discreet but compelling relation between singularity, ethics and performance.

Derrida explores the semantic possibilities of repetition and the concept of singularity by borrowing the term "iterability" from Sanskrit. Although the Sanskrit definition is roughly cognate with the OED definition of repetition, the Sanskrit version introduces a compelling wrinkle. Iterability not only defines repetition but it also installs repetition as the foundation of all communication.

The claim sounds extravagant but it lies at the heart of the analysis of communication Derrida undertakes in "Signature Event Context". Thus the essay begins with the question: "Is it certain that to the word communication corresponds a concept that is unique, univocal, rigorously controllable and transmittable: in a word, communicable?" (1 Derrida's emphasis).

The thesis of this landmark essay is that for a unit of communication (written, spoken or otherwise) to be intelligible, readable and meaningful, it must be repeatable, repeatable in the sense that the codes and conventions employed in a unit of communication can be employed independent of the utterance in question and in the absence or death of the author.¹⁵ Repetition in this case cannot be understood as repetition of the same; it must be understood as repetition of a structure - the structure of self/other, singular/general and words/things. It is because language and grammar are different from the phenomenal world that codes and conventions become necessary and visible in the first place. The sublime paradox of finite/infinite lies at the heart of this complex system: the universe of linguistic possibilities is infinite; therefore if communication is to be at all intelligible, finite conventions must be imposed on this universe of possibilities. It is out of this finite set of conventions that meaning and information emerges, but that meaning owes

an irreparable debt to the cleavage announced by the reality of infinitude:

This implies that there is no such thing as a code - organon of iterability - which could be structurally secret. The possibility of repeating and thus of identifying the marks is implicit in every code, making it into a network (une grille) that is communicable, transmittable, decipherable, iterable for a third, and hence for every possible user in general. To be what it is, all writing must, therefore, be capable of functioning in the radical absence of every empirically determined receiver in general. And this absence is not a continuous modification of presence, it is a rupture in presence, the death or possibility of the death of the receiver inscribed in the structure of the mark. (Limited Inc 8)

The structure of writing and communication, as Derrida theorizes it, is not (and cannot be) lodged in some secret or unique code. To be what it is (i.e. communication) it must be public, and hence repeatable, in a very real way.

The structural and ontological effects of code and codification function as an inherent stumbling block to the truth of the objective world but, in a world without God or a transcendental signifier, it is the only access we have to the social and political. It is at this limit point that the

abstract principle of repetition touches on the issue of ethics. Ontologically, repetition denotes the perpetual need to negotiate our subjectivity "outside ourselves" (Dissemination 74). Language, as Lacan teaches us, is what allows us to speak and "be" in the same moment as it introduces a traumatic, irreparable rupture between ourselves and the world. The "mark" that identifies and renders intelligible the meaning of our utterance is also the "mark" which shatters the dream of autonomous, free floating, fully singular communication. The fully autonomous utterance, if there could be such a thing, would have no ties or answerability to code or context. That which allows us to be answerable, in Bakhtin's terms, is our participation in a code that ultimately exceeds but does not transcend us. Repetition is a concept that allows us to trope the idea of traditional ethical meaning and answerability without "making a mockery" of it (Eagleton 145). Allow me to map this argument.

In the examination thus far, repetition has taken on two related connotations; first, the repeatability of the general code or conventions and, second, complementarily, the structural repetition of the encounter between singular and general. It is this second, structural, repetition that has "Copernican" implications for the emergence of social, political, judicial and ethical meaning. When I speak of the structural repetition of singular and general, I am

referring to the encounter of an event (crucially, I am making no ontological apriori distinction between literary, political, ethical or sporting event) with the codes, rules and conventions that allow that event to have meaning. The two principles are inexorably tied to each other; general rules have no meaning in formal abstraction and an event has no intelligibility outside of linguistic, social and political codification. For Derrida, repetition "entails the necessity of thinking at once both the rule and the event, concept and singularity" (Limited Inc 119). The event is in fact an unholy alliance between the singular and the general that disturbs any hope of prioritizing the epistemic value of the one over the other.

The logic here is compelling. What would the status of an act or event be that emerged as a fully autonomous singularity or as fully accountable in terms of general laws and conventions of knowledge? How, in either case, could one envisage a scenario in which we were called upon to decide whether a given act or event was ethical or unethical? Both cases reify the difficulty of deciding by rendering the process of interpretation either self-enclosed (Kant) or, in the final analysis, accountable to general laws (structuralism). Without a hint of irony or cynicism it could be claimed that it is these traditions that trope the "true" meaning of an event. Is it not the overdetermined aporia of an event, an act, a text, an utterance that

renders it meaningful and subject to political and ethical interpretation? John Caputo, in Against Ethics, defines an event as "an idiosyncratic situation, a just slightly unprecedented configuration that we have never quite met before, unique and never exactly anticipated" (99). The structural logic of repetition notes the "infinite particularity...and exceptionality" of each event by insisting on the impossibility of any one event stopping the perpetual movement between singular and general (Said 20). Repetition demands a dual mode of thinking and writing; "moreover, this dual response involves the apprehension of the interdependence of these two qualities as an oscillation or vibration that underlies but also undermines all logic" (Attridge 19). Derrida employs the concept of repetition to demonstrate that all decision (especially ethical and political decision) is the product of an undecidable dialectic between singular and general. Decision emerges from undecidability and charges the event with a status that might properly be called ethical. It is this restoration of the event to its unsafe singularity that frames the oblique ethics of deconstruction.

Throughout the corpus of Derrida's work the credibility of repetition and its ironic ethical imperative is bolstered by the "double science" of reading and writing outlined earlier. Above all else, Derrida's style of reading is a practice that he has always simultaneously performed and

theorized. The most explicit methodology that is to be found is in a section from Of Grammatology, entitled "The Exorbitant Question of Method". In this chapter he outlines a practice (vs. program) of reading that engages the movement between singular and general at work in all texts. The challenge of responding responsibly to any text lies in balancing a competence of the general linguistic, cultural and social codes. In Limited Inc Derrida explains his method by suggesting that one must grasp "what interpretations are probabilistically dominant and conventionally acknowledged [in order] to grant access to what...[the author]...thought he meant and what readers thought they could understand....Otherwise one could indeed say just anything at all and I have never accepted saying, or encouraging others to say, just anything at all" (144). This seemingly conservative approach belies Derrida's interest in examining the decision/s, paradoxically unearthed by undecidability, that mark a text off as an event. The singularity of the text speaks, but only through the free play or undecidability that emerges from a close reading. The text serves as a segue into the paradoxes and poetry of undecidability: "What has always interested me most...is not indeterminacy in itself, but the strictest possible determination of the figures of play, oscillation, of undecidability [in texts]" (145). This element of undecidability is the second component of the inseparable

double gesture Derrida employs in his reading practice. The care (both practical and Heideggerian) Derrida takes in responding to the particularity of the text is in the service of illuminating the undecidability that determines the ultimate shape of a text and, in the end, the limits of human knowledge. This practice of reading is at work in his interpretation of the "Phaedrus" dialogue. The specificities of the Platonic text itself show up in the gaps and fissures that allowed the text to emerge as it did. The case of Plato's text is particularly interesting because it grounds itself in the abject rejection of gaps and fissures. Although reading against the grain of Plato's stated intention, Derrida's disturbance of the Platonic vision, via the pharmakon and writing, remains firmly anchored in the structure of the text.

The dual nature of Derrida's reading and interpretation constantly turns on the paradoxes of undecidability. Like repetition, undecidability is a structural rather than literal principle. Derrida's critics have often confused undecidability with indeterminacy. The difference is absolutely crucial. Indeterminacy denotes a random, arbitrary movement in which things can mean whatever they want and, hence, mean nothing. The logic of undecidability insists that it is precisely because things are not random, arbitrary and autonomous that they come to mean something. This something must not be mistaken for the shimmering Truth

of the text but rather should be recognized as the performative product of differential forces. In The Sublime Object of Ideology Slavoj Zizek points to this delicate balance when, speaking of Freud and Marx, he says:

First, we must break the appearance according to which a [text] is nothing but a simple and meaningless confusion, a disorder...having nothing to do with signification...Then we must get rid of the fascination in this kernel of signification, in the hidden meaning of the [text] - that is to say, in the content concealed behind the form of a [text]. (14)

The struggle is always to interpret the event (textual or otherwise) without fetishizing it.

In the same way that Einstein's theory of relativity did not end science or physics, Derrida's notion of undecidability does not jettison notions of ethics and politics. Politics and ethics emerge in the space between the event itself and the infinity of possibilities that obtain in human affairs. Meaning like matter emerges from the relativity of the universe, not its determinacy. The determination of ethical and political contexts is inevitable when that context cannot be guaranteed prior to the event itself. This paradox lies at the heart of Derrida's project and he explains it as follows in Limited Inc:

To be sure, in order for structures of undecidability to be possible (and hence structures of decisions and of responsibilities as well) there must be a certain play, difference, nonidentity. Not of indetermination, but of difference or of nonidentity with oneself in the very process of determination. Difference is not indeterminacy. It renders determinacy both possible and necessary (149).

It is at this point that the epistemological credibility of Derrida's focus on difference, undecidability and alterity emerges in opposition to charges of terrorist obscurantism and pedagogical gamesmanship. The logical rigour of Limited Inc. and other texts patiently builds the (apparently) abstract case for the epistemic primacy of repetition and undecidability.

The foundational character of terms (linked by a family resemblance) like undecidability, difference, pharmakon and repetition opens rather than closes the opportunity for ethical and political action.¹⁶ What undecidability and repetition compel is a mapping of ethics that theorizes a performative vs. constative or descriptive paradigm. Those uncomfortable with the term paradigm will at least grant that a paradigm which grounds itself in performance undermines the fixed nature of the term. Derrida's sense of the performative signals an ontological break from

traditional conceptions of performance, but it is this break that frames the ethical imperative in deconstruction. The performative role of the human subject is never set against a higher ontological principle in the creation of meaning and the modality of decision in a singular context. For Derrida, performance is a ubiquitous and founding gesture in matters of ethics, law and justice: "What is at work here are structures of "performativity", allegedly descriptive or constative, that I have...described elsewhere" (135).¹⁷ The repetitive movement between singular and general preserves the infinite singularity of the human event and (necessarily) encloses the field of ethics in a performative modality. The ethical actor is charged with the permanent/performative summons to decide "without the slightest hint of closure or reprieve" (Kearney 48). The ethical demand (as opposed to program) lies in accepting the "the ethical responsibility to the singular demands for justice made in each singular historical moment" (Kearney 40).

The play between the affirmation of performance and the repeatability of structure is, to my mind, the central ethical, epistemological and personal challenge of deconstruction. As I shall demonstrate in the next chapter, Derrida finds this relay between structure, repetition and performance already at work in selected modern literary texts. These texts will become a working demonstration of a

discourse that engages the problem of performativity and knowledge overtly rather than latently or in disavowal (as is the case with almost all philosophic writing). I shall return to the importance of literary texts later; for now it is important draw out the difference of Derrida's performative and its link with ethics and repetition.

Derrida's most germane work on performance emerges from his critique of J.L. Austin and the speech act theory of language. Austin, a moral philosophy professor at Oxford, pioneered the search for a general theory of speech acts. Austin's focus on the speech act distinguish him from the grammatical tradition of philology. Austin was interested in how words did things in a practical context and this led him to posit a general theory based on performance. The central aim of Austin's theory was to distinguish literal/non-literal utterances and, more importantly, serious/non-serious utterances from each other. To his theoretical credit Austin refused the traditional linguistic determination of meaning outside of the particular context. He locates meaning in the performative moment of the context. The distinction between serious and non-serious is to be found in the social performance of a speech act. Although, for Austin, there is no apriori way to the distinguish the serious from the non-serious; the intentional speaker and receiver are able to work out the distinction in the performative moment. It is this point that fascinates

Derrida but it is also at this point that he signals a radical break from the positivistic value that speech act theory invests in the notion of performance.

In order to arrive at his general theory of speech acts Austin excludes certain anomalous speech acts as a means of determining what a successful performative utterance would look like. In doing so he inadvertently delimits the field of interpretation by locating the truth and presence of the utterance in its performance. The criterion of grammar in and of itself has been abolished but Austin's performative falls back on the most intense of structuralist/phenomenological fallacies. In a move that Derrida describes as Nietzschean, Austin frees the performative of "truth value" status but in a distinctly un-Nietzschean manner he restores the power of performance to decide (between serious/non-serious etc.). Derrida characterizes this gesture by arguing:

In order to demonstrate this, I shall take it for granted that Austin's analyses at all times require the value of a context [but] the performative element always comes back in what Austin calls the total context....As a result performative communication becomes once more the communication of an intentional meaning, even if that meaning has no referent in the form of a thing or of a prior or exterior state of things.

The conscious presence of speakers or receivers participating in the accomplishment of a performative...implies teleologically that no residue escapes the present teleology. (14)

The progress achieved by Austin's move into the performative is undermined when the performative takes on the stale rigor of a philosophical concept capable of deciding.

The essential element missing from Austin's conception of performance is risk (Caputo 113). Austin's speech act performative is without ontological or ethical risk. Although Austin rigorously limited himself to linguistics, a definite value judgement inheres in his use of serious and non-serious. Austin excludes all strange and parasitic cases (i.e. jokes, speeches in a play, poetry in general) of non-serious speech acts. What this gesture willfully ignores is the fact that all speech acts we consider to be ordinary or serious are always already dependent on the conventions that define non-serious and parasitic examples of speech acts. It is only from within an undecidable, overdetermined framework (here announced by convention) that speech acts and all other matters take on human value. The modalities we have for distinguishing, say, a poem from a political speech bear the iterable (repeatable) structure we spoke of earlier. The iterability of structure is what allows structure and conceptual distinction to emerge, but that emergence always

already precludes the purity of the categories Austin was hoping for. Devising a typology that accounts for the iterability of structure is the only way out of this labyrinth:

there is a relative specificity...of performatives. But this relative purity does not emerge in opposition to citationality or iterability, but in opposition to other kinds of iteration within a general iterability which constitutes a violation of the alleged rigorous purity of every event of discourse or of every speech act. Rather than oppose citation or iteration to the noniteration of an event, one ought to construct a different typology of forms of iteration (Limited Inc 18).

Like Plato's forms, Austin's system is menaced and, ultimately, undermined by what it sought to exclude.

The status of performance in Austin falls down around the issue of purity. Austin's theory intrigues Derrida because it is a fascinating attempt to locate the performative as the site of plenitude. In some senses Austin's effort is symbolic of a limit point in Western epistemology. Western philosophy has attempted to account for meaning and truth by pursuing trajectories of thought that can be traced through idealist, materialist and phenomenological notions. The post-Nietzschean work of

Austin has finally come to lay its stake with performance. Austin's attempt to erect a general theory based on performance becomes parasitic itself to the point where the very spirit of the performative has been evacuated. The repeatability (iterability) of general structures allows us to mark certain texts, utterances and events off from one another. That process of marking, however, is always already a performative and not a constative or descriptive act. The ontological conditions of a performance forbid the laws and conventions of its occurrence to become generalized: "a performative is necessarily an 'impure' performative" (17). It is this untotalizability and repeatability that makes a performance what it is. Utterances and acts that refer to a pregiven reality (descriptive) or autonomously constitute a category (constative) are not performative in one sense, yet all too performative in another. Purity (even if it is provisional or grounded in performance) and performance are mutually exclusive terms.

The move, witnessed in Derrida's encounter with Austin, from constative and descriptive inquiry to a genealogy of performance is, I believe, the move from moral to ethical. The Western tradition has exhibited an uncanny will to ignorance when dealing with the ontology of ethics and textuality. On the whole what passes as ethical discourse generally turns out to be a clandestine morality. Like Austin's performative, the hegemonic discourse on ethics

appears to be open but, in the end, neutralizes the Real performativity of what it means to be an ethical person. Kant's ethics, for instance, begins in the foul-rag-and-bone shop of the heart but ends up in the starry skies. In Against Ethics Caputo characterizes the Kantian move by suggesting "I have found it necessary to move heaven and earth, Kant says in his best German/Jewish, in order to make room for obligation. Obligation is a fact, categorically, unconditionally....But then Kant blinked. The Aufklärer recovered his senses. Ethics, which is philosophy, and philosophy which is Greek, cannot abide by this much alienation and disappropriation, this much Unheimlichkeit. The philosopher, who belongs to the true world, must come home" (13). The humane struggle initially promised in the Kantian oeuvre is eventually reified when the law one gives oneself is generalized.

An ethics that can be generalized evacuates the urgency of decision that perpetually menaces and punctuates ethics. In an effort to restore this sense of decision to ethics Derrida claims:

[a] decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by turning it into a programmable effect of determinate causes. There can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of

undecidability (Acts of Literature P 24).

Ethics in the "proper" but tropological sense of the word is about repetition. The happy tragedy of ethical decision is the perpetual imperative it forces upon us. The ambivalent frame of repetition offers the promise of a new genealogy of performance, a performance without end and without purity but not without meaning or ethics.

II

The Literary Trial of Ethics

My first inclination wasn't really towards philosophy, but rather towards literature, no, towards something literature accommodates more easily than philosophy.

Derrida

The poets were there before me.

Freud.

The task of evaluating literature in Derrida's work is fraught with several difficulties. The nature of his work has allowed his writing to influence many different fields. The insights of deconstruction has had an impact on linguistics, sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, film studies and many other disciplines. However, the impact has, perhaps, been felt most strongly in departments of literature. In terms of sheer volume, American departments of literature have practically instituted deconstruction as the methodology. Culturally, politically, and financially deconstruction has been instrumental in rejuvenating literary studies in the American academy (Said 160). The implications of such acceptance is, at best, ambivalent. The American school of deconstruction has been widely criticized for effacing the political challenge offered by deconstruction. In the main, I accept this criticism but reject it as a natural or even logical product of Derrida's work. The belief that deconstructive studies of literary texts is political in and of itself has more to do with American ideology than anything Derrida has said or written.

The style of reading Derrida employs when considering literature follows a particular pattern. He reads literary work in the context of his philosophical/deconstructive project in order to bolster those arguments. However, he does not, as some believe, collapse the dilemmas of philosophy in the service of elevating poetry as some new

Truth. The leading proponent of this view is American philosopher Richard Rorty. Rorty speaks approvingly of the general aims of deconstruction but chastises Derrida for continuing to work through the tired old dilemmas of Western philosophy. For Rorty, philosophy is dead, with the exception of his liberal pragmatism, and the "true" task of deconstruction is to negotiate the terms of a peaceful surrender to poetry. In addition to vouching for every liberal, pragmatic assumption of the American ethos, Rorty has slipped metaphysics, in the form of poetry/literature, in through the back door. In Enjoy Your Symptom, Žižek summarizes the consequences of this liberal gesture by suggesting: "we are victims of authority precisely when we think we have duped it" (x). Like the American view of class and race, Rorty feels he has duped philosophy, but I would suggest he has been duped by it. Metaphysical assumptions, like power/class relations, thrive when they are pronounced dead.

I will argue that Derrida's reading of literature not only compliments his philosophy but supplements it by showing how the structure of the literary text menaces the ontological validity of binaries like inside/outside, writing/truth, and philosophy/literature. It is never a matter of recasting literature as the essence that philosophy could not provide. Having said that, it is essential to grant the literary text a "relative

specificity". By definition, literature and the social, epistemological, and cultural codes that define it as such are not homogeneous and ahistorical. Literature, like any other discourse, is steeped in the conventions of its historical moment. Derrida's literary criticism is primarily concerned with texts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In "Sign, Structure and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" he introduces a sublime sense of the "event" surrounding the emergence of this writing and its epistemic milieu. He theorizes the event in a two-pronged movement and, roughly stated, this dual sense is: i) the historical moment between approximately 1850 and 1925 when Copernican figures like Marx, Freud, Darwin and Nietzsche emerged; and ii) the deconstructive focus all of these thinkers bring to examining the idea of human events and structures free of metaphysical props. A solid majority of the literature produced in this period reflects an emphasis on the "structurality of structure" and the performative nature of writing (270). In the work of Ponge, Joyce, Mallarme, Celine, Kafka, Proust and others the movement between singular and general, self and other, language and objects becomes the very subject matter of the narrative. The interval between self and other and the de-naturalization of this relation inspires the motif of performativity in these texts. There is a determinate shift away from content per se toward the structural conditions

that underwrite content and its repeatability. Ironically, when the ontological primacy of content is hollowed out, subjectivity becomes a matter of performance in an irreducible, irredeemable context. Žizek characterizes this shift as a shift away "from reality toward the [Lacanian] Real" (52). The focal point in Derrida's literary criticism is the transition he outlines between the textual performativity of modernist literature and "real" social, historical and ethical contexts. The transition, of course, is not of any certain ethical knowledge but a continued affirmation of the other in all its singularity. If the Lacanian Real is grafted onto Derrida's register of terms the parallel terms would be repetition, undecidability and aporia. It is this encounter, which Derrida records ("gramophones") in the literary texts he reads, that supplements the ethics of aporia and undecidability that I have been sketching thus far.

Derrida's reading of literary texts demonstrates the way in which most modern literature is founded and founded by the "ontological flicker" between inside/outside and philosophy/literature (Mchale 13). As with writing and repetition, it is the moment and structure of undecidability that defines the ethical in Derrida's literary reading. The difference, for Derrida, in literary texts is that writing and repetition do not occupy an antagonistic space. Literary texts affirm (without guaranteeing) Derrida's deconstruction

of the Western edifice of metaphysical philosophy. The "ethical" insistence in Derrida's work is that which affirms and works within the terms of repetition, undecidability and differance. In Joyce's Ulysses this insistence is inscribed by interrogating the terms and conditions under which competence and decision - literary or otherwise - emerge. In Kafka's "Before the Law" the issue of the construction and efficacy of law is put into question. Each text provides a powerful means of enunciating such aporias, not only because they are irreducible to a particular category but because they also self-reflexively interrogate the ontological grounds of all categorization. Kafka and Joyce (unlike traditional philosophy) always already serve Derrida's deconstructive purposes so long as they are not cast as yet another binary in which literature is on the inside and all else on the outside must surrender. Derrida's reading of Joyce's Ulysses and Kafka's "Before the Law" balances this demand in the service of theorizing the aporia of the event. It is this aporia that (obliquely) announces Derrida's sense of responsibility and ethics and unites his literary criticism with his other work.

The work of Joyce has played a key role in my conception of the linguistic and ethico-political nature of Derrida's work. Despite the preceding provisos about prioritizing literature, I must confess that many of Derrida's seemingly intractable contradictions became

tenable after re-reading Joyce and Borges. In effect they turned from intractable contradictions to sublime paradoxes. Is there anything surprising or disturbing to my thesis about this? I would suggest not. Authors like Joyce, Borges, and Kafka occupy a liminal space in which they ironically and self-consciously deconstruct Literature.¹⁶ In "Ulysses Gramophone" Derrida examines Ulysses as a text that simultaneously undermines the notion of Literature while participating in its codes and conventions. The paper was delivered as the keynote address at the 1984 Joyce Symposium in Frankfurt. The essay attempts to mirror the form and content of the Joyce text by intentionally mixing chance and necessity, scholarship and personal narrative, chaos and structure. Like the Joyce text, Derrida narrates his paper in a circular structure that responds to the summons announced by the word "yes" in Ulysses. The yes, to which Derrida responds, will, as always, be informed by a double gesture. In this case the question is - posed of all places at the International Joyce Symposium - what does it mean to say yes to the Yes of Ulysses? Is there any way of properly, responsibly saying yes to Joyce's text?

Derrida begins his paper with a series of coincidences and personal anecdotes leading up to his writing of the paper. The most important of these was the proliferation of books on the benefits of saying yes, or not saying no, encountered "on the morning of May 11 when I was looking for

postcards in a sort of news agency in the basement of the Okura Hotel" (259). This seemingly banal coincidence, with its recorded dates and proper names, sets off an entire network of symbolic resonance for Derrida. The "event" took place while Derrida was researching a topic for the paper and he recorded the incident on a pocket cassette recorder. This encounter served as a reminder and an imperative about what was involved in affirming the texts of Joyce. Ulysses is a text saturated with dates and proper names that often have obscure but important connections. The minute details of Leopold Bloom's life enforces the undecidable connection between structure and chaos that produces the proper names of his and our life. The relation between structure and chaos also produces the social context on to which those names (i.e. subjects, personalities, life histories) are grafted. Proper names and dates only emerge from chance meetings in a "universe set adrift". The opportunity that opened for Derrida to give this paper on Joyce in 1984 in Frankfurt owes an unpayable debt to iterability and undecidability. The genealogy of his own text and his encounter with the "yes" of Ulysses is offered to settle some of the debts incurred from the Joyce text. I.O.U. James Joyce/Jacques Derrida.

In a rough count Derrida comes up with 222 yeses in the body of Ulysses. In every occurrence of yes Derrida tempts us, dares us, to think of it as an answer. The semantics of

yes always involve an answer or response to something. The implications of this affirmation takes on the currency of all linguistic exchange between people. Even if the utterance is negative or supposedly only to ourselves (as in Molly's "monologue" or John Searle's shopping list) the very act of uttering presupposes an affirmative response. A response to what? A response to the otherness and alterity at the heart of all language. The affirmation at the heart of "yes" is the condition of utterance; it "precedes (not temporally or logically) even the utterance 'I'...Yes breaches time as well as space, as it always involves a commitment, a willingness to say yes again. With this relay, this differing...comes spacing (space and time), gramaphoning, memory, recording, computers, and ultimately the whole Joyce mega-machine" (254). The affirmation of language functions as both an "amputation" and an "advent" for the human subject (Kearney 42). Our response to alterity (denoted in Ulysses by "yes") severs the essential kernel of the object but serves as the catalyst for our intercourse with the world. This affirmation of the "yes" is hollow and meaningless unless it balances both sides of this "happy tragedy". It is this cumulative response to the other that Ulysses dramatizes and that Derrida answers in "Ulysses Gramophone".

The encyclopedic ambition of Ulysses is structured by a foundational and parodic irony. Joyce was a prodigious

reader and serious scholar in numerous fields but are we supposed to take the virtuostic learning of Ulysses as a pedagogical tool? The dynamic Ulysses plays off is the way in which spacing or breaching opens the door for totalizing systems but also renders such gestures comic and vain. The "other" opens the possibility of the ideal but an ideal grounded in the Other can only be the parody of an ideal. Two of the central ideals in the text are the Catholic church and the British empire. The Catholic catechism is cited and de-familiarized by Bloom's Jewish heritage deep in the heart of Catholic Dublin. Like the Lysias text in "Phaedrus," Bloom introduces alterity at the heart of sameness and homogeneity. The centrality of the British empire is thrown into relief by the ontological and epistemological place of Dublin in Ulysses. For all intents and purposes Dublin is the centre of the universe in Ulysses. Dublin may be the "mockery" of Europe but its cultural and intellectual tension interrupts the flow of Being characterized by German and English thought. The intensely personal and bawdy episteme of Ulysses is anathema to the aspirations of "pure" Western thought. In recounting his own experiences leading up to the writing of this text, Derrida juxtaposes Hegel's Phenomenology of the Mind with the undeniable phenomenology of the mind at work in Ulysses: "here the phenomenology of the mind would have the form of a diary of the conscious and the unconscious in the chance

form of letters, telegrams, newspapers...and also of postcards" (262). The meanderings of Bloom through the streets of Dublin and of Joyce through the 600 odd pages of Ulysses offers an alternative phenomenology: a phenomenology that deconstructs the old maps of competence and knowledge. Ulysses does not posit literature as a new site of knowledge or competence but rather uses the genre of literature to disturb the boundaries of all genres of knowledge and, hence, competence.

The issue of competence goes straight to the heart of what deconstruction tries to say about ethics and responsibility. In this context competence is certainly tied to issues of propriety and responsibility. In "Ulysses Gramophone" Derrida uses the occasion of a Joyce conference to broach the topic of competence. The essay is peppered with incredulous remarks about the possibility of establishing an Institute For Joyce Studies:

But as with God and the Tower of Babel, it is an institution which he did everything he could to make impossible and improbable in its very principle, to deconstruct it in advance, even going so far as to undermine the very concept of competence, upon which one day an institutional legitimacy might be founded, whether we are dealing with a competence of knowledge or know-how. (268)

This deconstruction "ahead of time" is framed by the archival nature of Ulysses on two discreet levels. First, the encyclopedic detail of Western philosophy, literature and art found in Ulysses frames or "cites" these texts, not as repositories of Truth, but as "signsponges". Signsponges is another term Derrida employs to convey the repeatability of language in material contexts. The image of the sponge denotes the materiality onto which language is grafted. The absorbability of the sponge symbolizes the supple movement of something that is never quite there but never absent. The epistemes of Western culture tend to appropriate themselves as brick, but in Ulysses they are parodically re-inscribed as "signsponges" of infinite, material repeatability. Joyce's signsponges use and mention what they are deconstructing, namely the "great" Western tradition. On another level, the breadth of Joyce's allusions, also paradoxically, point to the impossibility of stepping outside of writing and representation. The dream of pure communication permeates Ulysses but always with a sense of self-conscious parody. Joyce secularizes the second coming by turning Elijah into a telephone operator. The revolution may not be televised, but the second coming will be available through directory assistance.¹⁹ Only "Elijah the other" is capable of booking the reader straight through to eternity junction. There can be no unmediated access to either Elijah or the other: "I want to insist (in French) on

the fact that seats must be booked (louer), reserved with Elijah, Elijah must be praised (louer), and the booking of this praise is none other than the book which stands in lieu of eternity junction" (278). The desire to be booked straight through to eternity junction will always already be caught up in the process of booking, being booked, and interpreting books; Joyce and Derrida are incompetent at saying anything else.

The institutional aspect of competence touches on the notion of academic and social responsibility. Michel Foucault's brilliant analysis of institutions constantly emphasizes the efficacy of power and its need for self-fulfilling prophets of competence. Although of a different kind, Derrida's reading of competence in the case of Joyce employs the tenor of Foucault's power/knowledge critique of institutions. Competence betrays a certain determinate smugness about how the universe operates. Western logocentrism based itself almost exclusively on such competence. In Plato's system, for instance, women, slaves and foreigners were precluded from the logical competence required to apprehend the forms. In today's society psychiatrists have become our competent entrail readers, dispensing the "truth" of our "illness".

The progression of Western thought has generally placed responsibility in a trajectory that eventually meets competence. The responsible mind becomes competent and is

able to distinguish serious from non-serious. In this field of endeavour, Derrida confesses his incompetence:

"incompetence...is the profound truth of my relationship to this work....In order to defend myself against this hypothesis, which was almost a certainty, I asked myself: but in the end what does competence come down to in the case of Joyce" (280). The institutional dream of booking straight through to eternity junction is fraught with as much rhetorical violence (if not more) as any ideal conception of purity. The answer Derrida offers is yet another trope of what we take responsibility to entail. To read Joyce "competently" is to account for the announcement of an affirmation that, in Heidegger's words, gives without giving. It is that giving that accounts for all writing, including Joyce's own. The multitude of allusive content in Ulysses amounts to window dressing for the Real message of Joyce's oeuvre. Augmenting this reference to the Lacanian Real, Žizek captures the secondary nature of content/competence-based inquiry by stating: "the real letter is not the message we are supposed to carry but our Being itself" (7). Derrida ends by denouncing the traditional sense of competence: "the very discourse of competence...is thus incompetent, the least pertinent there is on the subject of Joyce" (286). In Ulysses Bloom disobeys the letter of the law when it comes to competence but embodies the law of the law when it comes to the spirit of

competence. Who's afraid of Leopold Bloom?

In Derrida's reading of "Before the Law" it is the law itself that is at stake. Kafka's story is a parable about the construction and maintenance of law. The intricately constructed narrative teases out many of the central questions about our relationship to law and the relationship of law to literary texts. Derrida's reading focuses on the point where these two interests intersect, where law has something to tell us about literature and literature has something to tell us about law but where neither settles into what we could rigorously or sedately call a Law. The issue of law in this story and elsewhere in Derrida impinges directly on the issue of ethics. Law is the material extension of the desire to construct an ethical mode of being and, like ethics itself, the impossibility of a finalizable law becomes the ethical demand in Derrida. The summons to create and resist law always and everywhere takes place in the economy of unfinalizability.

The narrative of Kafka's text begins as a man from the country approaches the Law. Like most "mystical" judicial terms in Kafka's fiction, the Law is given a physical, almost architectural character in "Before the Law". The Law has a physically imposing doorkeeper to guard it and the reader is immediately reminded to stop thinking of Law as a disembodied spirit. The role of the endearing countryman is to ask after the law with a candour and naivete that shakes

the very foundation of what we thought law was. Despite the abstract nature of his work, Kafka, like Borges, was a genius at constructing humane characters in inhumane situations. The parable is driven by the partial closure of the law to the countryman. When he approaches the law's "bouncer" and asks to enter the law the guard responds: "It is possible but not at the moment" (175). This places the man and the reader firmly before the law and mobilizes a parable that resonates with deconstructive poetry. The countryman takes up a stool and begins a holy vigil before the law. The vigil last for years and the man from the country lives out his days trying to bribe and cajole the doorkeeper to admit him. As the man nears the end of his strength he beckons the doorman in a scene reminiscent of Christ's drink of vinegar on the cross:

Before he dies, all that he has experienced during the whole time of his sojourn condenses in his mind into one question...[he] raises his stiffened body...What do you want to know now? asks the doorkeeper, you are insatiable. Everyone strives to attain the Law answers the man, how does it come about, then, that in all these years no one has come seeking admittance but me?...No one could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it (176).

The story ends with the countryman and the reader standing before the law of textuality and undecidability.

The issue of standing before the law interrogates what it means to be a subject of the law, what it means to be subject to the law and what it means to be a human subject. All three of those issues are contained in the nodal phrase - Before The Law. Derrida reads "Before the Law" as it, along with the entire corpus of Kafka's work, stands before the Law of literature. Is "Before the Law" a poem, a parable, a short story, an essay about the intricacies of legal theory? In his "Before the Law" Derrida argues that the form and content of Kafka's tale disturbs the tranquil taxonomy of literary genre and law. The questioning of the law is not limited to literature. In drawing attention to the performative materiality of literary law, Kafka suspends the relative stability attached to our everyday assumptions about the law. The point of situating the lead "deconstructor" in this story as a "countryman" as opposed to say, H.L.A. Hart, is to foreground a sense of bewilderment about the paradoxes of the law: "These are difficulties the countryman has not expected; the Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible to everyone". In what sense are the countryman's problems with the law our problems as well?

The journey in from the country allows us to situate this story as a quest for the law. The man gives everything

he has to enter the law but dies spent and unfulfilled. He is left standing before the law and yet he is told "No one but you could gain admittance...this door was intended only for you" (176). What are we to make of this law he cannot enter but cannot help standing before? The "answer" is to be found in the complex kernel of the parable itself. The parable is told by a priest to K and when the story is finished the men set about trying to interpret the point of the parable. They are, in effect, literary critics avant la lettre trying to decipher the law of the story. K tries to interpret the story literally while the priest points to the allegorical significance of the story. They are both inside and outside the main story, skirting its boundaries (all the while) mirroring the gesture of the countryman before the law. This a story about law but no less is it a fable about the impossibility of law: "The right perception of any matter and a misunderstanding of the same matter do not wholly exclude each other" (178).

This story, like deconstruction itself, demands that the reader keep two seemingly mutually exclusive ideas clear in his/her head. If we accept that there is no human subjectivity before the law we also stand before a more tragic "law of the law" - the law of difference, supplement, and pharmakon. Every law and subject of the law holds Descartes' clarity and distinction - the dream of non-contradiction - close to their heart, but the very act of

inscribing law puts one before the law of the law. Derrida characterizes this generative impossibility as follows: "In terms of a quest to reach the law, in order to stand before it, face to face and with respect, or to introduce oneself to it and into it, the story becomes the impossible story of the impossible. The story of prohibition is a prohibited story" (200). What is, no doubt, prohibited for Derrida is the story of a certain morality over the undecidability of ethics. The desire to enfold the dilemma of ethics, justice and knowledge into a coherent, decidable narrative is the most profound prohibition at work in "Before the Law". The style and practice of writing Derrida employs attempts to answer before this "strange" imperative by theorizing the terms of language and narrative in Kafka and elsewhere. In explaining his project Derrida outlines the paradox of narrative (hence language) as follows:

You see, what seems lacking to me in the
'problematic of narrative' is the ability to
reflect precisely that which makes its theses
unnarratable. Could Borges have authored such a
singular narrative. Alas...(Positions 56).

The only problem with a decidable morality is that it is impossible. Derrida's "double science of writing" traces the outlines of this impossibility into the aporia and ethics of undecidability.

As a piece of literature "Before the Law" is a forceful

performance of the structure and shape of the Law's prohibition. Access to the Law is prohibited but that prohibition sets off the entire network of symbolic displacement at work in the world as we know it. The absence of a foundational law certifying (copyrighting?) words and the world of objects, among other things, produces the text of our lives, the lives of our texts. The act of literature performs and participates in this reality:

This poses before us, preposes or proposes a text that lays down the law, and in the first place with respect to itself. In its very act, the text produces and pronounces the law that protects it and renders it intangible. It does and says, saying what it does by doing what it says. This possibility is implicit in any text, even if it does not take as obviously a self-referential form as in this case. ("Before the Law" 212)

The relay between the law that protects the text and the intangibility of that law is precisely the possibility that the discourse of Western philosophy sought to shut down. It is from the point of view of genre that literary texts, especially those like Joyce's and Kafka's, pose serious problems for philosophy, problems that go well beyond the dilemma of how to distinguish a text as poetry, fable, short story, or "amateur" legal theory.

In his essay "The Law of Genre" Derrida introduces the

concept of "the law of the law" in a reading of yet another literary text of questionable pedigree, Maurice Blanchot's "The Madness Day." The mixing of genres in the Blanchot text is used to illustrate a larger point about the general instability of generic categories. The mark that brings a text or act into being as a certain species of genre destabilizes the entire field of generic marking. A text can only function in its milieu as a mark if it participates in that genre without properly belonging to it. If something belonged properly it would not require generic marking because it would carry the mark of its genre in the essence of its Being. The very articulation of taxonomic categories announces a fissure in the law of non-contradiction. In his introduction to the paper, Derek Attridge describes this principle:

But genre always potentially exceeds the boundaries that bring it into being, for a member of a genre always signals its membership by an explicit or implicit mark;...Derrida sees this not as an occasional and optional possibility but as a constitutive property of genre; and the crucial feature of any such mention, or possibility of mention, is that it cannot be said to belong to the genre it mentions. Derrida calls this re-marking, this being inside and outside at the same time, 'the law of the law'. (221)

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The notion of participating and not belonging might serve as the best allegory one can devise to explain Derrida's ethos. His reading of literature is inspired by the generic disturbance announced in the structure of literature. I would also argue that Derrida's principle of generic disturbance is extended to his ethical demand. Ethics in Derrida mirrors the sense in which we participate (only can or need to participate?) in a world in which we do not properly belong.

What literature has the power to do is introduce difference at the heart of the law. The appearance of the poetic text introduces ontological "trouble" into the law of non-contradiction. Derrida argues that while literature has no access to a privileged language it does, at the most basic level, de-familiarize human utterance and the categories used to distinguish them. In Derrida's work it is always a matter of the criterion used to define context and decide between options. The question is not whether or not we can decide but what is the law that allows us to decide and distinguish in the first place. This is what Derrida means when he says that Kafka's text does what it says. The literary text stands out as an interruption in Being when it calls into question the ontological conditions of its own status.

The literary text catches the law out when it tries to pass the singular off as universal. Again, the paradox is

sublime: the man in the story is disturbed that a law he thought would have been universal is in fact singular. But is it singular? Yes and No. The law is for the man alone because he can appeal to no authority higher than himself. However that reality also makes the law universal; our country-man is everyman (sic) - - H.C.E. as Joyce might say. The law of the law states: the law is nothing without you, but you are not the law, yet you are nothing without the law. The anguish the countryman in the parable is caused by his inability to read the law of the law: "The man from the country had difficulty in grasping that an entrance was singular and unique when it should have been universal, as in truth it was. He had difficulty with literature" (213). There can be no escaping under or around the law when one is "before the law".

The difference at the heart of all law insures the universality of law (vs. Law). The character of such universality, must, however, be viewed ironically. The multiplication and diffusion of law does not signal its disappearance. As Judith Butler says in Gender Trouble, "repetition of the law...is not its consolidation, but its displacement" (30). The same movement is at work in Derrida's painstaking analysis of communication. It is the principle of difference and deferral (difference) that conditions the emergence of linguistic meaning and reference. The context is never determinable ahead of time,

but that insight is useless if it is not balanced with the rigorous demonstration that context, meaning, ethics and politics are always already dependent on the absence of apriori determination. The rigour and structural discipline of Limited Inc is perpetually pointing to this poetic risk/opportunity:

I want to recall that undecidability is always a determinate oscillation between possibilities (for example, of meaning, but also of acts). These possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations (for example, discursive - syntactical or rhetorical - but also political, ethical etc). They are pragmatically determined...There would be no indecision or double bind were it not between determined (semantic, ethical, political) poles, which are upon occasion terribly necessary and always irreplaceably singular...Differance is not indeterminacy. It renders determinacy both possible and necessary. (148)

The difference in tone and emphasis between literary and philosophical texts is, to be sure, marked. The difference between a progressive and ethical set of politics and a conservative oppressive vision is again surely marked. The difference between literature and "real" life is also always already marked. What we must be willing to reconsider is the

ontological status of those marks. The law of distinction and decision can only be mobilized before and in servitude to the law of the law. Kafka's "Before The Law" and Joyce's Ulysses embody a beatific state of servitude to the law of the law. Like Gertrude Stein's history, this is what literature teaches. Literature teaches."COME IN CENTRAL....PAGING ETERNITY JUNCTION...I seem to have lost my key Stephen says to Bloom." (Joyce 473)

III

The Politics of Aporia

Through these difficulties, another language and other thoughts seek to make their way. This language and these thoughts, which are also new responsibilities, arouse in me a respect which, whatever the cost, I neither can nor will compromise.

Derrida

Since the deconstructionist (which is to say isn't it the skeptic-relativist-nihilist!) is supposed not to believe in truth, stability, or the unity of meaning... how can he demand of us that we read him with pertinence precision, rigor? How can he demand that his own text be interpreted correctly? How can he accuse anyone else of having misunderstood, simplified, deformed it, etc.?...The answer is simple enough: this definition of the deconstructionist is false (that's right false, not true) and feeble; it supposes a bad (that's right bad, not good) and feeble reading of numerous texts of mine, which therefore must finally be read or reread. Then perhaps it will be understood that the value of truth is never contested or destroyed in my writings, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts.

Derrida

The tone of this thesis has been abstract and theoretical thus far. Borrowing from Barthes, however, I would suggest that a little abstraction turns one away from practice, whereas a lot brings one into tragic proximity to practice. A fortuitous bridge between the abstract and the practical and political was forged at the 1992 Amnesty Lectures at Oxford, which were later turned into a book entitled Freedom and Interpretation. The organizers gathered the leading names in literary theory in an effort to explore the links (or lack thereof) between theory and activism. The contributors were asked to consider what is, to my mind, the political dilemma of poststructuralist thought: "Does the self as construed by the liberal tradition still exist? If not, whose human rights are we defending?" (2). The political and "real" efficacy of deconstruction can be read into this question. The public forum offered by Amnesty International facilitates a practical application of many of the issues that I have raised thus far in my defence of Derrida's "sense" of responsibility and ethics.

The issues raised by the aforementioned question touches the raw nerve of larger questions about the relation between theory and practice and language and action. Fredric Jameson's contention that deconstruction encloses politics in the prison house of language is representative of the keynote charge against the alleged political "shortcomings" of deconstruction. Jameson's resonant charge typifies the

manner in which theory (most especially linguistic theory) is set up in a false binary with action and politics. The supposed "difficulty," from a poststructuralist's point of view, is how one could ever conceive a politics when the meaning of words is perpetually deferred and the foundation of subjectivity is repetition and undecidability. Standing on the shoulders of Derrida and others, I want to argue that to assume that poststructural or deconstructive thought has a crippling difficulty imagining a politics in the wake of undecidability is an untenable and unproductive way of thinking about politics. Further, the separation between theory and action is untenable when it is cast in terms that (however implicitly) holds up the possibility of "real" politics and History (praxis) against the slippery, contextual problems of language (theory). Undecidability (both "real" and linguistic) is the very condition for the urgency and need to construct a politics. Derrida sketches the outline of this distinctly poststructuralist way of theorizing politics in Limited Inc:

one cannot do anything, least of all speak,
without determining...a context. Such experience
is always political because it implies, insofar as
it involves determination, a certain type of non-
natural relationship to others....Once this
generality and this a priori structure have been
recognized, the question can be raised, not

whether a politics is implied (it always is), but which politics is implied in such a practice of contextualization. This you can then go on to analyze, but you cannot suspect it much less denounce it except on the basis of another contextual determination every bit as political.

(136)

Human beings existing in a "non-natural" condition are always already in a political relation with each other. The "theoretical-ethical-political" dilemma, for Derrida, is upholding the "apriori" reality of politics without ignoring the singular scene in which that generality manifests itself again and again (Limited Inc 135). The compelling transition at work (implicity and explicitly) in Derrida's ethos is toward the singularity of performance, a singularity that balances the particularity of the dilemma with the general condition out of which the dilemma emerges.

The performative imperative to design structures and institutions of negotiation occurs precisely because language is a prison house. The fact that language is enclosed in the prison house of undecidability means that the naming and distribution of objects will be a political contest rather than an intuition. The self-referential nature of language brings the world of objects and others into tragic proximity. The "non-natural" negotiation of subjectivity through the objects and others in the world is

a performance without purity, a performance in the truest sense because it is coerced by the impossibility of ever deciding or acting independent of an infinitely singular and repeatable context. The singularity of context and the undecidability of language is not something that deconstruction invents: it exposes "something that was contained in potentia in the most elementary relationship of the subject to the signifier" (Enjoy Your Symptom 184). The notion of acting and calculating in a world without "guiding stars" (i.e. politics) insures that theory and action are always already contaminated with each other: never more so than when action is held up as independent of and superior to theory.

Derrida's rigorous work on the nature of a context disturbs any notion of a unified autonomous human subject: the urgency and meaning of political and ethical context is incompatible with a unified and autonomous self. In the "context" of the Amnesty conference, the vigilant way in which deconstruction upholds the undecidability of context (political or otherwise) inspires the sceptical tone of the question put to the respondents. The most enthusiastic response to this scepticism came from Terry Eagleton. His "Deconstruction and Human Rights" is a scathing attack on the "irresponsible" politics of deconstructive theory. The foundational nature of the suspicion Eagleton brings to the political potential of

deconstruction highlights most of the issues at stake in defending the political and ethical arguments of deconstruction. I will engage Eagleton's arguments with the hope of installing not only the practical/political efficacy of deconstruction but the reasonable (as opposed to rational) basis of the argument. It is on the ironic, paradoxical ground of undecidability that performance, politics and deconstruction meet.

The central charge that Eagleton brings against deconstruction is that it "has two embarrassments with the term 'human rights,' one with each word" (122). This is a serious charge and one would think that a critic with the politically progressive credentials of Terry Eagleton would have good reason for making it. Unfortunately Eagleton's article does little more than enforce the existing prejudices against the ethical and political implications of deconstruction, an unjust act if there ever was one. I will support this provocative charge against Eagleton's argument on three grounds: i) he uses a "feeble" definition of deconstruction in a critique that does not, once, engage the logical rigour of Derrida's arguments (something Derrida has always done - even with traditions and individuals with whom he finds himself most at odds); ii) he distorts and misunderstands the place of imperative and categorical statements in deconstructive discourse; and iii) the ethical and political nullity (one is tempted to say embarrassment)

of his alternative ironically solidifies the trope of deconstructive ethics. The issues at stake in Eagleton's attack on deconstruction will form a practical summary of the performative imperative I have been trying to argue for Derrida's conception of ethics. These issues will also point the way toward further work on the "real politik" of the deconstructed human subject.

The first of my objections to Eagleton's article is the impoverished definition of deconstruction he uses in his polemic. It seems only just that if one's stated intention is to demonstrate the political and ethical "embarrassment" of a theory, the definition and understanding of that theory should be precise and thorough. In "Deconstruction and Human Rights" there is neither precision nor detail; there are snapshots of J. Hillis Miller and Paul De Man accompanied by an admitted caricature of Derrida himself.²⁰ One of the difficulties that must be accounted for in criticizing or supporting deconstruction is the fact that it is not reducible to a set of rule-governed procedures but is rather a practice of reading and writing that takes account of gaps and fissures where presence and wholeness had been previously assumed. The core of Eagleton's understanding of deconstruction fixates on the disturbance Derrida's work introduces into received notions about the structure of language and its relation to Being. The tension in what I will, provisionally, call deconstructive reading is always

found in the relay between words and things, text and life, decision and undecidability. For Eagleton, however, deconstruction has mistakenly collapsed linguistic undecidability into ethical undecidability. The constant attention deconstruction pays to the slippage of language, he argues, leads the deconstructor into a vortex of political paralysis that renders ethical dilemmas "ontologically baseless" (122). This reading of deconstruction fails to take account of the ironic dialectic deconstructive texts highlight between the ethical and the linguistic. Linguistic undecidability, for Derrida, is not euphorically collapsed into the ethical; it is used to theorize a different conception of what ethics entails.

In a questionable interpretation of De Man (and this is significant - why not Derrida's Limited Inc or "The Politics of Friendship" or Cinders?) Eagleton asserts:

De Man will accordingly shift the whole question of ethics from a subjective to a linguistic register - which is to say that moral imperatives share in the aberrational nature of all language when it strives, hopelessly yet ineluctably, to refer...The ethical in this bleak scenario, has nothing to do with human decision...[which] dissolves the humanist subject to sheer randomness, or into the effect of an iron determinism. (122)

This interpretation of deconstruction shows an incredible will to ignore the irony and paradox that frames the ethical discourse of deconstruction. Deconstruction does, on a certain level, equate the "trouble" of language with ethical decision. However, nowhere does deconstruction suggest that the differance of language has "nothing to do with human decision" or that the undecidability of language dissolves the human subject into "sheer randomness or...iron determinism." Deconstruction, to my mind, says exactly the opposite. Limited Inc, for example, is book that, from start to finish, insists on the inextricable relationship between the slippage of language and the emergence of ethical and political context as illustrated above. In "Force of Law: 'The Mystical Foundation' of Authority" from Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice Derrida offers one of his most forceful qualifications about the effects of deconstruction:

Consequently, never to yield on this point, constantly to maintain an interrogation of the origin, grounds and limits of our conceptual, theoretical or normative apparatus surrounding justice is on deconstruction's part anything but a neutralization of interest in justice, an insensitivity toward injustice. On the contrary, it hyperbolically raises the stakes of exacting justice; it is a sensitivity to a sort of

essential disproportion that must inscribe excess and inadequation in itself and that strives to denounce not only theoretical limits, but also concrete injustices. (20).

The undecidability of language is what Derrida employs to combat the reification of the humanist subject and the reduction of politics to a cynical determinism. In a tactic reminiscent of John Searle, Eagleton employs a definition of deconstruction that Derrida has patiently and rigorously undermined. The result is a reading or re-reading of Derrida's texts that unearths ethical principles and logically consistent paradoxes that bear little resemblance to the charges Eagleton brings against deconstruction and even less resemblance to the definition of deconstruction he uses to make those charges.

The inability of language to ever essentially refer to the "objective" world bespeaks a larger "ontological nullity". The precarious place of the human subject on this planet is what allows poverty, war, and the plight of the boat people (I will return late to Eagleton's dubious invocation of the "boat people") to emerge and makes the emergence of tragedy a perpetual danger and opportunity. In Against Ethics John Caputo characterizes this sense of "throwness" that paradoxically conditions and undermines the desire for justice and ethics: "We have no star to guide us, no messages from on high. Life is a disaster; the earth is

adrift...I begin where I am, from below, on the receiving end of a message from I know not where" (24). If, as deconstruction relentlessly argues, and Eagleton provisionally agrees, we can only interpret this "thrownness" through language, it is difficult to imagine how ethical and political dilemmas can escape the paradox and undecidability that structure language. Politics and ethics are dilemmas precisely because they are ontologically null; null, that is until we bring a linguistic response to them.²¹ Eagleton's limited definition of deconstruction contaminates him with the very charges he brings against deconstruction. For, if ethical and political dilemmas are beyond the "finespun obliquity" of the linguistic register (as Eagleton's vague and inconsistently essentialistic reading of language suggests), it seems to me that the human subject would indeed "have nothing to do with decision" and would "dissolve [into] iron determinism" (123).

The second objection I have to Eagleton's argument is the manner in which he tries to use imperative and categorical statements in deconstructive discourse against its "supposed" plurality. Such statements do, on occasion, appear in deconstructive texts but in a highly conditional and ironic way. The appearance of "quasi-transcendental" concepts in deconstruction causes Eagleton to level the rather bizzare charge that "deconstruction delivers us a neo-Kantianism shorn of both subject and value" and that

deconstructors are "unconfessed neo-Kantians who think of ethics primarily in terms of absolute imperatives and categorical necessities" (126). The only defence against such a charge is a practical reading of how apparently "absolute" statements operate in Derrida's texts.²²

In "Force of Law" Derrida sketches out the possible relation between deconstruction and justice. This essay touches on a variety of ethical and political issues and it is typical in the way it employs apparently absolute statements in the structure of its argument. A surface reading of such statements would confirm Eagleton's contention that deconstruction is more comfortable with empty Kantian pronouncements. A more careful examination of the tissue of Derrida's argument reveals quite the opposite. In "Force of Law" the premise that underwrites the argument is the belief that, for decision and ethics to emerge, the traditional conception of justice must be impossible. To make this point Derrida draws a rigorous distinction between justice and law. Law is the amalgam of rules and conventions we as a society devise for communal living. Justice, on the other hand, is the desire for plenitude that inspires those rules and conventions. The strategic importance of such a distinction is to deconstruct the tendency, in legal theory,²³ to collapse the law (a secular, conventional principle) into justice. The phenomenon of law has been confused with the noumena of justice when the materiality of

law is charged with the task of producing justice. In common parlance a law deemed to be just has come to stand in for justice. What Derrida theorizes is that it is the aporia of undecidability (i.e. the absence or impossibility of an all-pervading justice) that allows us to judge the relative justice of any law. The ability to render justice in a singular context requires the impossibility and suspension of Justice as we have come to expect it. The moment of decision is incompatible with the possibility of justice:

For if calculation is calculation, the decision to calculate is not of the order of the calculable, and must not be....That is why the ordeal of the undecidable that I just said must be gone through by any decision worthy of the name is never past or passed, it is not a surmounted or sublimated moment in the decision. The undecidable remains caught, lodged, at least as a ghost - but an essential ghost - in every decision, in every event of decision. Its ghostliness deconstructs from within any assurance of presence, any certitude or any supposed criterology that would assure us of the justice of a decision, in truth of the very event of a decision. (24)

The ineffable and impossible nature of justice is posited as the prime mover of law(s) and their construction but it is a prime mover that, in the end, holds the law(s) accountable

for its inherent deconstructability.

The use of an apparent absolute such as "justice is impossible" is, pace Eagleton, highly ironic and conditional. The perpetual challenge of rendering justice is opened in the aporia of its impossibility. Impossibility, like Derrida's other "quasi transcendental" concepts, is used to enunciate the positive limits of human cognition but, and this is crucial, those limits are infinitely generative. Derrida mobilizes concepts like impossibility, repetition, undecidability and pharmakon to shake up the historical sedimentation of laws and conventions and the political and ethical effects of such sedimentation. He passionately argues that it is precisely the "flabby devil" of sedimentation that is unjust because it reduces the responsibility of the ethical actor to a calculating machine. Unlike Kant, the "absolutes" of deconstruction are never theorized as productive in and of themselves the way that Kant's separation of pure and practical reason were. It is incorrect to say that a theory which insists absolutely, imperatively, on the absence and impossibility of apriori truth and justice "thinks of ethics in terms of [Kantian] absolute imperatives and categorical necessities" (126). Categorical imperatives imply a telos of decidability within the horizon of a singular situation. Kant's system of imperatives produces a system of decidability that ultimately evacuates the ethical component of the obligation

to decide. The spirit of Derrida's argument reads against the Kantian/Eagletonian desire for decidability to insist that, in a strictly logical sense, if justice were ontologically possible the subject who decides would be redundant.

The paradox of intentionality will help shore up the attendant ironies of Derrida's use of "quasi transcendental" concepts and render Eagleton's charge of latent, unconfessed neo-Kantianism untenable. The desire for justice conditions the creation of laws but the inscription of those laws also precludes the possibility of any ideal justice - any justice outside of the infinitely singular context in which the desire for justice arose in the first place. The subject who gives him or herself the law intends Justice, but that very intentionality, without which there would be no intelligible law or justice, upends the possibility of a fully immanent and determinable ethical or just context. The logic here is analogous to Žižek's observation earlier on set theory, in which the inescapable singularity of the One inherently upsets the possibility of universalizing the set. The intention of the set, the intention to mark the set off as one thing and not another, is disturbed by the very content through which it marks itself off as a distinct set. Derrida's theorization of intentionality in Limited Inc can be grafted onto our consideration of the relationship between the desire and discourse of justice and its

paradoxical impossibility:

In following the inclination of this temptation, I would say not simply that "intention doesn't imply pure plenitude," but that it necessarily can and should not attain the plenitude toward which it nonetheless inevitably tends. Plenitude is its telos, but the structure of this telos is such that if it is attained, it as well as intention both disappear, are paralyzed, immobilized, or die. The relation to the telos is therefore necessarily dual, divided, split. What is understood as telos must therefore be rethought. And it is precisely to the extent that this relation to telos is also intricate, split, that there is movement, life, language, intention etc. (128-29)

Derrida splits the relation between law and justice in order to guard against the immobilization of justice and the inevitable authoritarian pronouncements that comes with it. In "Force of Law" justice stands for the telos of intention and law represents the product of the necessarily failed (impossible) telos. By demonstrating the impossibility of the ideal (universal), deconstruction returns and re-invigorates the stakes and intensity of the One (the singular event and decision). No gesture could be further from from Kant's subtle, attenuated move from the singular

to the universal. In "Force of Law" and elsewhere Derrida talks of impossibilities and necessities, but the effect of those imperatives have nothing whatever to do with the "neo-Kantian" charges Eagleton brings against deconstruction.

The third and final objection I have to Eagleton's argument is the alternative he offers in place of deconstruction's "embarrassment" with human rights. Besides the "obsessive and apolitical" focus on language, Eagleton's other bete noire with deconstruction is the notion of the performative. He speaks derisively of "that discursive or performative realm where they feel most at home - indeed, which is for them, in a certain sense all there is" as if the idea of the performative was the hermetically sealed space of French critics and their American followers. Implicit in Eagleton's rhetoric is the unexamined belief in something beyond the performative along with the rather nasty little distinction between us (presumably Marxist humanist critics who genuinely care about the "boat people) vs. them (presumably unconfessed neo-Kantians who refuse to heed the call of Eagleton's Internationale). The denial of the performative in Eagleton's politics, ironically, robs him of a coherent account of praxis and the stakes of political engagement.

The "ethics" of Eagleton's response to deconstruction is inspired by his sense that "it is not easy to see how

that [deconstruction] is going to form the most reliable basis for our deliberations over what to do about the boat people" (123). Eagleton attempts, literally and figuratively, to step into the gap left by "those erstwhile enthusiasts for deconstruction who somewhat gullibly credited its promissory note to deliver the political goods" (124). The alternative Eagleton offers in this essay is a mixture of Marxist humanism and moral philosophy. He turns to the work of J.G.A. Pocock and his reworking of the ancient conception of civic humanism. Civic humanism represents a moral tradition in which property and material security are prerequisites for the exercise of personal and civic virtue. Personal wealth was not automatically equated with virtue but it represented the minimum requirement for citizens hoping to "[develop] their autonomous personality through a devotion to the public realm" (131). The appeal of such a tradition to Eagleton and Pocock was the potential for a society where politics was not confirmed by universal right or law but where politics and law "were the formal structure within which political nature developed to its inherent end" (131). The ethics and politics of the "free" citizen was determined by his (both Pocock and Eagleton concede that this is a highly masculinist tradition with no place for women or anyone else who did not embody the "norm" of what a citizen was supposed to be) participation and conduct in the public, political realm of the polis. The

strength of this tradition is its recognition of the roughly Marxist notion that a measure of material security is necessary before any democratic debate can take place.

The snake that enters the garden of this politics is the notion of commercial humanism and its apogee in bourgeois capitalism, with its emphasis on universal rights and the sanctity of the private sphere. The public challenge of virtue at work in the civic tradition became sublimated into the machine of Enlightenment efficiency. Pocock writes: "the universe became pervaded by law, the locus of whose sovereignty was extra-civic, and the citizen came to be defined not by his actions and virtues, but by his rights to and in things" (132). Virtue, in what Pocock dubs commercial humanism, was now defined by property and inalienable rights rather than public performance.

Eagleton traces a problem in both kinds of humanism. Civic humanism is crippingly naive about the terms and conditions under which material goods are gained and distributed. The material security of those at the political table is simply taken for granted without any degree of self consciousness about the virtue or justice of who gets to sit at the table and why. Commercial humanism, on the other hand, reifies the political by leaving the matter of public virtue and politics to the "objective" machinery of law and justice. For Eagleton, the thinker who breaks this admittedly contentious and linear, logjam is Karl Marx. More

importantly, Eagleton argues that poststructuralism ignores Marx's role as a moral arbiter between civic and commercial humanism. Poststructuralism takes the easy road by engaging Kant's conception of ethics while ignoring the "fact" that "Marxism is a strikingly original combination of these two modes of thought and practice, pitting the one against the other in order to achieve some novel synthesis that finally transcends both" (134). It is undeniable that Marx's work represents an unprecedented combination of those two traditions of moral and political thought. He was as diligent in insisting on the absurdity of separating private and public virtue as he was about stressing the need to exploit material potential in order to avoid the ethically and politically bankrupt condition of "general scarcity". The question remains, however, whether he "transcended" the two poles and, if he did not (as I believe), whether his delivery of the political goods is really dependent on such transcendence? In keeping with Eagleton's problematic notion of delivering the political goods, I want to call into question the need or even the desire for transcendence or synthesis in the construction of a politics and an ethics. In the course of refuting Eagleton's use of Marx I will trope the notion of what it means to deliver the political goods.

In his haste to erect a Marxist morality as an alternative to the undecidability of poststructuralist

ethics, Eagleton aligns himself with the teleological view of history and materialism that Marx fought so hard to debunk. Marx argued that material progress was unconditionally necessary if the "absolute working out of creative potentialities" was to take place (488). He rigorously refused to define what those creative potentialities might be and even more carefully refused to equate material progress with an aggregate increase in public or private virtue. This latter point disturbs Eagleton in the same way that Plato's treatment of writing in "Phaedrus" disturbs those interested in enclosing Plato's thought in a hermeneutic circle. Eagleton attributes the lack of decidability in Marx to the fact that he was unable to distinguish a "true" morality from the hypocritical and oppressive slant that the bourgeois had given the term:

Marx did, in fact believe in morality, but he did not know that he did, because he identified moral discourse with the impoverished juridical notions of the bourgeois liberal tradition, which he quite properly regarded as ideological....Marx habitually counterposes the 'materialist' to the 'moral': but this is only because he too readily surrenders the whole category of morality into the hands of bourgeois idealists. (142)

Really? Are we to take Eagleton at his word when he says the

only reason Marx counterposes morality and materialism was because morality was in the hands of bourgeois idealists? I would suggest that, like Nietzsche and Freud, Marx recognized, 125 years before the writing of "Deconstruction and Human Rights," that equating materiality and morality was a liberal, bourgeois, and politically vacant gesture. What would a politics or a morality look like if it could be guaranteed and determined by the material? Despite his desire (and occasional attempts) to locate a sense of certainty and transcendence, Marx's work still represents one of the most forceful deconstructions of the binary oppositions between material and ideal (moral), form and content, base and superstructure. It is the overdetermined nature of those binaries that informs Marx's politics and his view of history, not the potential of collapsing them. The poignancy of Marxist politics is the "material undecidability" it disseminates into the gears of non-material, self-evident conceptions of human subjectivity (Ryan 43). Eagleton's reading of Marx actively struggles against this reading in order to institute a materialist morality that is nowhere to be found in Marx. In a strange rhetorical twist Eagleton acknowledges as much by making the following distinction:

It is this [the focus on material forces] that distinguishes a communist from liberal ethics: but it will tell you nothing[?!] as it stands in any

specific historical situation. For that purpose, superstructural discourses and institutions of justice and morality would remain essential (143).

When faced with the "white heat" of ethical and political decision in a concrete socio-historical context, Eagleton flees to the shelter of "superstructural discourses and institutions of justice and morality". This is a view that, surely, no "nineteenth century Welsh attorney" or "fin de siecle Mexican dentist" would have any problem with.

In The Sublime Object of Ideology Slavoj Zizek extends the argument for an "undecidable Marx" to its apogee by suggesting that Marx, in the schism between material and ideal, "invented" a symptom that places him closer to Lacan than Aristotle:

Marx 'invented the symptom' (Lacan) by means of detecting a certain fissure, an asymmetry, a certain pathological imbalance which belies the universalism of the bourgeois rights and duties. This imbalance far from announcing the 'imperfect realization' of those universal principles - that is, an insufficiency to be abolished by further development - functions as their constitutive moment. (21)

Eagleton's interpretation of Marx clearly indicates that Marx supplied the framework to correct the "imperfect

realization" of morality in the form of the "further development" at work in Marxist "superstructural discourses and institutions of justice and morality" (142). For example, in examining the historical study of virtue in Alasdair MacIntyre's After Virtue, Eagleton applauds the attention MacIntyre pays to what constitutes the good but eventually rejects MacIntyre's study because "MacIntyre would seem to assume, rather like Matthew Arnold, that belonging to a tradition is a good in itself; in Wittgensteinian or postmodernist fashion, there is apparently no possibility of subjecting a whole form of life to moral scrutiny" (139). Nowhere in Marx is there a methodology for "subjecting a whole form of life to moral scrutiny" and the only way Eagleton can insist there is, is to render a "creative" interpretation of Marx's refusal to collapse his materialist critique into a prescriptive ethics. The most positive legacy of Marx's writing is the care he took not to reduce the irreducible and the overdetermined. It is, to my mind, in this shimmering absence that Marx delivered the political goods and continues to do so for progressive anti-essentialist politics. The worst thing we can do with Marx's legacy is turn him into a delivery boy for the ethical and political dilemmas of our own day.

There is a great deal in Eagleton's work about the need for action and the opposition of theory and practice. I

suspect some of the rhetorical excesses of "Deconstruction and Human Rights" might be explained by Eagleton's desire, in the context of Amnesty International, to appropriate himself as an activist over and against deconstruction. In order to offer a viable alternative to what I take to be Eagleton's unsatisfactory terms for political and ethical engagement it is necessary to be clear about outlining the stakes involved in theorizing politics and politicizing theory²⁴. Theorizing the condition of ethical and political engagement is not, in and of itself, political but it does introduce a disturbing chain of mediation between the political and the theoretical or more simply between words and acts. Theorizing politics and the undecidability of all action highlights the kernel of trauma at work in anything properly called political. The compulsion to act and exchange is founded and funded by an irreducible lack and any attempt to theorize action, political or otherwise, must account for this abyss. The recent work of Slavoj Žižek represents the most compelling theory on the relationship between the ontology of lack (Lacan's Real) and the political act as well as the absolute inseparability of the two in the construction of the "social". For Žižek:

the true theoretical problem is not how to leap over the abyss that separates acts from words, but how to conceive of this abyss itself: the absolute act, the act stronger than all

interventions in reality, is the act by which we disjoin 'the great chain of being' and acquire distance from it (Enjoy Your Symptom 54).

When Žižek talks of an absolute act here, he is not engaging in neo-Hegelianism but rather sketching the Lacanian tenet that the imperative to speak, to act, to be, is, paradoxically, prior to all systems of language and politics. The political moment is the "non natural" joining of the act and the language we use to describe and justify it. Politics is always already subject to the same limits of mediation as all linguistic utterance. There is no pure political act outside of the iterable structures of interpretation we bring to bear on a particular context. This rather dry point forms the focal point of Derrida's conception of politics and introduces a foundational disturbance into what we conventionally mean by "delivering the political goods".

In "Deconstruction and Human Rights" Eagleton radically undertheorizes the unholy alliances he makes to arrive at a determinable politics. Politics cannot be delimited by the particular context if it is going to remain "properly" political (at least democratically so). Eagleton, who is so anxious to have the political goods delivered, is abandoned by his politics in the very gesture in which he is so certain they have arrived. He becomes enclosed in a Marxist dogma that must exclude all else as "decadent" and

apolitical. The question Eagleton does not and cannot ask is: If we can only know the world through language and can only act in the world through "impure" performance, would it not be more ethical to say so rather than burdening literary theory (or any theory for that matter) with the impossible and onerous task of delivering the political goods? For, in the end, what are the politics of a theory that promises to deliver praxis?

The lack of positive ethical knowledge that punctuates Derrida's work also functions as an ethical demand, an ethical demand to "take on board" the ontological reality of the Other and otherness in every human endeavour. Judith Butler phrases it thus in inside/out: "the disruption of the Other at the heart of the self is the very condition of that self's possibility" (27). Derrida's politics (or more accurately his style and theory of politics) are framed by this active response to the Other and alterity in general. If one accepts the notion of alterity and the aporia of otherness, the task of crafting a political and ethical self becomes a performative imperative. Derrida announces the political contribution of theory in Limited Inc when he suggests: "[w]hat is at work here are structures of performativity...[and] the theoretical duty of every theoretician (for me this is also an ethical-political duty: a theoretical duty is never purely theoretical) also consists in describing as lucidly as possible the situation

I have just evoked [i.e. the primacy of performance]" (135).

The possibility of political agency and engagement is lodged at the heart of performance without ontological guarantees. Our relation to the Other can never be reduced to a homogeneous relation of self-identity and is therefore best accounted for as a performative (repetitive) gesture. The ontological nullity of that which underwrites our existence is also that which allows us to assume the form of ethical and political subjects. Judith Butler captures this sublime paradox in her contribution to Feminists Theorize the Political:

We may be tempted to think that to assume the subject in advance is necessary in order to safeguard the agency of the subject. But to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined; on the contrary, the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency. (12)

Derrida's conception of ethics and politics is not an evasion of ethical and political responsibility. The "track" of Derrida's texts offers an uncompromising resistance to any attempt at domesticating or foreclosing the tragedy in which ethical and political dilemmas first make themselves felt. Derrida's ethical vision upholds the tragic singularity of the event so rigorously that many critics have trouble recognizing typical conceptions of ethical

responsibility in his work. Simply put, that is the point. In "Violence and Metaphysics" Derrida offers the following conditional without apology:

But as this determination does not offer itself as a theory of Ethics, in question, then, is an Ethics of Ethics. In this case it is perhaps serious that this Ethics of Ethics can occasion neither a determined ethics nor determined laws without negating and forgetting itself. Moreover, is this Ethics of Ethics beyond all laws? Is it not the Law of laws? A coherence which breaks down the coherence of the discourse against coherence - the infinite concept, hidden within the protest against the concept. (164)

Deconstruction is, above all else, an imperative/invitation not to forget the "happy tragedy" that structures our practices of ethics, language and love. It is only when we are prepared to think, with rigour and care, this Law of the laws that we can start to see for the first time a more direct, intimate and tragic relation between deconstruction and praxis than has hitherto been accepted.

Conclusion

The difficulty in writing on Derrida always has and always will lie in managing the balance between the double bind he demands of his readers and himself, the double bind of living, loving, writing, and acting when undecidability is unearthed as the "ground" of human activity. In an essay entitled "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'" Derrida offers the following sketch of the "mug's game" of deciding in the face of undecidability:

This aporia without end paralyzes us because it binds us doubly (I must and I need not, I must not, it is necessary and impossible, etc.) In one and the same place, on the same apparatus, I have my two hands tied or nailed down. What are we to do? But also how is it that it does not prevent us from speaking, from continuing to describe the situation, from trying to make oneself understood?

(19)

Derrida's ethical practice emerges in the perpetual effort to describe the situation (of the double bind) without ever transcending it. His work enunciates the impossibility of transcendence in the same movement as he reinscribes the

stakes of acting and speaking. The double bind is nothing that could be subsumed under the proper name of Jacques Derrida because it is the very condition of the name Jacques Derrida or Michael Conlon emerging. The proper name and the entire lexicon of non-Aristotelian tragedy that can be traced through its genealogy is, in the end, an ethical problem. What is to be done? The answer is a secret, an ethical secret: "[a] secret that gives rise to no process....[although] it may appear to give rise to one (indeed always does so), it may lend itself to it, but it never surrenders to it" ("Passions" 22).

The intransigence of the double bind would seem gratuitous to me if it were not for the issue of ethics. The questions implied in the wake of Derrida's philosophical "inquiry" bear an uncanny resemblance to the tradition he is deconstructing. Derrida, however, suggests a (necessarily) oblique imperative by theorizing the impossibility of devising a prescriptive ethics and, in the same sublime movement, demonstrating the impossibility of ever "finishing" with ethics. Ethics resonates with the irony and logic of the pharmakon that always and everywhere guards against the insights of deconstruction being swallowed up by the metaphysical Doppelgänger of cynicism and nihilism. We can only act in the world because we know not how to act. Derrida literalizes the metaphor of the lost tribes of Israel to suggest that one can wander and live only in the

ignorance of a final resting place. In a contentious, but provisionally useful, characterization, John Caputo argues that Derrida combines the Dionysian character of the Greek spirit with the secular and temporal treatment of law in the Jewish tradition (Caputo 158). The dialectic between the orgasmic dream of transcendence and plenitude and the ubiquity of law forms the spirit and matter of Derrida's work. The Dionysian energy of action and the Judaic law of exile are united in an ethics that is always to come vouchsafed by a God that may come but not for us.

The charge of irresponsibility in Derrida's work can only be refuted with a thorough interrogation of the terms upon which responsibility and the ethical are defined. When the foundation of those categories is credibly undermined it is difficult to see what is responsible and ethical about upholding them. The compelling praxis that emerges in Derrida's work is intensified by the theory he brings to that praxis. When praxis is no longer guaranteed by theory and theory is no longer guaranteed by praxis the performance is terminal, the dilemma endless and the tragedy complete. The ethical becomes all too ethical at the moment it falls away from the arbitrary certainty previously attached to it. This reality locates Derrida in the tradition of ethical philosophers but also positions him radically outside the norm and normative tradition of ethics. When all is said and deconstructed, ethics and the dilemma of practice is what

remains. The ethical story Derrida narrates ends with Dostoevsky and the maxim "all is permitted". All is permitted therefore nothing is permitted, time is infinite therefore there is no Time, Ethics is impossible therefore there are ethics...I can't go on, I'll go on...

ENDNOTES

1. See the epigraph to chapter 3. This quotation is lifted from p 146 of Limited Inc and it forms, to my mind, Derrida's "mission statement" on deconstruction's redeployment of truth vs. its alleged destruction of truth. Throughout this thesis I will use truth in this contextual "Derridean" manner in order to denote that, to suggest that truth is impossible outside the "chronotope" of its enunciation is not the same as saying it doesn't exist or it isn't important. Most especially in the case of ethics and politics.

2. This thesis bears an uncanny resemblance to Lacan's reading of the contradictions which inhere in courtly love and Freud's deconstruction of the universalizing nature of the Christian imperative to love unconditionally in "Civilization and its Discontents". In both cases the thesis is: what value would love and affection have if it could be universalized and foreclosed in an "unconditional" imperative? The very nature of love and affection springs from a far darker fount than 'love thy neighbour'.

Derrida's ethics, I would argue, follow from the same line of thought. What would be the sense or value of an ethics that could (however conditionally or provisionally) be guaranteed by something beyond the ethical subject?

3. This focus on the ethical in Derrida's work is a relatively new phenomenon. By a rough count in the MLA index over 70% of the entries under "Derrida, Ethics" appear after 1988.

4. There is a vibrant debate underway in both feminist and postcolonial studies on this very question. The terms of the debate are never clear cut (essentialist vs. non essentialist) but there are ongoing debates about the efficacy of, to use Spivak's term, strategic essentialism. I would argue, with Judith Butler, Hommi Bhabha and many others, that any mitigation of the undecidable nature of gender and subjectivity mitigates the ethical, political and performative imperative of poststructuralist conceptions of human subjectivity.

5. For the purposes of this paper I will be considering the epistemological investigations of philosophy as cognates of ethical inquiry. Although this appears to be a contentious claim I am proceeding on the common sense assumption that knowledge is not worth pursuing if it does not tell you, however obliquely, something about how to act or make judgements in the world. This, to my mind, is the scene behind the scenes of Western philosophy that I am trying to locate Derrida in and against. John Caputo's book Against Ethics fortifies the implicit and explicit ethical stakes involved in philosophical inquiry.

6. See Will Durant's History of Philosophy.

7. It is worth noting here that the conception of writing I will be dealing with is distinctly Western. Without Orientalizing or romanticizing the conflicts of Eastern philosophy it is fair to suggest that the act of writing has a different and less antagonistic place in this tradition. To this end Derrida has drawn one of his key terms, iterability, from the Sanskrit. A further example is the tradition among Chinese historians to leave a blank page adjacent to any piece of written history in order to provide a forum for differences or further discoveries.

8. The treatment of Plato's polemic text bears an uncanny resemblance to the way in which the conservative body of psychoanalysis views Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" - a text which reconstituted death and not pleasure as the prime mover of the human psyche. In both cases the physical and spiritual infirmity of the author is cited as an answer to the disturbing questions that both texts pose for the institutions they founded.

9. This text is uncharacteristic of Plato's other dialogues where the city is generally characterized as the site of discussion and dialogue. The distinguishing feature in this dialogue is the topic of writing and, it might be suggested, this geographic displacement is further evidence that something 'strange' is afoot in this piece of philosophy

10. Concept, like most terms of philosophic articulation, is troped by Derrida and employed ironically. Derrida's use of concept is dedicated to showing the impossibility of ever generating a rigorously proper Concept capable of generating a general theory or epistemology. The operative part of this equation comes from John Llyell's article "Responsibility and Indecidability" in which he equates the Derridean concept with the legal term in order to accentuate the generative nature of Derrida's methodology. Other (quasi) concepts in Derrida's vocabulary - supplement, differance, iterability, parasitism - all provide a framework to address the paradoxical generation of meaning from undecidability rather than decidability.

11. See Limited Inc for numerous qualifications on the generative and positive quality of the limits deconstruction places on knowledge and language.

12. In this context I am using redemptive in the Kierkegaardian sense as a trope of orthodox Christianity. The logic of Fear and Trembling follows the logic I am trying to sketch by troping the most negative limits of biblical morality in order to generate an enabling ethics.

13. For one of the latest such arguments see Terry Eagleton's article in Freedom and Interpretation - The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 1992. This essay will be dealt with at length in chapter 3.

14. This phrase is lifted from John Irwin's excellent book The Mystery to a Solution - Poe, Borges and the Detective Story.

15. This concept is also the thesis of two classic poststructuralist essays : Michel Foucault's "What is an Author" and Roland Barthes "The Death of the Author"

16. I borrow the logic of this argument from Zizek's brilliant defence of Lacan's maxim "a letter always arrives at its destination". In Enjoy Your Symptom Zizek argues against those who suggested that Lacan had merely inverted logocentric reason by prioritizing language. Zizek's subtle defence rests on the argument that having language as foundation does not and cannot restore any logocentric hierarchies - quite the opposite. I employ the tenor of such thinking when suggesting that Derrida installs difference, repetition and undecidability as "origins".

17. In Limited Inc. Derrida refers the reader to his work on the American constitution, entitled "Declarations of Independence". In this essay Derrida points out that there is a habitual resort, in the American constitution (not to mention American society), to transcendental, quasi-religious terms when defining the principles of social and political intercourse (God, Liberty, Justice etc.). The ideological and political connotations of such terms are glossed over when they are enfolded in such constative and descriptive terms. In essence, Derrida argues that the attempt to fix and reify the play of performance is itself always already a performance (that is, of course, unless God really does exist and he appointed the likes of George Bush and Ronald Reagan as the guardians of Democracy).

18. The classic criticism of this gesture is to be found in Deleuze and Guattari's study of Kafka entitled Towards a Minor Literature.

19. This reference is taken from Linton Quise-Johnson's eerie song "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised".

20. The following is the entire text of Eagleton's direct comments on Derrida in "Deconstruction and Human Rights":

"There is a good deal lately in Derrida about gift and promise, obligation and responsibility; but it is hard [!] to see how this might be brought to bear on the nature of Neo Stalinism or the oppression of women. Indeed Derrida himself seems to have grown increasingly restive with such humdrum political matters, as when he asserts in a recent interview that deconstruction is neither conservative nor revolutionary, and that is what gets on its opponents nerves. We have become accustomed lately to hearing from

Derrida such statements as (I parody a little) : 'I am not for socialism; but I am not against it either. Neither am I neither for nor against it, nor simply for or against the whole opposition of 'for' or 'against' " (123)

I cite at length here to demonstrate that, in a text purporting to expose the ethical and political embarrassment of deconstruction, Eagleton parodies and caricatures Derrida's work more than just a little.

21. "There is no such thing as morality, only moral interpretations" Nietzsche.

What, if not language, do we base our ethical/moral interpretations on say - The Communist Manifesto, The Ideology of the Aesthetic or the plight of the boat people? In Žižek's terms the very ability to decide is tied "as by an umbilical chord" to "ontological nullity" (i.e. the absence of safe, fully determined contexts and meanings) In appropriating his interpretation as the one to deliver the goods on the boat people Eagleton is evading the psychic and epistemological freight that goes with any decision, including the ethical decision to feel compassion for suffering and the political decision to do something about it.

22. I again refer the reader to Žižek's work on this dilemma in Enjoy Your Symptom. Grounding human knowledge in an 'absolute' lack or undecidability does not invert logocentric reasoning and foreclose interpretation in a hermeneutic textual circle.

23. See M.L. Hart's Concept of Law.

24. In this context I am using politics and the concept of 'the political' as a simple extension of the ethical into the public realm. It seem useless to regard politics as anything other than the public exercise of ethics.

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