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## ON THE CORPOREAL ORIGINS OF LANGUAGE: DERRIDA SAYS YES TO JOYCE

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This paper elaborates on the insight that, in his 1984 address to Joyce scholars “Ulysses Gramophone,” Jacques Derrida performs a methodologically comprehensive phenomenological analysis to show that James Joyce’s *Ulysses* activates the essential structures of experience to make the reader live through the constitution of sense as corporeally lived and grasped meaning. A deceptively casual collection of facts Derrida rehearses in this talk is, also, a Husserlian variation of connections and continuities between the body, in its many manifestations, and the signifying structures of the socio-cultural order and consciousness. This variation leads Derrida’s deconstructive analysis to the discovery of the originary event – the constitution of distinction and, with it, language – in the living flesh which, as Derrida finds in Joyce, is the locus and experience of the sensual, corporeally lived intentionality.

KEYWORDS: Derrida, Joyce, Husserl, corporeality, sense.

Rumour has it that Joyceans, inviting Jacques Derrida to give a welcoming address to the Ninth James Joyce Symposium in Frankfurt in 1984, were anticipating with great excitement a feast of the post-structuralist deconstructive dissection of James Joyce’s language. Deconstructive criticism was only taking shape at the

time, a panel on it was to follow Derrida's address (Attridge 2013: 269), and there was a ghost of the Text as a critical issue looming over that particular Symposium anyway: Hans Walter Gabler was expected to present his much-heard-of synoptic edition of *Ulysses* (Joyce), a revolutionary editorial achievement in both the theory and practice of editing (Gabler), to the Symposium, but he did it only at the very end of the week (Benstock 1988: 16; Sandulescu 1986: xix). From today's perspective, it seems to have been an exceptional, singular opportunity to witness the founding father of deconstruction dismantle the text *par excellence* – Joyce's text – to address the Text as the fetish of both post-structuralism and deconstruction, as they both appear to be concerned with, if not carried away by, *jouissance*, or the "play of the signifier," the definitive characteristic of the Text. If indeed there was such an expectation, it was not met, for Derrida gives close to nothing of that. There is a trace of a disappointment about it in Derek Attridge's preface to "Ulysses Gramophone" (Derrida 1987, 1992, 2013), in parenthesis: "(We might note, however, that the 'play of the signifier' – often taken to be the major affinity between Joyce and Derrida – is not of great importance here.)" (Derrida 1992: 255). In the "here" of Derrida's two-and-a-half-hour address to Joyceans (Attridge 2013: 269)<sup>1</sup> Attridge finds instead "an assortment of examples from *Ulysses*" Derrida exploits for an exploration of "what seems to him at a given moment to be the singularity of Joyce's text" (Derrida 1992: 254). And this "moment of singularity" comes up as a bric-a-brac of casual characteristics and themes with no common denominator between them other than Derrida's reading *Ulysses* there-and-then. So obviously lacking internal cohesion, Derrida's talk appears to perform one of its many assorted themes: it comes across as "a derisive mockery of those who analyze and systematize," a mockery carried out by indulging in a "painstaking counting of the *yeses* in the text, and [in the] relishing of the coincidences that stud the history of [Derrida's] writing on the text, during an odyssey that takes him from Ohio to Tokyo and from Tokyo to Paris" (Derrida 1992: 254).

In this paper, I want to claim that, actually, the play of the signifier is precisely what Joyce makes Derrida tackle in his 1984 talk to Joyceans, except it is not the (post-)structuralist but the phenomenological signifier. This signifier is the structure and agency of the signifying activity, which signifies in terms of all kinds of signifying structures we call textual but, nonetheless, itself is not quite

<sup>1</sup> A number of participants in the Frankfurt Symposium were present at the XXVI International James Joyce Symposium (University of Antwerp, 11–16 June 2018), where I presented the first version of this paper. None of them remembered the exact timing of Derrida's talk but all agreed that it had felt very long and that they had not been able to follow. Hans Gabler recalled that he had left Derrida's lecture to hear other papers and had come back to find Derrida still reading, several times. He also remarked that Derrida had been present in all workshops on textual editing, always sat in the front row.

such a structure but a living embodied consciousness – a subjectivity, for want of a better word, – involved in the unstoppable process of making sense of the world. As such consciousness, I find myself, to use Heidegger’s wording, “thrown into the world:” entangled in an immediately given yet always already significant, as if pre-textualised reality I live in, experience, and know as the world. It is this kind of experience that Derrida re-enacts in his address as he “thr[ows himself] in the water, as one says in French” (« je me suis jeté à l’eau, comme on di ten français » (Derrida 1987: 60), he actually says in the original) and “decid[es] to surrender [himself] along with [us] to a chance encounter” which Joyce’s text is sure to give because “[w]ith Joyce, chance is always recaptured by law, sense, and the program, in accordance with the overdetermination of figures and ruses” (Derrida 2013: 42). With Joyce, that is, chance is no longer accidental but, on the contrary, is an outcome of a whole range of determinants – namely, “law, sense, and the programme” – which are at work in the “figures and ruses” Joyce deploys.

To appreciate the full significance of this, so to speak, thesis statement on Joyce, which Derrida gives by way of a narrative opening to his performance, Derrida himself must be read not so much as the father of post-structuralist deconstruction but, rather, as a son of Edmund Husserl’s and, then, a practitioner of deconstruction in the original, phenomenological sense of the word. Martin Heidegger in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* names it, in the original German, *Destruktion* and defines as “a critical process in which the traditional concepts, which at first must necessarily be employed, are deconstructed down to the sources from which they are drawn” (Heidegger 1982: 23; Heidegger 1989: 31). The “sources” here may mean two things: Generally, Heidegger and Derrida after him are far more obviously preoccupied with the historical sources of Western thought and, then, the philosophy they do is, as Heidegger puts it, “a de-constructing of traditional concepts carried out in a historical recursion to the tradition” (Heidegger 1982: 23). Yet paired with Husserl rather than Heidegger, Derrida appears to be concerned with the other kind of sources: those that are the originary ground of our capacity for conceptualising lived reality whatever the concepts themselves might be (Derrida 1962, 1989, 1990).

This capacity, along with the constitutive value of activating it in the production of all knowledge, is the central concern for Husserl in “The Origin of Geometry” and for Derrida after him, in his Introduction to the French translation of the piece (Husserl 1962). Jean-Michel Rabaté tells us that, while working on Husserl during his stay at Harvard in 1956–1957, Derrida read Joyce “to relieve the tedium and the mental cramp caused by too many pages of Husserl at one

go” (Rabaté 2013: 281) and Derrida’s Introduction to “The Origin of Geometry” indeed confronts Husserl and Joyce, specifically, on the issue of language and translatability (Derrida 1989: 102–103)<sup>2</sup>. About three decades later, in 1984, all confrontation is gone: Derrida does not mention Husserl in “Ulysses Gramophone” at all, but Husserl permeates it throughout even without being mentioned. Husserl here is a silenced presence, an internalised philosophical stance that (along with another unacknowledged ghost in attendance here, Maurice Merleau-Ponty<sup>3</sup>) guides Derrida’s “auto-biographico-encyclopedic circumnavigation” (Derrida 2013: 46) across *Ulysses*. For, when read as itself a performative enactment of reading *Ulysses*, “Ulysses Gramophone” shows Derrida, as the reader of the book, re-reading *Ulysses* for the occasion of giving a lecture on it and reflecting on his act of reading in an effort to comprehensively foreground the phenomenological essential structures of experience mediated by Joyce’s literary discourse. Derrida seems to be doing this by performing three interdependent methodological moves: he (1) identifies the transcendental conditions of responsiveness to literature in his specific response, to Joyce, (2) localises such conditions in the specific, given settings of his experience of Joyce’s text, and (3) re-stages their manifestations by re-enacting his reading *Ulysses* and living it beyond the text of the book, in the here-and-now of his preparation for the lecture. Joyce here, inadvertently, does not appear as the other of Husserl but emerges as somewhat of a Husserlian himself: a master of an aesthetics of literature that draws on the transcendental givens of literary discourse<sup>4</sup>. Such givens constitute what Derrida refers to as “law, sense, and the program” that recapture chance in Joyce and thus pre-programme all possible responses to his writing.

In “Ulysses Gramophone,” Derrida uncovers these transcendental givens by identifying them as conditions he finds occurrent throughout all instances of the experience he is describing. The logic behind this is quite clear: if transcendental conditions are those without which experience is not possible at all, they must be manifest in every instance of experience and, then, discovered in all instances of experience by identifying their manifestation as a necessary – hence necessarily recurrent – given for the experience to happen. From this point of view, the transcendental shows by virtue of its iterability, in the dialectics of repetition

<sup>2</sup> Donn Welton dates the composition of Derrida’s Introduction to “The Origin of Geometry” at 1953–1954 to highlight the fact that Husserl’s writings on genesis, the core issue Derrida has with Husserl, were not yet published at the time and that, whether or not Derrida had access to Husserl’s manuscripts, he largely ignores them (Welton: 395–397).

<sup>3</sup> Leonard Lawlor, in his Foreword to Merleau-Ponty’s notes on Husserl’s “The Origin of Geometry,” elaborates on parallels between Merleau-Ponty’s and Derrida’s readings of Husserl (Lawlor 2002).

<sup>4</sup> For the possibility and effectivity of reading Joyce in this framework, see my recent study “The Aesthetics of Phenomena: Joyce’s Epiphanies” (Levina 2017: 185–219).

and difference, which is, arguably, a major support of Derrida's deconstructive phenomenology at large and, quite clearly, the core of his reading of *Ulysses*. This reading also effectively shows Derrida capturing the iterable, and hence the transcendental, by the means of variation, a textbook method of Husserl's (e. g. Moran 2000: 154–155) which Derrida employs with a significant modification: In "Ulysses Gramophone," variation is neither "free" nor "imaginative," nor does it posit "the primacy of free phantasy" over actual perception (Husserl 1983: 158) to play, in the mode of "as-if," with the "pure possibilities" of the experiential act until one has grasped its essential structures (Husserl 1982: 70). Instead, in "Ulysses Gramophone," variation is firmly rooted in the factual: not in what Derrida, as a reader of *Ulysses*, might be imagining while reading the book, but in what Derrida has actually experienced or knows and hence can remember as the facts of the historical world into which Joyce's book, indeed, happens to throw him. Further, Derrida's reading of *Ulysses*, in this variation of the factual, shows the factual itself invariably pinned to the body which itself, however, surfaces as a variable whose form of manifestation depends on the perspective that identifies it as a marker of factuality within the eidetic framework that constitutes the perspective's signifying structure and force.

This reciprocity between the body and the signifying framework in which it appears in a particular form, a form determined by the framework, is quite crucial to keep in mind for us to fully appreciate the thrust of Derrida's seemingly paradoxical response to Joyce's masterpiece and read it accordingly. By keeping focus on the reciprocity rather than any of its two elements, Derrida seems to complete the paradigm of ways in which phenomenology approaches the relationship of consciousness and the body. In most general terms, this paradigm comprises three possible positions. Husserl's point of departure is the transcendental given of intentional consciousness, defined as the process and activity of signifying perception, or of making sense of the world, rooted in the sensuous body on the one hand and directed towards the world on the other. Merleau-Ponty shifts attention to the embeddedness of intentional consciousness in the body – the living sensuous flesh which is the experiential grounding, source, and support of the basic mechanisms and schemes of all signifying perception of the lived world and, thus, of consciousness itself. Derrida, in "Ulysses Gramophone," revisits these transcendental givens to show that the grasp of sense – and, with it, being – does not depend on either consciousness or the body as the primordial condition in relation to the other but is, instead, a matter of their interdependence if not inseparability. In Derrida's reading, Joyce's *Ulysses* plays on the given that making sense necessarily involves both the body and the signifying structures of consciousness. It is by entangling his

reader in the activity of sensemaking on the plane of this transcendently given continuity that Joyce seems to pre-programme every possible act of making sense and thus recapture, pre-determine every possible “chance encounter” that takes place while reading the book, wherever and whenever the act of reading happens to be performed.

An exposition of the full picture of this line of thought in Derrida’s reading of *Ulysses* deserves a much larger study than the genre of this paper can accommodate, so I will restrict it to three examples that show three kinds of the body-and-mind connection that constitutes the sense of being Derrida finds in Joyce and discusses in his exposition of the multiple modalities of the *yes* (Derrida 2013: 42). Notably, throughout this exposition, Derrida repeatedly refers to this *yes* in explicitly phenomenological terms pointing precisely to its transcendental. He associates it, for instance, with the “fundamental and quasi-transcendental tonality” of the yes-laughter (Derrida 2013: 70; 68, 80), characterises as the “transcendental adverbiality” of all discourse (Derrida 2013: 72) and, eventually, locates it “in the place [of] transcendental egology” (Derrida 2013: 77) to which I have referred, in the opening part of my paper, as the phenomenological signifier. The examples I am presenting below also show that Derrida, in the course of his deconstructive analysis of Joyce’s “figures and ruses,” finds that the ultimate originary event – the constitution of distinction and, with it, language – takes place in the living flesh and hence is, also, the primordial experience of intentionality.

The first kind of this constitutive connection comes across as, precisely, a connection of what initially is distinct. The body here appears in the form of one’s physical body, while the signifying structures mark it, in the literal sense of the word, to endow it with a socio-cultural identity and thus include into the social structure of a cultural community. This is done physically, in ritual acts such as circumcision, a recurrent motif of “Ulysses Gramophone” (Derrida 2013: 62–63, 65, 69, 71), and linguistically, by naming – giving a person a proper name. In this connection of the body (as the signified) and the sign (as the signifier), the body itself functions as the ultimate marker of one’s actual presence in the act, which confirms the act and legitimises the result. The body, in other words, is the token of the real, the actual, while the signifying mark gives it a socio-cultural significance. Circumcision is a most straightforward example of such a ritual act performed on the body. It is also a complex example, because, for this physical act to have the significance it has, it must be performed in the presence of Elijah the circumciser who must be present *in corpore* in all circumcisions, as Derrida reminds us, even if his corporeal presence has been reduced to the secondary form of “Elijah’s chair” in which the baby boy is held for the ritual procedure (Derrida 2013: 62–63). The

same value of the body is manifest in signature: it cannot be reduced to “a phenomenon of copyright readable through a proper name” (Derrida 2013: 71), for it confirms by itself being a trace of one’s bodily presence there-and-then, as one has to be present corporeally to perform the gesture of signing which seals what is signed to the one who signed it. In this dependence on the body, signature is not unlike other bodily self-expressions that leave a tangible, sensuously perceivable trace. The scent seems to be a liminal case of it: it appears in *Ulysses* in ways that prompt Derrida to ask, repeatedly, if it is “possible to sign with a perfume” (Derrida 2013: 81; 73), rather than a handwritten inscription of the proper name (Derrida 2013: 66), and invite us to imagine how his address would read if titled “Of the Perfumative in Ulysses” (Derrida 2013: 75).

This parallel brings me to the second example: the second kind of the body-and-mind connection, which is not quite a connection, for it manifests itself as the originary split of consciousness from and within the living body, a split that keeps the elements it distinguished from one another in interdependence. The body here no longer is the physical body but the phenomenological (Husserlian) conscious body. In order to sign, Derrida tells us, the signing *yes* must be endowed with memory – with consciousness, that is, – for it needs to remember its own identity while moving in space and time. It promises such memory in an act of signing (Derrida 2013: 56, 78), and this promise of the memory of oneself is, effectively, an intersubjective split: a split that puts another signing *yes* – another subjectivity, even if my own – elsewhere, at a spacio-temporal distance from the positing self. Molly’s so-called monologue, the closing episode of *Ulysses*, oozes with such re-positings and awareness of another *yes* (Derrida 2013: 74) on the primordial level of the living flesh, the flesh that lives by saying *yes* in response to another *yes* before it speaks any language (Derrida 2013: 73). Derrida identifies such “self-position of the self in the *yes* return unceasingly, each time in a different form, all through the journey” (Derrida 2013: 76) of *Ulysses*. And he eventually pins it down to the (Merleau-Pontian) living flesh – specifically, Bloom’s – which splits into sensuous self-consciousness as Bloom, for example, thinks of masturbating in the bath: “Also I think I. Yes I. Do it in the bath.’ (Joyce: 5.499–501),” Derrida quotes Joyce to comment on “this ‘Yes-I’ that dreams of massaging itself” (Derrida 2013: 70), of giving itself pleasure, in the act of which the body is both “I” the giver and “I” the receiver. The flesh of Bloom here daydreams of giving sensual pleasure to itself, in the phantasm of masturbation he lives through in the memory of the experience only, because, on the day we follow him in *Ulysses*, Bloom does not actually “do it in the bath [that] morning” (Joyce: 13.786). And, in the moment of holding to the phantasm of this experience, this flesh is both “I”

the giver and “I” the receiver of the pleasure, each of them saying *yes* in its own, different tonality even if verbally they are marked by the same word<sup>5</sup>.

This underlying tonality of the living flesh that says *yes* is the third and last example that points to the living sensuous body as the ultimate originary grounding of sense, hence the core of the phenomenological signifier surfacing in Derrida’s response to *Ulysses*. The tonality of the living flesh, such as the tonalities Bloom’s flesh takes on as it splits from itself, is the beginning of language – for, potentially if not actually, this tonality makes sense by way of being distinct from its other tonality and its other sense. To put it simply, Bloom’s “I” the giver is not his “I” the receiver even if they dwell in the same flesh, are marked linguistically by the same grammatical pointer, and hence overlap and contaminate one another so that they are impossible to separate. Of these two, each “Yes-I” (Derrida 2013: 73, 75) quite literally makes different sense, as one of them says *yes* in the tonality of giving and the other in that of receiving. They each embody primordial intentionality: a distinct, identifiable directedness of the living flesh towards an experience it knows as, in this case, the pleasure and reproduces from either the giving or the receiving end of it. Hence each is the locus and agency of signifying perception, lived through corporeally as the experience of a sensuous grasp of sense as meaning.

On this plane of sensing meaning, language itself is indeed, as Derrida describes it, gramophonetic – that is, heard and seen, visible and audible at the same time and yet in different senses. It is this gramophonetic quality of language on the page that enables a reader like Derrida to see a “yes” written in the “eyes” of Molly (Derrida 2013: 49), as she “ask[s] Bloom] with [her] eyes to ask again” to accept his proposal in the closure of *Ulysses* (Joyce: 18.1605). It is the same gramophonetic quality that, in the other modality of the sensuous grasp of meaning, makes him hear the word “father” in Bloom’s inclination to “go a step farther,” in a conversation with Stephen whose thoughts he is trying to encourage, a gramphonetic quality that is lost in the translation of the book into, say, French, losing all Freudian implications of this phrase as well (Derrida 2013: 45; Joyce: 16.1163). The sense perceived, in each of these examples, depends directly on the quality of the sensuous, here connected to a particular sense – seeing or hearing – as a channel that mediates the meaning. This is why Derrida speaks of “remote control” technologies as the constitutive elements of sense (Derrida 2013: 50). These, along with a range of other examples Derrida gives in “Ulysses Gramophone,” make it glaringly clear that, by relying on so-called material supports for transmitting language, such as words on the page

<sup>5</sup> See Waldenfels (1993: 65–77) and Lawlor (1993: 79–87) for a discussion elaborating on the constitutive significance of this split in the living, simultaneously self-expressive and self-perceiving flesh in Derrida’s thought in the context of Husserl.



or voice recording, linguistic expression itself is not at all “an external contextual element” but indeed “affects from within the most elemental meaning” we grasp while reading the text (Derrida 2013: 50) (« elle affecte le dedans même du sens le plus élémentaire » (Derrida 1987: 78)). Derrida, then, seems to be showing to the respected audience of Joyce specialists at the Symposium how Joyce, by playing with language in the ways he does, activates his reader’s capacities for sensemaking in every modality of the sensuous living flesh. Ultimately, it is this sensemaking living flesh that Derrida finds in himself answering to Joyce’s *Ulysses* as he throws himself into its text and surrenders to the figures and ruses that bring about most unpredictable chance encounters in quite predictable ways.

Received 2018 11 20

Accepted 2018 12 08

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### APIE KŪNIŠKĄSIAS KALBOS IŠTAKAS: DERRIDA KALBA SU JOYCE'U

#### Santrauka

Straipsnyje išplečiama įžvalga, kad James'o Joyce'o žinovams skirtoje 1984-ųjų paskaitoje „Ulisas gramofonas“ Jacques'as Derrida atlieka metodologiškai nuoseklią fenomenologinę analizę, kuria parodo, kad Joyce'o *Uliso* skaitymo akte įveiksimamos esminės patirties struktūros, panardinant skaitytoją į prasmės radimosi kūniškoje jos pagavoje patirtį. Iš pažiūros atsitiktinių faktų kaleidoskopas, pateikiamas šioje paskaitoje, pasirodo esąs huserliškoji variacija, kuria apčiuopiama jungčių tarp įvairiais pavidalais pasirodančio kūno ir sociokultūrinės tvarkos bei sąmonės užduotų reikšmės struktūrų paradigma. Taip atliekama dekonstrukcinė analizė atveria prasmės ištakų įvykį – skirties, ir sykiu kalbos, steigį – gyvo kūno patirties lauke, kuris, kaip Derrida atranda skaitydamas Joyce'ą, yra taip pat ir juslinio, kūniškai patiriamo pirmapradžio intencionalumo vieta ir patirtis.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Derrida, Joyce'as, Husserlis, kūniškumas, prasmė.