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## Undecidability and Reversibility

### Reversibility and "Reversibility."

For Jacques Derrida, an unprecedented decision always involves the possibility of a decapitation. For any genuine determinate intervention to take place, there needs to be the possibility of suspending all calculation and determination, of suspending all that authorizes in advance and that in doing so renders any decision a non-decision in principle. Thus, at the outset of "The Double Session," which sets out by comparing Plato's *Philebus* and Mallarmé's *Mimique* in order to interrogate the structural conditions under which the meaning of a text may be determined, Derrida opens with a deauthorizing act. Famously, for Derrida, Mallarmé's text upsets the hierarchical relationship between representation and original that has informed the "Occidental" concept of *mimesis*; it does this by drawing attention to the "false appearance" under which the "present" presents itself, an empty space purporting to be that in which no original and no hierarchical logic of truth and illusion resides but from which any meaning whatsoever might therefore emerge. (Mallarmé 1945b; Derrida 1981, 175 and 211) Derrida finds the same logic at work in another text, "Le Mystère dans les lettres," in which Mallarmé suspends the authority of the title and refers instead to the "blank space" that suspends it above the body of the text. (Mallarmé 1945a, 387; Derrida 1981, 178) Between figure and ground, presence and presentation, suspension and "suspension," there is thus a "semantic reversal," a *décollation*, an "ungluing" of the binding that holds the pages in one particular order and a "beheading" of the organizational principle that demands that writing proceed in one predetermined sequential fashion, which will have also allowed every existing relation between anything whatsoever to be revealed. As Mallarmé remarks amongst the pages of his "*Livre*," the concept of which sees the author leave the audience and the pages shuffled before each of his reentries: "the play—I bring it back—and return it to the cubbyholes the other way around only when it has become a book again ... which thus gives two sessions ... Words, of themselves, are

exalted on many a facet known as the rarest or having value for the mind, the center of vibratory suspense; whoever perceives them independent of the ordinary sequence ... all of them quick, before becoming extinct or extinguished, to enter into a reciprocity of fires that is distant or presented on the bias as some contingency ... [I]s this beginning by the end?"<sup>1</sup> (Derrida 1981, 174) It is "for" this "semantic reversal" that also determines the totality of signification that Derrida says that he will "determine the law of indecision."<sup>2</sup> (Derrida 1981, 179) In other words, Derrida's identification of a structural indeterminacy of the text, of an "undecidability" that haunts all forms of founding and conserving meaning, derives from a need to describe a certain reversibility that subtends the major elements that make reading possible.

Some years later, the co-implication of undecidability and reversibility attains one of its most enigmatic restatements in Derrida's 1989 address to the Cardozo Law School, "Force of Law." (Derrida 1990) Reacting to Walter Benjamin's 1921 essay "Toward the Critique of Violence," in which Benjamin, according to Derrida, proposes that there is a moment in the foundation of law that, being necessarily interruptive of established law and therefore necessarily violent, "remains suspended in the void or over the abyss, suspended by a pure performative act that would not have to answer to or before anyone" (Derrida 1990, 991-993), Derrida writes: "[The] unreadability of [this] violence results from the very readability of a violence that belongs to what others would call the symbolic order of law, if you like, and not to a pure physics. We might be tempted to reverse this 'logic' like a glove ..., the 'logic' of this readable unreadability." (Derrida 1990, 993-995) The word "unreadability" refers to the "cases in which it is not known for generations if the performative of the violent founding of a state is 'felicitous' or not" (Derrida 1990, 993); for instance, we only know after the fact whether the founding of a state is based on principles that perpetuate the violence and suffering that is exacted onto groups whose suppression played a structurally necessary role in that foundation. In turn, this "unreadability" issues, according to Derrida, from a hermeneutic circle in which "the order of intelligibility depends in its turn on the established order that it serves to interpret." (Derrida 1990, 993)

Whatever "succeeds" according to this "logic" will therefore have produced precisely that which it is "destined in advance to produce," namely the "discourse of its self-legitimation." (Derrida 1990, 993) At issue for Derrida, though, is this: if there is a "performative violence" embedded in the core of every interpretative reading, a "right to suspend legitimating authority and all its norms of reading ... in order to found another order of reading," what prevents any of "us" from succumbing to the "temptation" of "reversing" the very "logic" of unreadability, which is to say of the reversibility that underpins legibility as such, and insisting on the right that "we" have to suspend the norms in order to replace them with some future order we consider "right" because we will have deemed it so? In the place of a readable unreadability, then, there appears a so-called "unreadability" or unreadable readability, a being before the law that is only ever to come because the arrival of this law depends on the performative act of the subject instituting it and is thus always also past, predicative, and reiterable. And entangled in an inextricable knot with the destructive performance of founding new law is also therefore a deeply conservative force with which a fundamental violence indistinguishable from law as such seeks to perpetuate itself.

Derrida, of course, sees in the non-opposition of foundation and conservation a reciprocal contamination promising that neither revolution nor conservation will be entirely pure. (Derrida 1990, 997) Yet as he also notes, already in 1990, the deeply self-destructive and paradoxical tendency at the core of the violence with which law seeks to conserve itself has a low threshold to overcome before crossing over into actuality: not only does such a force no longer "need to mobilize or demobilize a spectacular number of people," it is enough "to introduce a few efficient viruses into a well-chosen computer network or, by analogy, to introduce the equivalent of AIDS into the organs of transmission, into the hermeneutic *Gespräch*." (Derrida 1990, 995) It would be a mistake to take deconstruction as advocating a reversal of the sort that amounts to merely affirming that a single word might harbor multiple or even contradictory meanings—but it would be equally a mistake to deny that such a perversion of reversibility is

always a risk. Readers of Derrida have suggested that such a risk is the necessary condition for justice and that undecidability names this necessary risk, pointing out, for instance, that Derrida had, in *Limited Inc.*, already noted that "there can be no moral or political responsibility without this trial and this passage by way of the undecidable." (Derrida 1977, 116) David Bates, for instance, remarks that this "impasse is of course where we might find justice—that is, not in the content of some rational or legal decision but in the madness that preceded it and in fact made it possible as a 'cut' in our experience." (Bates 2005, 7) In pointing to undecidability's sociopolitical ramifications, Bates argues, Derrida thus inscribes himself within a wider discourse initiated in the interwar period "on the nature of unprecedented decisions in situations characterized by crisis and the failure of all kinds of norms and formal systems defining order and organization," a discourse whose participants included not only legal theorists like Carl Schmitt but also those who first identified undecidability as a mathematical-logical problem. (Bates 2005, 3 and 11-12)

According to such a view, Derrida sees the democratic process as an intuitive reaction to a crisis in its foundation. Arguing, similarly, that the "complex topology" introduced by the undecidable suggests an ethics comprised of the ability to dwell within the paradox "that arises from the absence ... of any coherent reflection of the totality of a system's syntax within itself," Paul Livingston proposes that undecidability sketches the figure of a "possibility as impossibility" in any meaningful system, such that a gift, for instance, can be a gift only inasmuch as it is undecidable whether it is a gift or an instance of trade within the very system in which the gift might have any meaning. (Livingston 2012, 125-127) What Derrida calls the "undecidable" is thus not a leap outside the system but, instead, an "inscription of the possibility/impossibility of *any* signification as such" within a particular system of representation inasmuch as such a system comprises also the possibility of being leapt out of. (Livingston 2012, 129) According to Livingston, the undecidability of whether a gift is indeed a gift accompanies all phenomena that are normatively regulated and are therefore "essentially constituted ... by the possibility of 'jumping out of the system.'" (Livingston 2012, 127) By extension, the inscription

of possibility/impossibility that accompanies every question of normatively regulated life is generalizable to all systems of signification whatsoever inasmuch as any system is presumed to be meaningful only so far as it hews to the binary opposition between presence and absence that paradoxically fails to be applicable to itself. The upshot, according to this view, is that dwelling in the space of this paradox already constitutes "ethical *praxis*" for Derrida, and not any appeal to an "other" outside of the system of decision and knowledge. (Livingston 2012, 129)

Yet reversibility is not exactly coincident with undecidability, as Derrida's remark in "Force of Law" suggests. There is, Derrida writes, a "temptation" to reverse the logic of the violence that founds any legal order into its apparent counterpart, into the violence that, because its mode of existence is to found new law, is essentially indistinguishable from the violence that asserts and perpetuates *qua* conserves itself in the guise of law. This temptation, however, is strictly circumscribed within what Derrida nominally calls the "symbolic order of law," which is also the structure of signs in which it is assumed that the totality of signification is structured by a binary opposition of presence and absence, of truth and falsity, that is undermined at the very points it is articulated but that is necessary for signs to be meaningful at all. There is no pure "outside" of this symbolic order and the reversibility that it "tempts" to the extent that the relation to an "outside," that undecidable "cut" in our normatively regulated existence, is necessary for any genuine decision to be possible within this order. There is also no pure "outside" of this symbolic order inasmuch as it is presupposed that all systems, if they are to be meaningful, must hew to a binary of presence/absence and truth/falsity yet cannot do so without miring themselves in a paradoxical reversal of terms. Yet besides this sense of reversibility there is also another at work, one that, Derrida seems to suggest, amounts to no mere temptation to reverse the glove into its counterpart with the implication that this is impossible to do without contradiction, but instead realizes precisely this transformation somewhere in the region of "pure physics." (Derrida 1990, 995) To this other sense of reversibility there presumably corresponds another sense of undecidability as well, one that,

perhaps, points to an altogether different possibility of what is, decisively, justice. In what follows, then, my aim is to disambiguate the connection Derrida establishes between undecidability and reversibility as two distinct structures of language and time rather than as synonyms for the same. From an examination of how Derrida construes the co-implication of undecidability and reversibility in his early reflections on nonlinear writing, I then pursue an account of how Derrida conceives of reversibility as transformation. I conclude with a reflection on some of the sociopolitical ramifications of understanding reversibility as transformation, with and beyond Derrida. At stake throughout is the urgency of rigorously distinguishing between the two senses of reversibility intimated by Derrida in "Force of Law," one deeply conservative in that it destroys law to preserve violence that is enshrined as law, the other perhaps something else altogether. As it turns out, the distinction between reversibility and "reversibility" inscribes itself in a number of ways, and the aim of the ensuing discussion will be to sketch out some of these instances, beginning with Derrida's reading of Mallarmé in "The Double Session."

### **An Energetic Conception of Nonlinear Writing**

Of discourse and inscription, Derrida writes in "The Double Session" that their supplementary relation to one another is a function of their "complicities or reversibilities," their structural commensurability vis à vis their relation to the operations of imitation. Since both are "measured against the truth they are capable of," each may be said to be the image of the other. And since discourse and inscription both therefore partake of mimesis in respect to one another, they can functionally substitute for one another. Their functional reversibility, however, then sets off an infinite process of repetition's self-duplication at odds with the basic temporal priority that the imitated has to the imitator. (Derrida 1981, 190) "Whence," Derrida writes, "the problem of time": it is inconceivable yet apparently possible that the image precede the model or the double precede the simple. Whence also, then, *anamnesis* or recollection, that relation of the future to the present as a past that is due to return, that anterior futurity that is so difficult to

dismiss as contradictory and so implicated in the presentation of things that even Plato, who otherwise rejects the mimetic arts as ontologically and metaphysically errant, treats *anamnesis qua* recollection as inextricable from *aletheia*, "the unveiling of truth" (*la dévoilement de la vérité*).

(Derrida 1981, 191) Given this link between recollection and unconcealment—and thanks to Heidegger's restatement of the derivation of *aletheia* from *to me lanthanon*, the "unhidden" or "unforgotten" (*dévoilement* is Derrida's translation of Heidegger's *Entbergen*; see for instance Derrida 2017, 114)—we see that mimesis itself is essentially a mimesis of itself, and that it is a mirroring of one mimesis in another and thus the replacement of the single by the double that decides, for "Platonism" and the "whole history of Western philosophy," that which is present (*to on*) and present *as* present. (Derrida 1981, 191)

In Mallarmé, Derrida argues, this operation no longer feigns belonging to the system of truth. Instead, his text is a simulacrum of this operation itself. Disabused of the assumption that somewhere "out there" there "is" the being of that which is being imitated, Mallarmé's Mime mimics "nothing," and in mimicking nothing, suspends "the decidable exteriority of differing terms." (Derrida 1981, 208-210) There is, as Derrida writes, "nothing prior to the writing of his gestures" and nothing prescribed for him. (Derrida 1981, 194) "Thanks to the confusion and continuity of the hymen"—a term of Mallarmé's that Derrida interprets as occupying a position of structuring difference within the text—"thanks to the continuity of the hymen, ... a (pure and simple) difference inscribes itself without any decidable poles, without any independent, irreversible terms." (Derrida 1981, 210) Accordingly, presence is no longer the form around which all differences are measured, such as future and past, remembrance and repetition; rather, "what is marked ... between future and present, ... past and present, ... the capacity and the act, ... is only a series of temporal differences," such that it becomes questionable whether it is still meaningful to talk of tenses or temporal difference at all. (Derrida 1981, 210) For there is also no *logos* linking the Mime's movements in any order of consequence. Spatialized in the figure of a self-enveloping difference, the work of time is transposed onto various other spatial figures



that now bear the load of the text's reversible operations. Across the page one finds the "dance of the hieroglyph," a "graphics of supplementarity" (Derrida 1981, 235), as well as "mute writing, like that of a circling bird" (Derrida 1981, 241); in sum, "blank spaces" that are to be regarded as "germinal and seminal," "the place where nothing takes place but the place"; not because the "place" is everywhere, but because "the signifying spacings continually reproduce themselves," and the affinity between "white" [*blanc*] and "blank" [*blanc*] "means that each 'white' in the series, each 'full' white thing in the series ... is the trope of the 'empty' white space," and "everything becomes metonymical, the part being each time greater than the whole and the whole smaller than the part." (Derrida 1981, 257-258) "The Mime [who] is acting from the moment he is ruled by *no* actual action and aims toward *no* form of verisimilitude" (Derrida 1981, 219) thus generates syntactic excess; his non-action cannot be dialectically resolved into a synthetic organization correlating *in toto* with the "nature" outside the text. (Derrida 1981, 249)

Derrida finds a structural equivalence between the "complicities and reversibilities" of mimesis and its key terms (the hymen, the supplement) and that of other operators in his work. For instance, the pharmakon, which, in "Plato's Pharmacy," Derrida retrieves from a pivotal exchange recounted by Socrates in the *Phaedrus* between Theuth, the god of numbers and letters, and Thamus, the king to whom Theuth submits each of his arts and inventions for his evaluation. Presenting writing to the King, Theuth says of it that it is "a discipline (*mathema*) that will make the Egyptians wiser (*sophoterous*) and will improve their memories (*mnemonikoterous*): both memory (*mneme*) and instruction (*sophia*) have found their remedy (*pharmakon*)." (Derrida 1981, 96-97) But the King's response suggests from the outset that Theuth has in fact "exhibited the reverse of the true effects of writing" (Derrida 1981, 97) since, as he says, "one man has the ability to beget arts, but the ability to judge of their usefulness or harmfulness to their users belongs to another." (Plato 1925, 274e) From the position of the one whose spoken word alone suffices to and indeed is that which ascribes value to writing in the first place, the effectiveness of the pharmakon is reversible, the medicine in fact doubles as a poison, and, as Thamus goes on

to say, those who are given writing which is produced by external letters to trust over their own memory will in fact cultivate forgetfulness in respect to truth and knowledge. Thus the "father of speech" attempts to "assert his authority over the father of writing." (Derrida 1981, 102) But thus, too, Plato reveals his attempt, through Socrates' recounting of this myth and the mouth of the King, father of speech, to master an ambiguity by imposing upon it oppositions of good/bad, useful/harmful, and true/false, all of which produce the ambiguity in Theuth's use of the word *pharmakon* in the first place. Because of the imposition of these oppositions, which introduce into the word *pharmakon* a double sense, writing *appears* to be helpful to memory, and writing *is* in fact harmful to truth because it allows for a proliferation of appearances. Insofar as "the system is not primarily that of what some *meant-to-say*" (Derrida 1981, 95), the *pharmakon* will therefore have been the "ambivalent" medium produced by but also in which "opposites are opposed" and which "reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other." (Derrida 1981, 127) It is thus "conceived within this original reversibility"—which, again, seems to both inhere in and be imposed upon writing by sovereign speech—that the *pharmakon*, like the supplement, "has no identity," is both medicine and poison and is, "undecidably," "akin to" mimesis. (Derrida 1981, 169 and 139) Here one should note how embedded Derrida's conception of reversibility, and hence the non-identitarian logic of the supplement, the trace, the mark, and the *pharmakon* are in the indecision and undecidability produced by the attempt to domesticate the written sign.

Here, too, one is reminded of the discussion, in *Of Grammatology*, in which Derrida proposes that the de-centering of (Occidental) logocentrism begins with recognizing that "writing in the narrow sense—and phonetic writing above all—is rooted in a past of nonlinear writing." (Derrida 1997, 85) Phonetic writing, Derrida writes, was the spoils from a "war" waged against all that resisted linearization; the image the "West" has of writing as necessarily linear was gained from suppressing what the archaeologist and paleontologist André Leroi-Gourhan called the "mythogram," that is, "a writing that spells its symbols pluri-dimensionally ... [where] the

meaning is not subjected to successivity, to the order of a logical time, or to the irreversible temporality of sound." (Derrida 1997, 85) According to this view, linearity represents a "reduction of history" to that in which pluri-dimensionality cannot be given as a simultaneity, which insofar as it "coordinat[es] two absolute presents" remains a "linearist concept." (Derrida 1997, 85) Correspondingly, the linearization of writing is associated with a "vulgar concept of time" that, as Heidegger suggests in *Being and Time*, designates "a concept of time thought in terms of spatial movement or of the now" and of continuous motion that has dominated Western philosophy since Aristotle's *Physics*. (Derrida 1997, 72 and 86) What the concept of linearization exposes, above all, is linear writing's fundamental unity with the history of phoneticization—specifically, with the moment in that history in which phoneticization is presupposed in such a way that the complicity and tenacity of the non-phonetic qualities of writing were all but eradicated from memory or relegated to a primitive past. However, "the linear norm was never able to impose itself absolutely" (Derrida 1997, 86), precisely because phoneticization has never been conceivable outside of its attempts to "undermine the mute signifier" (Derrida 1997, 89), thereby preserving the possibility of what it tries to limit in its very gesture of limiting it: "discreteness, differance, spacing." (Derrida 1997, 86)

Thus the "line" came to organize all of the world and of language in the "traditional" *vis-à-vis* "Occidental" sense, as presence unfolding itself from one present to the next, its suppressed nonlinear past marking a lost unity with writing's graphic-technical, artistic, religious and economic dimensions in the very figures that disclose that "original reversibility"—itself a paradoxical construction—that produces undecidability in the very decision made to suppress it. Happily, Derrida writes, we also have the example of "largely non-phonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese" that "remained structurally dominated by the ideogram or algebra and we thus have the testimony of a powerful movement of civilization developing outside of all logocentrism." (Derrida 1997, 90) Here, Chinese writing appears for Derrida in quite a different light than did the concept thereof that, earlier in his argument, illustrated a "European hallucination" about

Chinese script's universal characteristic, a hallucination that was shared by Leibniz, amongst others, when he tried to derive from Chinese writing a model for a language that was removed from history and therefore suited to philosophy. (Derrida 1997, 72 and 76) That conception of Chinese writing did not arise for lack of knowledge of real Chinese script, Derrida writes; it was a "misunderstanding" (read: dismissal) of the knowledge that "we have [had] for a long time that largely nonphonetic scripts like Chinese or Japanese included phonetic elements very early." (Derrida 1997, 80 and 90) Tolerating no description that would be based on the logico-grammatical structures of the West and the Aristotelian categories passed on through the logic of the middle ages, real Chinese writing, according to Derrida, thus presents the propensity to "dislocate ... the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *epistémè*" by linking speech and writing differently. (Derrida 1997, 92) Specifically, Chinese writing does so as an "irreducibly graphic poetics" that so fascinated Ezra Pound in the account of the Orientalist and philosopher Ernest Fenollosa and that presented, "with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition." (Derrida 1997, 92)

Two things ought to be considered in regard to Derrida's proposition that his concept of reversibility might be modeled on the Chinese ideogram. First, it bears mentioning that this notion has alarmed sinologists for the past several decades. To briefly sum up some of their objections: there is significant colonialist baggage that accompanies the conception of Chinese script as "ideogrammic," as it invokes stereotypes of a culture that enjoys immediate access to nature, is imitative of its forces, stands outside of historical time, and is passive and essentially non-vocal. (Chang 1988; Cheng 1995; Jung 2011; Zhang 1985) So far as this inheres in all uses of the term "ideogram," Derrida shares the same "Chinese prejudice" of which he earlier accuses Leibniz inasmuch as Leibniz sought to wrench Chinese script from vocality in order to extract an arbitrariness and nonhistoricality from it that gives it over to philosophy. (e.g. Meighoo 2008) In his enthusiasm, Fenollosa even regarded the Chinese character as "a vivid shorthand of the operations of nature." (Fenollosa 2008, 45) But second, Fenollosa also held an energetic view of

Chinese writing that is at odds with the ideogrammic, intuitionist conception thereof. Crucially, it is this second, energetic conception that Derrida cites in his footnote on Fenollosa in *Of Grammatology*, according to which Chinese language displays the "development of the normal transitive sentence"—the key to expressing motive and vital forces in both science and poetic syntax—by rendering the agent and object as the verbs they "secretly" are anyhow in any language.<sup>3</sup> Just as "one action in nature promotes another," Fenollosa writes, so a sentence such as "reading promotes writing" would be "expressed in Chinese by three full verbs," each of which "is the equivalent" of an "expanded clause and can be drawn out" into any number of possible permutations involving "adjectival, participial, infinitive, relative, or conditional members." (Fenollosa 2008, 58; Derrida 1997, 334n.44) "Things," Fenollosa writes, "are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snapshots ... The eye sees noun and verb as one: things in motion, motion in things." (Fenollosa 2008, 46)

This energetic conception of poetic language puts into question the very character of knowing implied by the sentence form.<sup>4</sup> Fenollosa argues that grammarians describe sentences as "uniting a subject and predicate" or as "expressing a complete thought," but that there is no completeness in nature that could serve as an "objective standard," and appealing to a pure subjectivity to unite subject and predicate risks reducing sentences to "accidents" of a conversational animal, the truth of which would be impossible to test. (Fenollosa 2008, 47) Not only does Scholastic logic fail to grasp the incompleteness of nature and therefore the incompleteness of all sentences, but "it is evident that a thought cannot be the test of its own completeness." (Fenollosa 2008, 46) Chinese writing, by contrast, grasps this constitutive incompleteness by virtue of its *verbal* character, which captures things in motion, "working out their own fate" in the sense of their continuous transformation into one another; "motion leaks everywhere, like electricity from an exposed wire. All processes in nature are interrelated" as forces, and forces cannot be captured by the binary logic of the copula, or a unifying subjectivity,

which can only perform "a little private juggling between our right and our left hands" and posit the one as not being the other. (Fenollosa 2008, 47) For Fenollosa, Chinese script's rejection of handedness thus expresses what he calls the "natural order," inasmuch as its "cause and effect" has been modified by the fact of continuous heat death ("motion leaks everywhere"). The "truth" of Chinese writing, Fenollosa writes, is the "transference of power." (Fenollosa 2008, 47) Inasmuch as Derrida modeled his concept of reversibility on this energetic conception of nonlinear writing, reversibility, too, far from eliminating time altogether, presumably also retains a moment of loss, of direction, and of real change.

### **Handedness and Incompleteness**

Derrida, of course, also thought about handedness. In his second set of lectures on *The Beast and the Sovereign*, he provides a gloss on Kant's "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking," in which he, too, describes handedness as being derived from an "axiom of subjectivity[,] ... a zero-point of orientation[,] that prevents me from confusing my right and my left, whereas there is no conceptual, objective, and intelligible difference between a right-hand glove and a left-hand glove." (Derrida 2011, 73) For Kant, "to *orient* oneself" in what he calls the "proper meaning of the word"—that is, not in the sense that had recently been somewhat misconstrued by Moses Mendelssohn as the "maxim that it is necessary to orient oneself in the speculative use of reason ... by means of ... *common sense* or *healthy reason* [and] *plain understanding*," and that had been accused of thereby mobilizing speculation to inadvertently dethrone reason by Jacobi in the famous "Spinozism controversy" that ensued—to "*orient* oneself" according to Kant "means to use a given direction (when we divide the horizon into four of them) in order to find the others—literally, to find the *sunrise*." (Kant 1996, 7-8) For this, Kant says, we therefore "also need the feeling of a difference in my own subject, namely the difference between my right and left hands." (Kant 1996, 8) Without the faculty of feeling this difference *a priori* while moving from left to right and right to left, independently of any data about the difference of

objects in intuition, which is to say without "orienting myself *geographically* only through a *subjective* ground of differentiation," one would quickly become disoriented, being dependent only on the things one sees—and it is evident that one has this faculty of self-orientation even in the dark or walking down unfamiliar streets. (Kant 1996, 9) This means, once again, that the feeling of difference *a priori* is independent of any differences in the objects of intuition and is thus extendable beyond all the bounds of experience, and in turn, that judgments pertaining thereto may be brought only under the maxim governing the subject's own faculty of judgment (rather than any objective grounds of cognition). Handedness, in sum, is "reason's feeling of its own need" in respect to judgments formed in the lack of knowledge; it provides a "guiding thread" for Kant to exhort Jacobi and his followers to reaffirm reason over authority in matters pertaining to belief. (Kant 1996, 10-12)

For beast and sovereign alike, according to Derrida, the axiom that one may differentiate in one's own body is therefore both a promotion to a hitherto inconceivable condition of autonomy and a demotion to a potential radical sameness in the production of judgments. As Derrida remarks, the interest of Kant's text is a Robinsonian one: Kant sets out to orient himself geographically on the principle of subjective differentiation alone, based on the bodily situation of a solitary person claiming to be without any objective, intersubjective or techno-scientific point of reference. But he then "extends" this subjective and sensory principle of differentiation to everything, from mathematics to thinking in general (i.e. to logic). By virtue of extending the principle of sensory irreplaceability (one cannot put one's right hand in a left-hand glove), Kant, according to Derrida, accounts for the "right" of reason to "suppose and admit something reason cannot claim to know by objective principles" and to "orient oneself in thinking," according to "reason's own need," "in the incommensurable space ... of the supra-sensible." (Kant, cited in Derrida 2011, 59-60) This space—which is the space of practical reason—is unlimited because practical reason is, "precisely, unconditioned": Derrida describes it as a "leap into the night," an "infinite leap" and "infinite extension" occasioned by the absolute privilege of

practical reason over the need of theoretical reason. Thus this infinite space that is extrapolated from the "feeling of the proper need of reason," which in turn is the extension of the subjective principle of sensory irreplaceability, is also the spatial condition of possibility, according to Kant, for freely entering into contractual obligations. In "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking," Kant argues that the possibility of civil arrangements hinges on their being distinct from civil compulsion and, therefore, on their hewing to reason's *need* and indeed *right* of a need to assume a highest independent good to prevent morality from being taken as a "mere ideal" (Kant 1996, 12): "reason deserves the right to speak *first* in matters concerning supersensible objects such as the existence of God and the future world." (Kant 1996, 15) Only by giving itself law does reason avert the lawlessness and degenerate enthusiasm of believing itself to be "independent of its *own need*" and preserve civil arrangements from falling into "the greatest disorder." (Kant 1996, 17) Derrida underlines the fact that Kant conceives of civil arrangements as the "*right of reason's need*" (Kant 1996, 10): Kant's point, according to Derrida, is to "extend the always subjective, but sensory, principle of orientation to the right of reason, the right of the need proper to reason to orient itself in thought on the basis of a principle that is always subjective." (Derrida 2011: 60)

But handedness therefore also produces an intractable legal paradox. In "Force of Law," Derrida illustrates this paradox with Kafka's parable "Before the Law": law appears transcendent and inaccessible to the person standing before it because law depends on this very person who stands before and prior to it to institute and authorize it; law is transcendent and only ever promised because it has been written for this person alone, and for the same reason law is "immanent, finite, and in the past." (Derrida 1990, 993) This person, the impossible lawmaker, subtends a space in which all possible acts are unique, all contained within the scope (and dimension) of the rational embodied individual, which means that they are also all legible in advance as well as entirely illegible. In Derrida's words, this is a moment of "suspense" or "*épokhè*," of "founding" or "revolution" that is, "in law, an instance of non-law" and, therefore,



"terrifying": the moment "*always takes place and never takes place in a presence.*" (Derrida 1990, 991)

In response to this paradox, one might be tempted to suggest that the discourse of self-legitimation simply imports its own interpretative model, thereby exercising the right to suspend pre-existing legislative authority along with its norms of reading. Such a prospect, however, only reaffirms that the claim to suspend authority can be a claim to replace one authority with an appeal to another, and that the appeal to abolish authority altogether by virtue of a new interpretative act is merely a reiteration of that extrapolation of the self-legislative "right" of the solitary embodied mind to all domains, up to and including thinking in general. In this extended space where all possible acts are unique, and all are contained within the scope of the rational embodied individual, all of these acts are legible in advance and therefore, to the extent that they are finite, also entirely illegible—because they are also all extensions of the principle of sensory irreplaceability, the "feeling" that one cannot put one's right hand in a left-hand glove. In sum, the intractable legal paradox that Derrida identifies in "Force of Law" and that Kafka's "Before the Law" illustrates for him is itself an iteration of the same presupposition that in *Of Grammatology* governed the several millenia of linearized writing that produced phonologocentrism and its attendant "Chinese prejudice": a presupposition of irreversibility whose apparent necessity—its "need" by "reason"—is tied inextricably to the binary logic of the copula and a unifying subjectivity.

Derrida's argument can in fact be seen as an extension of his earlier appraisal, in his *Introduction to Husserl's Origin of Geometry*, of Husserl's early work on nomology—the study of the principles governing the operations of the mind—which, following Jean Cavailles, Derrida took to be advancing a "tautological conception of mathematics": a conception according to which "the contents of cognition are expressed *in toto* by axioms that, by way of ulterior deductions, ... explicate what has already been posited in the anterior as an indispensable and independent preface to mathematical work" as such. (Cavaillès 1960, 70-71; Derrida 1978, 53n.46) To this extent, Derrida seems to suggest, Husserl is an intuitionist; he shares the same conviction as a

mathematician like L.E.J. Brouwer, for instance, that an "objective thematic field" may be found for geometry by way of "definiteness" and "an exhaustive deductivity." (Derrida 1978, 53)

Employing a logic based in accessible mathematical entities that correspond to concrete intuitions and that one can therefore construct, intuitionism regarded deductivity as co-extensive with constructability, which meant rejecting from mathematics any notions that were inaccessible to intuition (such as the uncountably infinite). Resulting from this was a "system of axioms," as Derrida writes in his *Introduction* following Cavallès, that "governs' a multiplicity, [where] every proposition is determinable *either* as analytic consequence *or* as analytic contradiction." (Derrida 1978, 53; Cavallès 1960, 71) Such "confidence" in the completeness of the system and its co-extensivity with constructability was only dislodged, he remarks, when Kurt Gödel "discovered the rich possibility of 'undecidable' propositions in 1931," that is, in the paper in which he set out his two "incompleteness theorems" concerning the constitutive limitations in every formal axiomatic system in respect to their capacity to prove or disprove every statement expressed in its language. (Derrida 1978, 53; Gödel 1965) So far as this encounter between Husserl's earliest "axiomatic theories concerning mathematics and mathematical physics" (Cavallès's gloss on Husserl's "nomology"; Cavallès 1960, 70) and Gödel's "discovery" is concerned, there is a system in which all terms are demonstrable or refutable by its axioms and which considers itself "saturated," and there is another system that is necessarily "non-saturated" because in it one can "articulate a proposition that is neither the consequence of its axioms nor in contradiction with them: *tertium datur*." (Cavallès 1960, 71-72) The former would relate to the latter as the irreversibility *visz*: sensory irreplaceability that is apparently "needed" by reason would relate to undecidability—here, a kind of non-irreversibility of the left and right hands and a non-presupposition that reason would have either "need" or "right" of such exhaustive constructability of the system.

A peculiar complexity is added to the picture when Derrida invokes formal undecidability, in this sense of the breakdown of confidence in completeness and constructability

introduced by Gödel's theorems, to describe Mallarmé's Mime. As Derrida writes, the Mime mimes imitation itself; as such, it can be said to operate in a system that has no reference or any absolute exteriority or interiority. (Derrida 1981, 219) To describe this operation, Derrida gives a reformulation of Gödel's theorem in the "The Double Session" that follows closely on Cavallès's formulation: "An undecidable proposition, as Gödel demonstrated in 1931, is a proposition which, given a system of axioms governing a multiplicity, is neither an analytical nor deductive consequence of those axioms, nor in contradiction with them, neither true nor false with respect to those axioms. *Tertium datur*, without synthesis."<sup>5</sup> (Derrida 1981, 219) According to this definition, what Gödel's investigations show is, once again in Cavallès's words in respect to Husserl's early work on nomology, that the system is "non-saturated"—and that, therefore, a sentence can be formulated of which the truth cannot be proven from within a formal system and that arithmetic was either inconsistent or inexhaustible. (Cavallès 1960, 72) By "analogy," Derrida writes, the way that Mallarmé's Mime generates syntactic excess also corresponds to formal undecidability: acting as a "simulacrum that simulates the Platonic simulacrum," the Mime's mimesis of mimesis amounts to a "formal or syntactical *praxis*" that renders the truth or falsity of neither iteration determinable within the space they operate in. (Derrida 1981, 219-220) Thus what the Mime mimes in mimesis is, according to Derrida, "a certain inexhaustibility which cannot be classed in the categories of richness, intentionality, or a horizon, and whose form would not be simply foreign to the order of mathematics." (Derrida 1981, 250) And this is true so far as what is in question is the assumption that characterized Husserl's early nomology, namely that the totality of mental operations is exhaustively constructable by the binary logic of truth and falsity. In such a system, which for Derrida also describes the structure of presence named mimesis in "Western philosophy," there inheres a formal undecidability whose "effect" is produced "through the syntax, which disposes the '*entre*' in such a way that the suspense is due only to the placement and not to the content of words" and which determines what Mallarmé terms *hymen*—and so also the "double, contradictory, undecidable value" of signs inasmuch as it

derives from this same "irreducible excess of the syntactic over the semantic." (Derrida 1981, 220-221)

The same syntactic excess produces the paradoxical reversibility of terms within all such systems that, like that of mental operations assumed to be totally describable by axioms as either contradictory or noncontradictory, are underpinned by a unifying subjectivity with a "need of reason" for "sensory irreplaceability" to reinforce presence *as* presence—lending the sort of reversibility found within it (as performed by terms that, in spite of the claims to total constructability, remain undecidable) a peculiar quality of conservation, of irreversibility.<sup>6</sup> All the same, Derrida remarks, "it is possible to recognize a certain serial law" among such terms that is characterized by their "very singular relation to writing." (Derrida 1981, 221) About the singularity of this relation, he writes:

"When this undecidability is marked and re-marked in *writing*, it has a greater power of formalization, even if it is 'literary' in appearance, or appears to be attributable to a natural language, than when it occurs as a proposition in logicomathematical form, which would not go as far as the former type of mark." (Derrida 1981, 222)

In *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry*, Derrida intimates that undecidability only presents itself as a *problem* if the "objective thematic field" is preconstituted to bear a claim to exhaustibility; in a direct response to Cavallès, Derrida writes that only thus would one "be able to say, against the classic affirmations of Husserl, '*tertium datur*.'" (Derrida 1978, 54) The "preoccupation with decidability" belongs only "*within* this unity of the geometrico-mathematical horizon in general" that Husserl questions; thus, "the notion of the un-decidable" retains, beyond its reference to decidability, also "a mathematical value derived from some unique source of value vaster than the project of *definiteness* itself." (Derrida 1978, 53) Aside from anything else, this suggests one thing: there is "writing," which appears even to be "literary," that is of a higher power of formalization than syntax; indeed, "it has as its meaning the possibility of syntax" or the possibility of an opposition between decidability and undecidability, and so "re-marks" the

"between" with a degree of semantic value; given the possibility of another arrangement of syntax and semantic function that is marked in writing, undecidability *per se* falls away as a problem, leaving its trace as re-mark, as un-decidability and as "undecidability." (Derrida 1981, 222) As one knows, Derrida argues that Gödel's theorems cease to pose a problem for Husserl after Husserl turns from establishing an exhaustive deductive system for his nomology to investigating the origin of geometrical determinability in general, thereby "reducing" the "ideal itself of decidability" in view of a "truth-sense in general" of a purely mathematical tradition that "does not permit itself to be bound by the alternative of 'true' or 'false.'" (Derrida 1978, 56) Put on display by the Mime in "The Double Session," by analogy, is therefore also "un-decidability" as pertains to a "truth-sense" of writing's own, which fills the region where reason's "right of need" does not obtain and instead gives way to the questionability of origins and orientations, to intelligible objectifiable differentiation, and to the reversibility *qua* transformability of the one hand into the other.

### **Reversing the Glove**

Returning to the ambivalence with which Derrida presents the term "reversibility" in "Force of Law" when he arrives at the question of the undecidable element in the ungrounding of every law:

"This unreadability of violence results from the very readability of a violence that belongs to what others would call the symbolic order of law, if you like, and not to pure physics. We might be tempted to reverse this 'logic' like a glove ('logic' in quotation marks, for this 'unreadable' is also very much 'illogical' in the order of logos [...]), the 'logic' of this readable unreadability. In sum, it signifies a juridico-symbolic violence, a performative violence at the very heart of interpretative reading." (Derrida 1990, 995)

The operation to which Derrida alludes here is the continuous topological transformation of an object into its incongruent counterpart, a frequently deployed illustration of which is the

continuous deformation of a left-hand glove into a right-hand glove. Such a transformation means precisely *not* that it is impossible to hold fast to a place but rather that place or site (*topos*) generates the parameters for the transformation and not an extrinsic measure (such as a subjective principle, which would make the counterparts incongruent because they would be oriented within a set of coordinates sensed a priori). Key is that figures that undergo continuous transformations are considered to remain invariant, as what matters in respect to the problems for which topology's analytic tools were developed is not the exact shape of the objects involved but the way they are put together. In topological terms, for instance, both a square and a circle are one-dimensional objects that divide the plane into a part inside and a part outside; it is impossible to cross each of the seven bridges of Königsberg exactly once due to the way they are connected to islands and riverbanks, not their lengths or distances from one another. Topology defines those properties on which such problems *do* rely with the idea of homeomorphism, or "invertible" transformation: the Königsberg bridge problem applies to any arrangement of bridges that is "homeomorphic" to it, that is, can be deformed into it without cutting or gluing, just as a left-hand glove is homeomorphic to a right-hand glove by virtue of one's continuous deformation into the other. From a topological point of view, the left hand and the right hand are the "same"; their "sameness" is evidently not based on a mimetic relation or a sensory irreplaceability but instead ceaselessly oscillates as a constitutive deformation of one another. What Derrida's allusion suggests is a non-mimetic homeomorphism between the force that founds the new and perhaps some other force altogether, to be discovered in a region in which no point is orientable to a horizon.

Derrida is ambivalent about the possible ("tempting") misuse of reversibility as a figure standing in for mere reversal, which risks establishing a mimetic capacity of law-positing violence in respect to violence that asserts and conserves itself in the guise of law. Later, of course, Derrida regards with suspicion the idea of there being some other kind of violence that, according to his reading of "Toward the Critique of Violence," Benjamin wishes to posit as

"neither a justified nor an unjustified means." This other kind of violence would, "undecidably, ... no longer even be a means but would enter into a whole other relation with the pair means/end" as a violence he associates with the divine and that Derrida famously criticizes as a mystified foundation of authority. (Derrida 1990, 1021) As Benjamin writes, the experience of such a case where, posed in terms of means and ends, the legitimacy of the force remains undecidable ultimately extends to the undecidability of all legal problems, "which in its hopelessness can perhaps be compared only with the impossibility of deciding conclusively on what is "correct" or "false" in evolving languages." (Benjamin 2021, 54) For Derrida, Benjamin's reference to "evolving languages" is analogous with the account he gives, in his 1916 essay "On Language in General and on Human Language," of the origin of law in the "babbling" incited by the fall into "mediate" language, that is, the language of signs and questions. (Derrida 1990, 1023) By extension, what Benjamin then identifies as the "nonmediate function of violence" (Benjamin 2021, 54) can for Derrida only pertain to an errant characterization of violence which is not a means to an end as "ha[ving] no object other than to show and show itself" and, therefore, to a missed opportunity to illuminate the "true mechanism" of decision as violence within the domain of language. (Derrida 1990, 1025) Nevertheless, he seems to hold out for some other sense of reversing the "logic" of foundation like a glove, a sense that is not merely "tempting" or circumscribed within the order of signs but discoverable somehow in the realm of "pure physics." (Derrida 1990, 995) How might one understand this?

In fact, Benjamin offers a hint in the opening paragraph of his essay on violence, where he writes of the criterion that uncalculated, immediate force—"effective ... cause"—must fulfil in order to transition into violence and thereby become the proper object of a critique of violence: "only when it intervenes in moral relations." (Benjamin 2021, 39) That is, force, in the sense of proximate cause, becomes discernible as violence and offers itself to critique only in the sphere of morality, which is circumscribed by the concepts of law and justice, and only in "intervening in" or doing something in respect to their relations. Violence is therefore

characterized by causality, specifically by the relation of cause and effect; but it becomes discernible as violence only in the sphere of moral relations, which is also the sphere designated by a bifurcation between law, itself defined by the relation between means and ends, and justice, which is not. Very quickly it becomes clear that for Benjamin, the question of violence is the question of how an "intervention" might occur in such a way that it leads from law to justice—and as the essay soon demonstrates, this question of what means to just ends turns just as quickly to all the ways in which the gap between them cannot be closed, leading to the insight into the "ultimate undecidability" of all legal problems. Beyond this sphere of undecidability, however, which is to say what remains entirely decisive, is the fact that prior to the legibility and legitimization of violence there was effective cause, or pure physical force: force that in itself is merely causal, or directionless, and intervenes in moral relations while remaining entirely amoral. But because its schema is distinct from that of means and ends, pure physical force, including that of natural phenomena which intervene in moral relations in the guise of "fate," is therefore also reversible in principle.

Similarly, for Derrida, it is within the "symbolic order" that the undecidability of all legal problems is produced. Within the symbolic order, the iterability of legitimating violence "inscribes conservation in the essential structure of foundation." (Derrida 1990, 1009) Outside of this order, however, is "pure physics," a region in which force is illegible for the moral sphere—unless it intervenes as violence in all of its attendant and undecidable guises. At minimum, the separating out of these two regions—the "symbolic" and the "physical"—renders an illegibility newly legible *as* an illegible source of the conservative violence in law, as the reliance of conservatism on violence that asserts and perpetuates itself in the moral sphere and in the guise of law, and as the inseparability of the conservation of legal violence from its appearance as irreplaceable and irreversible. By the same token, however, in the region of physics the law of conservation does not hold sway alone. As we read in *Of Grammatology*: "The access to pluri-dimensionality and to a delinearized temporality is not a simple regression toward



the 'mythogram'; on the contrary, it makes all the rationality subjected to the linear model appear as another form and another age of mythography." (Derrida 1997, 87)

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<sup>1</sup> These quotes were included on the handout accompanying Derrida's initial presentation of his "sessions." See Derrida 1981, 174-75.

<sup>2</sup> Derrida derives the phrase "semantic reversal" from Jean-Pierre Richard, who he says also uses the term to describe "the theme of *la décollation*" in Richard 1961, 199. But Derrida makes clear that he sees in this "reversal," semantic or not, a structural similarity with a host of other figures including, to draw just from the examples given in the same passage, writing's "describing" and "de-inscribing" itself, that is the "'coilings' and 'reprises' that bring [writing] back to itself" and, in so doing, underscore what it is that "suspends" the title "up in the air" in such a way that its "multiplicity of facets" will "never be counted or reduced." See Derrida 1981, 179-180.

<sup>3</sup> That Derrida cites Fenollosa's "energetic" and verbally anchored conception of Chinese poetry is pointed out in Saussy 2001, 38.

<sup>4</sup> For a full account of how Fenollosa's energetic view sits in tension with his own ideogrammic conception of Chinese poetry, cf. Saussy 2008, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Bates (2005) has pointed out that Derrida follows Cavallès in particular in this restatement of incompleteness theorem; see Bates (2005, 10) for an extended discussion the significance of this fact.

<sup>6</sup> In a footnote corresponding to this thought in his *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry*, Derrida writes: "Thus, undecidability has a revolutionary and disconcerting sense, it is *itself* only if it remains essentially and intrinsically haunted in its sense of origin by the *telos* of decidability—whose disruption it marks." (Derrida 1978, 53n.48)