

# Deconstruction, Right against the Body of Hospitality<sup>1</sup>

*Giustino De Michele*<sup>2</sup>

---

## Abstract

The title of this article, “Deconstruction, Right against the Body of Hospitality”, contains a quotation from Jacques Derrida’s *Hospitality* seminar. Here Derrida, while exposing the impossibility to distinguish a host from a guest (*hôte* from *bôte*, in French), and a friendly from a hostile one (a *hospes* from a *hostis*) – and therefore hospitality from hostility – says: “this is not here a contingent accident. It is a destiny, it is an essential law, inscribed *right against the body of hospitality*, it is the space and time of hospitality”.

## Keywords

deconstruction, *à même*, finitude of hospitality, enclavement, maternity and solicitude

## 1.

The title of this article, “Deconstruction, right against the Body of Hospitality”, contains a quotation from Jacques Derrida’s *Hospitality* seminar.<sup>3</sup> Here Derrida, while exposing the impossibility of distinguishing a host from a guest (*hôte* from *bôte*, in French), and a friendly from a hostile one (a *hospes* from a *hostis*) – and therefore hospitality from hostility – says:

this is not here a contingent accident. It is a destiny, it is an essential law, inscribed *right against the body of hospitality*, it is the space and time of hospitality.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is a slightly modified version of a paper presented in Budapest in the occasion of the 2022 Derrida-Lectures, organized by Jolan Orbán et Anikó Radvánszky, whom I wish to thank for their lasting hospitality.

<sup>2</sup> LLCP, Université Paris 8, [giustinodemichele@gmail.com](mailto:giustinodemichele@gmail.com)

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Hospitalité, volume I. Séminaire (1995–1996)*, Paris, Seuil, 2021 (hereafter, *HO*). All translation from this seminar, in this article, will be mine.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 256 (the stress is mine).

This is my translation. The French text says “*C’est une destinée, une loi d’essence inscrite à même le corps de l’hospitalité*”. I don’t know how felicitous my translation is, but since neither French nor English is my mother tongue,<sup>5</sup> I chose one that could underscore what is, for me, the potentially problematic character of the expression “à même”. This expression will be my thread, and following it I will try to expose an axiom and a postulate that define hospitality according to Derrida.

In my translation, “right against” stands for “*tout contre*”, which in turn renders “à même” in the sense of a contact which is also a contrast. Thus, the “law of essence”<sup>6</sup> that Derrida evokes would be inscribed right against, right upon the body of hospitality, as a sort of tattoo. Also, “against” resonates with the ambivalence between intimacy and hostility, which structures the essence of such hospitality. Moreover, it stresses a sort of friction of deconstruction against hospitality. Not only against its formal aspects: in this vein, throughout the seminar, Derrida reiterates prudence concerning the perversion of the laws of conditional hospitality and of the law of unconditional hospitality. Not only friction against the form, but also against the body of hospitality. Of course, deconstruction is against any body proper, against any ideology of an authentic material hospitality of sorts. But beforehand, I simply found worth stressing that, in order to offer resistance, to be able to produce some friction, this concept or allegory of hospitality cannot go without some kind of a body.

<sup>5</sup>Throughout the seminar Derrida reiterates the remarks concerning language, and in particular translation (thus, concerning language as translation, which is to say as an idiomatic performance of auto-hetero-translation, or -affection), as a paradigm of hospitality. It is no accident, then, that Eric Prenowitz’s translator’s note to Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1996, p. 103–111, is entitled “Right on [à même]”: if “right on” (no brackets added in the text) is Prenowitz’s translation of “à même” – cf. p. 8: “right on the so called body-proper”, and p. 20: “an incision right on the skin” (the stress is Derrida’s) – our syntagm is identified by the translator as a paradigmatical operator for fashioning and seizing a deconstructive conception of archivation, of the “impression” (as per the subtitle of Derrida’s book). In such book and note (see also note 17 *infra*), this operator catalyses a problematisation of the distinctions between an impression without or with lesion, between typographic (inert) and bodily (living) inscription, and between the material (and metaphorical) and the immaterial (and more general, if – and – not proper) sense of archivation (“Right on the ash”, glosses Prenowitz, *ibid.*, p. 111). Shall we add that, as we will see shortly (see the quotation referenced *infra* by note 11), for Derrida this expression “translates” an indecidable structure? As per the high speculative value of “à même”, and for a particular translation of this expression (“the overlap”, “overlapping”), see Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard. From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, tr. Alan Bass, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 283.

<sup>6</sup>“Loi d’essence”, in *HO*, p. 256, *loc. cit.*

## 2.

Yet, in fact, I did not concentrate on “à même” for these general, theoretical reasons (the motive of language and translation as paradigms of hospitality, that of contact as at the same time intimacy and opposition), but for a contingent interest in it, and upon stumbling into the thematisation that Derrida dedicates to this expression in the 2nd session of the seminar. This made me think of another thematisation of *à même* (the only other, as far as I am aware of), one that struck me since it seemed to establish an opposition – that which would be problematic if coming from Derrida’s perspective.

This other thematisation takes place in the unpublished seminar *Manger l’autre*.<sup>7</sup> Here Derrida aims to define what “eating” or “loving to eat the other” means. In the 5th session of the seminar, he deals with milk and breastfeeding between Augustine, Rousseau, and Nietzsche (as many milk brothers, and warring brothers, *frères de lait* and *frères ennemis* within himself, as he defines them). And here, he draws a distinction:

One has to distinguish here between milk (or sperm), and blood.<sup>8</sup> When the nursling – or whoever mimics the nursling in a figure or a rhetoric of suckling<sup>9</sup> – suckles right against [*à même*] the breast, “right against” translates or describes at the same time the immediate contact of the hand-to-hand [*corps-à-corps*, again an ambivalence, between fighting and lovemaking], the suction<sup>10</sup> from the source and without intermediaries, but also, normally, without tearing off or without lesion.<sup>11</sup>

Derrida thus employs “à même” to distinguish suckling from cannibalism, consuming from eating the other, as lips from teeth or milk from blood. He does so in a long parenthesis in which he convokes psychoanalysis: Freud from the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, of course, but also and notably the Hungarian branch (in particular Karl Abraham, Ferenczi, and Klein) which has a lot to say on incorporating and eating the other. I think that Derrida’s distinction remains questionable. But what matters here is to point out two elements that, while they deconstruct the opposition between suckling and biting, also say something about hospitality.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l’amitié: Manger l’autre*, unpublished seminar (EHESS 1989-90), IMEC archives, Fonds <sup>Archives</sup> Jacques Derrida / IMEC (hereafter, *MA*). All translations from this seminar, in this article, will be mine.

<sup>8</sup> Derrida writes: “*le lait, le sperme ou le sang*”; milk and sperm are associated (because of their color, and of the fashion of their extraction) as opposed to blood.

<sup>9</sup> In French: “*allaitement*”.

<sup>10</sup> In French: “*aspiration*”.

<sup>11</sup> *MA* 130.

1) Derrida insists on *Anlehnung*, or Anaclisis: the process by which, according to Freud, the subject's superior functions depend or *lean* on inferior ones. Namely, the sexual function would lean on – or *à même* – the nutritive one, as Derrida says<sup>12</sup> commenting on Freud's example of supplementary auto-affection through suckling one's thumb. For Derrida this scheme goes so far as to include oral auto-affection and *all* its supplements. In other words: speaking, and even writing, would depend on eating. The *langue* (language) leans *à même* the *langue* (tongue), the latter (the tongue) being moreover only one part of a complex bodily apparatus, including lips, teeth, etc. Of course, Derrida criticizes Freud's biologism, but he takes very seriously psychoanalysis recalling that an "irreducible genealogy,"<sup>13</sup> as he says, relates all oral enjoyment – all rhetoric, all discourse – to hunger. All: hence, included about hospitality. And by the way: is not eating the other a way of hosting another?

2) In this digression, Derrida discusses cannibalism in Karl Abraham. He wishes to contest the postulate of an original, non-sadistic oral phase (coinciding with a primal narcissism, during which the nursling would only suckle, or eat *à même* the other). This phase would be followed by the cannibalistic one (when the infant would bite, or eat *the* other, that which entails weaning, frustration, reactive aggressiveness, and so on). To say this very roughly, in order to criticize this position Derrida adopts a Melanie Klein-like theory of development: sadism and ambivalence are original, structural, and this applies to the infant toward the mother *and vice-versa*.<sup>14</sup> In the lexicon of hospitality, we shall say that the bosom or breast (*le sein*) is not the haven of pacified hospitality.

### 3.

Let us get back to the *Hospitality* seminar. Here Derrida thematizes "*à même*" in the 2nd session, while discussing a passage from Benveniste's *Vocabulary* chapter on hospitality. Derrida spots Benveniste's idea whereby it would be counterintuitive to deduce, from a name denoting "power" or "mastery", the connotation of identity or "sameness" – whereas the contrary, that is, to deduce the proper meaning of mastery from an adjective denoting identity, would be comprehensible. Derrida criticizes this position doubly.

<sup>12</sup> MA 132.

<sup>13</sup> MA 133.

<sup>14</sup> On Derrida's relation to Melanie Klein, I permit myself to refer to Giustino De Michele, "Comment le dénier : legs de Melanie Klein", *Bollettino Filosofico*, vol. 36: Silvano Facioni and Fabrizio Palombi (eds.), *Decostruzione e psicoanalisi. A partire da Derrida*, Università della Calabria, 2021, p. 19-33.

1) On the one hand, by showing that in the whole history of philosophy the position of identity has been considered the effect of the manifestation of a power or force (be it the power or force of substance, of spirit, of Being, or will). Benveniste, from a linguist's supposedly objective position – better still, muses Derrida, according to the *ethos* of this position – would remain naively subject to the philosophical force of sameness. This makes him at the same time a formalist and an empiricist.

2) But what matters to us, on the other hand, is Derrida's semantic analysis of the word “*même*”. Derrida wants to find “[a] – virtual or explicit – opposition in the very inside [*au-dedans même*] of identity or of equality, of the sameness [*mêmeté*]”.<sup>15</sup> And he chooses the expression “*tout de même*” (all the same), as an exclamation of surprise to suggest how sameness can host an objection, how its “hyperbolic excess”<sup>16</sup> can show the alterity lodged at its heart.

In an aside of this semantic analysis, Derrida treats the meaning of “*à même*”. This expression involves some trouble of sameness as well, but other than its hyperbolic excess. While stressing the extreme difficulty in translating it, Derrida explains two uses of it.

1) As a prepositional locution, “*à même*” means the “contact, in difference, between one body and another, a contact in an absolute proximity but without confusion, a contact that yields *without* yielding [or leaving: *laisser*] room to a foreign [or a stranger's: *étranger*] body”.<sup>17</sup> Such a foreign body “penetrates without penetrating” its support or substrate. Sleeping right on the ground and drinking right from the bottleneck are Derrida's first examples.

2) As an adverb, being “*à même de*” means being capable, or having the power if not the habilitation to do something. In Benveniste's words, the issue is that of the power of the “pos-essor, as of he who is established (sitting) upon the thing”.<sup>18</sup> As for Derrida, he says that all he will say about power and social power, hence about the power of hosting, and *a fortiori* of mastering one's own place, home, or “*chez soi*”, depends on this meaning.

<sup>15</sup> HO 55.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. HO 57: “*la surenchère hyperbolique*”.

<sup>17</sup> HO 62, the stress is Derrida's. Here Derrida says of “*à même*” that it is “one of the French expressions that I know by my experience to be one of the hardest to translate and therefore one of the most interesting”. This session of the seminar was given on December 13th 1995; the first English version of *Archive Fever*, in the translation of Eric Prenowitz, was published on *Diacritics*, Vol. 25 No. 2, Summer 1995, p. 9-63 and Derrida might very plausibly be referring here to the task of such translation (see note 5 *supra*).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Émile Benveniste, *Dictionary of Indo-European Concepts and Society*, 2106 p. 65: “\**pot-sedere* [...] describes the ‘possessor’ as somebody who is established on something [*sur la chose*]”.

If we combine these two points, then “à même” enables us to think about hospitality as concerns the relation that one has to one’s power and legitimacy, to its conditions of possibility, to its ground, and as concerns the structure of this ground, substrate, or “thing” (*chose*).

#### 4.

For Derrida, against Benveniste, a subject, or a host, is the hypostasis of a power, and this in turn expresses the *ipseitas* of the *metipsissimum*, of a pre-subjective sameness, of the thing itself. This position is still potentially metaphysical. Then, how to characterize a deconstructive host and hospitality? Just before explaining what “à même” means, Derrida had employed an *axiom* to this effect.

*Hospitality is finite.* “By definition, there is no hospitality among infinite beings; the *hôte*, in both senses of the word [host and guest] must be finite”.<sup>19</sup> This finitude is what entails the selection, the restrictions, the interest taken and the preference exerted, according to the tragic legality of hospitality.<sup>20</sup>

This axiom goes almost without saying for Derrida. In fact, I just quoted a passage from further on in the seminar. This, instead, is what Derrida says in the 2nd session, while he discusses Rousseau’s trope of the irreplaceable solicitude of the mother:

How not to abuse of one’s irreplaceability, hence, of one’s mortality? How to render oneself replaceable, so as to not charge the weight of one’s own singularity, and therefore of one’s own death, on the other?<sup>21</sup>

Singularity means mortality. I do not know if this equivalence is analytical. In fact, a couple of pages before the digression on “à même”, I had been struck by this assumption. Cannot a singular being (for example Aristotle’s god) be infinite? At least in itself, or by definition? Be that as it may, Derrida assumes that singularity *is* finitude, and most of all that the singularity of the *hôte* is finite. So finitude is the milieu, the ground of hospitality. This condition entails at the same time the irreplaceability of the singular being (since it is singular), and the impossibility of not replacing it (since it is not infinite). This is the cause of the abuse, of the violence and tragedy that inhabit even the best intentioned of hospitable negotiations. As we said, this argument stems

---

<sup>19</sup> HO 132, n. 2.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. HO 309.

<sup>21</sup> HO 60.

from a parenthesis of the analysis of the word “*même*”, where Derrida comments on (Derrida comments on a passage) passage from Rousseau’s *Émile*:

Other women, or even animals [*des bêtes même*], may give [the nursling] the milk [the mother] denies him. But there is no supplement for maternal solicitude.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, breastfeeding is the figure of the best intentioned and the most natural scene of hospitality, and *tout de même* also of its most radical trouble, or abuse.

This argument on maternity structures a crucial reflection on the mother tongue, in this seminar as well as in *The Monolingualism of the Other*,<sup>23</sup> and even a further parenthesis on solicitude as a sort of synonym for deconstruction itself.

To follow my thread, I will rather remark that the digression on “à *même*” comes right after this one on maternal solicitude. And I would like to point out how, in this vein, the figure of the dual relation of breastfeeding *can* deconstruct the naturalness of hospitality and of its embodiment. To begin with, the infant is hosted in the bosom, he is at home by the other, *chez soi chez l'autre*: right on, directly against the other. Moreover (cf. note 14 *supra*), if we follow Derrida elaborating after Melanie Klein, this dwelling is ever split, cleaved, and therefore is the source of satisfaction and frustration, hatred and love. And furthermore: this relation represents precisely the inversion of the host and guest described by Derrida: since the mother (and notably its substance: milk, and milk supplements blood) is not only ethically the hostage of the guest: she is literally hosted, incorporated by the other, and this at the same time on the tangible level, on the symbolic and affective level, and on the phantasmatic level (the psyche of the infant is construed by the ambivalent images of its mother-world). Even more so: some of these incorporated images are in turn trying to incorporate the infant, to tear it apart and swallow it. And this subject is very literally a hostage of the mother. So, if along with Imre Hermann, that Derrida speaks about in a 1975 interview,<sup>24</sup> we notice that the mother is the descendant of the nursling she once was, we can amuse ourselves multiplying *in abyme* the folds of this condition.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou de l'éducation*, in *Œuvres complètes*, t. 4, Paris, Gallimard, 1969, p. 257 (my translation), cit. in HO 58. Mistakenly, maybe symptomatically, in the seminar Derrida says that he had forgotten to mention or comment on this passage in *Of Grammatology* (Corrected Edition, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998.

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Between Brackets I”, in *Points... Interviews, 1974–1994*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1995.

## 5.

The axiom stating the finitude of hospitality oriented us toward the body, birth, infancy, and toward the milk and blood of a maternal ground. This can be regressive, to say the least. But this can also trouble the ground upon which hospitality is supposed to be fast established: before the social body (family, civil society, or state), the personal body. This is why Derrida reiterates considerations on space and topology often in relation to technical innovations (from communication to medical and genetic technology).

Then, what is the relation between the finitude and the embodiment of hospitality? A finite singularity is embodied insofar as it is not immaterial: it is extended, and therefore divisible, and mutable. This is necessary if such a singularity has to be affected and auto-affected, parasited and auto-parasited. A space susceptible of contradiction, if not space as the condition of possibility of contradiction, auto-immunizes or deconstructs hospitality. Derrida's model is not Cartesian, and not even Kantian.<sup>25</sup> It is a more grotesque spatiality. To see which one, let us return to the first occurrence of the "*à même*" that we considered.

As we saw, Derrida writes: "this *here* is *no more* a contingent accident. It is a destiny, it is an essential law, inscribed *right against the body of hospitality*, it is the space and time of hospitality". This use of *à même* deserves three considerations:

1) It denotes at the same time something essential (not a contingent accident) and a modification (an inscription on a body). This body would always have been inscribed before every possibility of experiencing it as a proper, or a whole one. Thus, *à même* convokes the original secondarity of Derrida's notion of writing. Writing is *à même*. *À même* is an imprint. It is also worth stressing that, as Derrida explains, this structure is, "at least by way of a simple analogy, [...] 'like' (*comme*) the transcendental esthetics of hospitality".<sup>26</sup> This body is not that of a singular subject (the incarnation of a noumenon); it is not even a transcendental scheme; but the scheme or rather the *Bild*, that is, a model representing the structure of experience itself (therefore comprising or involving more than one singularity).

2) Derrida says: this is not "*here*" a contingent accident. "Here" means "in this impossible- or non-representable-geometry space" (*dans cet espace à géométrie impossible ou non objectivable, non représentable*), a space that entails the "*être chez soi chez l'autre*". This space is the form of the ground of hospitality.

To characterize it, Derrida has recourse to a *postulate*:

<sup>25</sup> Which is to say: irreducibly oriented, inhabited by an intimate gap.

<sup>26</sup> HO 256–257.



a general topology of the enclave must organize all theory of ipseity as hospitality or hostipitality. *Dès lors que* (since) the ipseity of the self and of the by-oneself [*du chez-soi*] entails some enclave, everything becomes more complicated, [...] even more so, indefinitely [*à l'infini*], since an enclave can also be cleaved in itself, and a cleaved enclave is also the opening of an enclave in the enclave”, and even more so since this “does not even mean an opening-closing ‘*en abyme*’”,<sup>27</sup> not even a figure in a figure..., but rather a fold in a fold...

A bit later Derrida repeats: “*Dès que* (since) there is hospitality, if there is any, there is enclavement”, “and invagination”.<sup>28</sup> This is the space of hospitality. But what is an enclave? It is “a place, an exterior territory enclosed in the interior, an included exteriority”.<sup>29</sup> It “is (a) safe, an outcast outside inside the inside”.<sup>30</sup> In one word, it is a crypt, in the very technical sense developed by Abraham and Torok, after the Hungarian bioanalytical vein and the motif of cannibalism, and that Derrida generalizes in “Fors” (cf. note 30 *supra*), and already in *Glas*.

3) The last remark is due to maternity. Here, it is Klossowski’s *hôtesse*, the female host, the figure that Derrida employs to impersonate the contradictory topology of hospitality. This woman is “the first motor as of hospitality, the place where one’s home is but an invaginated enclave in the other’s home”, where “*on est chez soi chez l’autre*”.<sup>31</sup>

## 6.

It would be interesting to confront this solicitous first motor with Aristotle’s indifferent one, which is maybe singular, but surely infinite; which is thus only the object, but not a subject of desire. And a wholly other ground of hospitality.

We could also compare this solicitous paradigm of hospitality with Benveniste’s: a virile and public one, where a man is habilitated to embody the sovereignty over a social body by means of this body’s meaningful word.

We could follow the bio- and physiological motif in the seminar, where Derrida renews the traditional motif of the animality of the political, through another model of the living.

<sup>27</sup> HO 253.

<sup>28</sup> HO 255.

<sup>29</sup> HO 249.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Fors: The English Words of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok”, Foreword to Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man’s Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. xiv.

<sup>31</sup> HO 256.

I will rather end on the motif of language. And in particular, based on the definition of a finite and embodied hospitality, on what Derrida says about the inscription, right against a language which in turn works right against the body of hospitality, of what he calls “referential singularities”:<sup>32</sup> proper names, dates, and idiomatic happenings.

Let us follow one last time the “à même” thread. After an axiom and a postulate, it will lend an example of this referentiality.

Right after the explanation of the “à même”, Derrida says:

this little word “*même*”, whose homonymy, so to speak, with “*m’aime*”, of ‘I love myself’ or of ‘you love me’, renders untranslatability even more vertiginous [...], could be the last reason to remain in this country or to dwell in this language (French).<sup>33</sup>

MEMEME, echoing the MUMMUM from *Finnegan’s Wake*,<sup>34</sup> Derrida mimics lallation. His lips auto-affect (the genealogy of the kiss, for Freud read by Derrida, is the same as that of thumb suckling). Here is a case of supplementary, quasi- or infra-linguistic, embodied, and idiomatic oral enjoyment. This language, arising à même the lips, that lie à même the teeth, is not “linguistic”, as it were. It manifests a more general semiotics. If hospitality adheres to this language and body, then this body and this adherence, and the redoutability of a body à même to speak, are what make its condition *more and more complicated*, as Derrida puts it.

---

<sup>32</sup> HO 166, n. 1; cf. 309.

<sup>33</sup> HO 62-63.

<sup>34</sup> On this point, I permit myself to refer to Giustino De Michele “La toilette entre Derrida et Joyce. Une stratégie d’appropriation”, *L’inconscio, Rivista Italiana di Filosofia e Psicoanalisi*, n. 13: Claudio D’Aurizio and Fabrizio Palombi (eds.), *Joyce e l’inconscio*, Università della Calabria, 2022, p. 104–131.