

The Game of Metaphysics and the Sign. *Sign – Writing – Origin. (Con)texts of Deconstruction* by Anikó Radvánszky, Kijárat, Budapest, 2015

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The book *Sign – Writing – Origin* by Anikó Radvánszky draws attention to the early period of Jacques Derrida’s work, to the fundamental texts that elaborate the basic concepts and logic of deconstruction, as well as its intellectual strategy. Following this logic, it interrogates the contexts of Derrida’s emerging philosophy, taking account of the need for the innermost critique of Western philosophy. We are talking specifically about an internal approach – not overturning the existing order according to the criteria of a newly introduced structure of thought but examining the ‘disorder’ inherent in the existing order from within, exploring its role and processes and rethinking the system in question. In Derrida’s case, what is at stake is the reconsideration of the metaphysics of fixed meaning-structures, subjecting metaphysics to its own internal critique:

*There is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics. We have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history; we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest. To take one example from many: the metaphysics of presence is shaken with the help of the concept of *sign*. (Derrida 1980, 354, my italics)*

The book begins with a key statement from Jacques Derrida’s lecture “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences”, given at Johns Hopkins University in 1966, and accordingly, questions the possibilities of metaphysics in the 20th–21st centuries. This book is about metaphysics, in the language of metaphysics, considering its 20th century destabilisation and exploring its conditions of possibility in the given circumstances.

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What is the presence-shaking effect of the operation of the sign? Why this shock? How, in what way, where does it lead? What conclusions should we draw from the necessity of the emergence and spread of deconstruction, or, in Derrida's terms, its dissemination? The book questions the genealogy of deconstruction, which at first glance seems to be a heretical idea in relation to the philosophy of Jacques Derrida, who addressed genealogy as such with the deepest Kantian critique – an unorthodox approach, no doubt.

But once the first surprise has passed, we must realise that Anikó Radványzky's excellent book, its perspective, its strategy of thinking faithfully following Derrida's, forces us to take a step back: we change perspectives, we must rethink everything we thought, or even assumed we knew, about genealogy as we follow the analyses of the book. Genealogy, as history and study of origins, traditionally presupposes a linear sequence of thought, an orderly series of correlations of cause and effect, a story that can be told in a meaningful and clear way. Anikó Radványzky does not make use of this reductive claim to linearity, far from narrowing deconstruction to a single dimension, she opens genealogy to the context, or even contexts, of deconstruction. Saussure's semiotics, Paul de Man's literary theory and Walter Benjamin's theory of translation are three possible focal points of interpretation. Derrida's work offers certainly much more, but the monographer's choice of these three interrelated areas is not accidental: in her interpretation deconstruction became an age defining, genuinely pivotal, paradigm-shifting way of thinking by moving within the space marked by these three theories – since it opened up and rewrote Western metaphysics for the interpretational horizons of the 20th–21st centuries by reinterpreting the concept of writing.

The key is the dynamic otherness of *différence* and *différance* condensed into a single signifying irregularity: the emergence of “a” (a single, phonetically imperceptible change, merely a change in graphic form!), that opens up worlds. The free play of the grapheme leads the thinker out of the rigid, closed world of structured system philosophies, and this brought about truly profound changes in the 20th century, especially in the philosophical fields that had been assumed as fundamental. It is safe to say that the legacy of deconstruction is an existential question – nothing more, nothing less: the question of Being, ontology, and rethinking its central problem of ontological difference – which was of fundamental importance in the second half of the 20th century in a wide range of social sciences, far beyond theory. *Différance* is inscribed, meaningfully in the history of the 20th century. In Derrida's words: “In a certain aspect of itself, *différance* is certainly but the historical and epochal unfolding of Being or of the ontological difference. The ‘a’ of *différance* marks the movement

of this unfolding.” (Derrida 1982, 22, quoted in Radvánszky 2015, 119) The author traces this unfolding meticulously in her book, focusing on the semiotic workings of language and thus of our thinking. She begins by analysing the Derridean reading of Saussure’s theory of signs, and then, through an interpretation of Saussure’s anagram studies, she explores the creative power of the irregularity of language use. Then, widening the scope further, indulging in the dissemination of the operation of signs, she seeks to understand the translatability of texts, or more precisely the overwhelming Babelic experience of untranslatability. The game of differences rewrites our world in ever-widening waves (the genealogical line chosen by the author illustrates this beautifully), it opens up more and more dimensions of otherness to us, and this multiplicity, indeed, overwhelms the thinker as the confusion of Babel, no matter how much they try to navigate it with an understanding openness.

The governing idea of the book, that is, the contemporary significance of a *genealogical* reading of Derrida’s *différance*, becomes clear from the Babel experience of deconstruction. Derrida’s recurring reading of Genesis, and in particular his writing *The Towers of Babel*, has an emblematic meaning regarding the message of the oeuvre according to the author. Genesis is a history of origins, and within it the Tower of Babel story speaks about the origin of languages, or more precisely, the history of origins that explains the multiplicity of languages and the origin of the differences between languages – Radvánszky’s *Sign – Writing – Origin* is a fascinating text that goes beyond academic writing, especially when read from the perspective of the interpretation of Babel in the last few pages. This is where the author’s own position, the desire for origin pervades the text, her own personal decision becomes pronounced – far from the nostalgia that recalls the past, it is more about the wilfulness of the thesis: Anikó Radvánszky lives and understands her own desire for origin as a call, even as a command.

Far from being an errant in the Babelic confusion of the intellectual dimensions opened up by deconstruction, she shares with us from her position of conscious and determined decision-maker what she has experienced through Derrida’s semiotic texts as the compulsion of reason to falter in the finality of assumed meanings. In Derrida’s case, from the tension between semantics and semiotics, semiosis, understood as the free play of signs, emerges as the victor. A linguistic operation that breaks the boundaries of interpretation and meaning, bypassing all intentionality and deliberate creation. Derrida’s writing is the event of an act of meaning without fetters, freed from the constraints of referentiality, of rule-following – its origins are obscured, one might even say: uninteresting. The grapheme, which, as the author

excellently points out, is a synonym of difference in Derrida's texts, is a deviation from the "original", the creator of difference, the agent of *différance*: a creative force, creativity unleashed. To such an extent that the concepts of creation, creativity, play, writing, (etc.) are also displaced and reinterpreted in the process: the freedom of play implies that the rules are rewritten in the process of playing. Even creation is not "the same as before": it is no longer enough to have the intention and ability to create – creation no longer originates from the creator and the creator's intention, its origin has become ambiguous, being created is no longer purely derived from the act of creation, and is best understood through the example of invention: the new can only be realized, can only come into being in our world if we make room for the unknown that is revealed to us, for what is to come (see: *invention* < Latin: *inventio* [*invention, discovery*] < *invenio* [*to come, to enter*] < *in-* [*in-; prefix*] + *venio* [*to come*]), wherever it comes from – if we become attentive recipients. There are no linear origin stories to follow in the Babel of free-flowing reason. Gone is the omnipotence of metaphysics, it lives on as a narrative in the multidimensional world of fictions (i.e. creation). Nevertheless in the Babel of freely expanding textual worlds that are arranged in multidimensional spaces of horizons of reason, Anikó Radvánszky hears the voice, even the command, of Reason: the Reason that announces itself as a multiplicity. "In the beginning (there was) the difference, behold what has happened, behold what has already happened, there, behold what was, when language was an act and language was writing. There where this was, was Him" (Radvánszky 21, 138; my translation), the divine voice is amplified considerably in the pages of the *Ulysses gramophone*. For Derrida himself had been listening to this voice throughout his work. He heard it himself; he was far from being a stranger to this "tone". Metaphysics, in its own divine voice, also addressed him, the deconstruction of metaphysics is far from being a devastating critique of theology – but Derrida never heard the voice of an only god. "*Plus d'un*", there is always more than one of everything, Derrida heard the divine voices in chorus. Always more than *one* cause (especially if 'ultimate'), more than *one* origin, more than *one* god – this is why the Judeo-Christian tradition so often haunts his work: the tradition of differentiating theology with difference inherent in itself. Ultimately, deconstruction does not exclude, does not suspend, but reinterprets the theological tradition: the uncontainable process of creation, the overflowing being, the unnameable god of dissemination makes his voice heard in it, who is always more than can be said of him, the excess of being over the existing, the excess of creation

over the created. The author is perceptibly attracted by this unattainable, ungraspable excess: He, the unknown but capitalized, the distant, not present, metaphysical polyphony echoing the voice of others for lack of his own. The eternal truth may not speak in the voice of *one* god, may not even “speak”, since in the absence of presence, the voice also takes the form of a message – that is, a graphic, writing-like one: it leaves a trace in us, echoes, awaits an answer. The monographer hears the polyphonic harmony of the cacophonous sound of Babel – as a person affected and addressed, she responds to it: in writing, how else? ... in her book *Sign – Writing – Origin*.

Translated by *Petra Zsófia Balásy*

References

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