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Reading, Invention, Secret

Deconstruction and the "Ethical Turn" of Literary Studies

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Abstract

This study examines the so-called "ethical turn" in literary studies through Jacques Derrida's writings, questioning whether deconstruction itself underwent such a shift. While critics often speak of an ethical or political turn in Derrida's work from the late 1980s onwards, Derrida himself resisted the language of "turns," emphasizing continuity rather than rupture. The essay explores how deconstruction's engagement with notions such as gift, forgiveness, hospitality, and responsibility demonstrates that ethics and politics were always already present in Derrida's thought. It further considers how deconstruction generates its own ethos, beyond prescriptive rules, as a hyperbolic ethics rooted in the impossible and the unconditional. The connection between this ethos and literature emerges most forcefully in Derrida's reflections on secrecy: literature is not the concealment of a hidden meaning, but the experience of secrecy itself. Readings of Abraham, Melville's *Bartleby,* and other texts illustrate how literary writing stages singularity, alterity, and responsibility beyond classical ethical frameworks.

Keywords

Derrida; deconstruction; ethical turn; literature; secrecy; hyperbolic ethics; singularity; alterity; responsibility; invention

It is likely that many of us have already observed the somewhat troubling abundance of theoretical "turns" that have emerged since the second half of the twentieth century. In addition to the linguistic, iconic, media, cultural, corporeal, gender, spatial, or realist turns, the humanities have also identified an "ethical turn" among these phenomena. One might say that this is perhaps an excess of good things. It is therefore in a spirit of critical distance that we will examine a theoretical orientation – or, more precisely, the author who embodies

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it – whose work, over the past fifty years, has profoundly influenced philosophical discourse and, through it, literary discourse (and one could even say, without too much exaggeration, that it has shaped certain of these turns). Yet this author did not believe in so-called "turns" of thought.

Here we are speaking of Jacques Derrida, whose work – if one adopts a long-term perspective – appears, beginning in the second half of the 1980s, to display a shift in relation to the interpretive strategies of the preceding decades. The critique of the metaphysics of presence – that is, of the logocentric, phonocentric, onto-theological European tradition – then gives way to questions that no longer fall within a difficult-to-grasp transcendental-historical framework, but rather pertains more directly to everyday experience, to what appears self-evident or is taken as such.[2]

These are themes that may be regarded as fundamental phenomena of individual existence (ethical) or collective existence (political), such as the gift, forgiveness, hospitality, the event, the act, and so forth. In light of the texts Derrida published during this period, one might therefore legitimately assert that a certain political or ethical turn took place – or at least was at play – within deconstruction itself, more precisely within Derrida's own writings.

This turn, then, would not represent a transformation concerning only the thematic level – in other words, it would not simply be a matter of Derrida, at that time, integrating or privileging so-called ethico-political notions, concepts, or problematics within the field of his investigation. Rather, it would signal or imply an essential, internal change, namely that deconstruction itself would have taken an ethical turn. This turn, however, Derrida did not accept. And precisely because he considered that politics and ethics – both at the level of texts and at that of acts – were already present within deconstruction, even during the period prior to the 1990s. "I do not sense a rupture between my writings and my commitments, but rather differences of rhythm, of tone, of context, etc. I am more attentive to continuity than to what certain people, abroad, call the political turn or the ethical turn of deconstruction" (Derrida 2000, 18).[3]

What is at stake here is not only the nature of the ethical turn, but also – and perhaps above all – the constitutive characteristics of this mode of thought. Indeed, all the periods, all the terms, all the modes of enunciation that one finds in Derrida's work and that could seem to evoke a certain "paradigmaticity" – such as, for

[2] One of the very first representatives of this position was Simon Critchley, who was also among the first to recognize the philosophical significance of the relationship between Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. His 1992 work, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, is still considered a foundational text today.

[3] See on this question the writings of Lóránt Kicsák, for example: Kicsák (2019, 230–232).

example, the announcement, in his early period, of the "closure" of the epoch of metaphysics – resist precisely any form of paradigmatic model.

In this spirit, one can also cite one of Derrida's statements in which he explicitly rejects the term "turn": "If a 'turning' turns by 'veering' round a curve or by forcing one, like wind in one's sails, to 'veer' away or change tack, then the trope of turning turns poorly or turns bad, turns into the wrong image" (Derrida 2005, 39). It is obviously not a matter of suggesting that this philosophy would be marked by any kind of stability. Yet, instead of speaking of a "turn" – a term most often used to designate a complete change of horizon – it is easier to perceive modifications of tone and emphasis in Derrida's thought, as well as what is called its "politico-ethical dimension." And this cannot be dissociated from the transformations of the context in which this thought developed.

In other words, the issues that were scarcely perceptible in the early texts become salient – and can only become salient – because the philosophical reflection devoted to them had, thanks in part to the writings produced before the 1980s, consolidated itself sufficiently to render them more insistently thinkable.[4] Moreover, it is today much less conceivable to present deconstruction as a caricature of itself. For a long time, among the criticisms levelled against its approach to the text and to method – such as accusations of parasitism, nihilism, or anti-humanism – one of the most frequent was the claim that it was characterized by a certain "in-difference" with regard to ethics.

Today, there is hardly any doubt that, in Derrida, the re-evaluation of the philosophical status of writing, the practice of textuality that he developed, and the interpretive strategies inseparable from these, carry ethical implications. The key concepts of his treatment of the text – such as graft, dissemination, and displacement – generate a movement of understanding that restructures the horizon of thought toward something new, unpredictable, and approaching the experience of the other, of alterity; in other words, of the welcoming of the foreigner.

Phono-, logo-, phallo- and carnocentrism – through a sustained and layered reading – can be displaced: the displacement of the violent hierarchies that structure our culture is manifestly a moral task. It is thus a matter of reorienting and re-evaluating that which, within the tradition, had been repressed, relegated, or devalorized. In this sense, deconstruction is always political: it consists in a

[4] The conditions were thus in place. Among contemporary interpreters of Derrida, this position is now one of the most widely accepted. See in particular: Crockett (2018); Malabou (2005).

deconstruction of the various modes of the exercise of power and of its repressive tendencies. I cite *Of Grammatology*, published in 1967:

> There is no ethics without the presence *of the other* but also, and consequently, without absence, dissimulation, detour, differance, writing. Arche-writing is the origin of morality as of immorality. The nonethical opening of ethics. A violent opening. As one has done in the case of the vulgar concept of writing, the ethical instance of violence must no doubt be rigorously suspended in order to repeat the genealogy of morals. (Derrida 2016, 283)[5]

Following the texts of the 1990s – often evoked and interpreted as marking a "turn" – it nonetheless becomes increasingly evident that deconstruction does not possess an ethics that would be external to it, nor even that any ethics whatsoever could be derived from it: it is deconstruction itself that engenders its own ethos. An ethos that does not conform to a closed system of pre-established rules and prescriptions, that neither recognizes nor bows before any condition to which it would be obliged, but tends toward something situated beyond any prior determination – "beyond good and evil" – and, by virtue of its aporetic nature, beyond the limit of the possible.

> For a deconstructive operation, *possibility* is rather the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches. The interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible: that is, … of the *other* – the experience of the other as the invention of the impossible, in other words, as the only possible invention. (Derrida 2007, 14)[6]

Derrida's ethical reflections arise, at least in part, from his *critical engagement* with Kant – from a radical intensification, even a hyperbolic extension, of Kantian duty-based ethics. Influenced, not least, by Levinas's philosophy, Derrida may be said to rewrite Kant's categorical imperative. In Derrida, the unconditional no longer designates the universal form of law but rather the command of an unconditional – yet always impossible – responsibility toward the Other, toward justice, or toward the *à-venir*, the to-come. Unconditionality thus shifts into the relation with the Other: in place of the categorical imperative, it is now the face of the Other that calls. This ethical injunction is not general but always singular and addressed;

[5] Original italics.

[6] Original italics.

the responsibility to the Other is unconditional, yet it can never be fulfilled. The "command" is therefore intrinsically aporetic: one must obey the law and, at the same time, transgress it in the name of justice. The imperative remains categorical insofar as it binds unavoidably, but it can no longer be universalized.[7] The unconditional hospitality and forgiveness are impossible, for they are heterogeneous to the political, to the juridical, and even to the ethical. Yet, as Derrida writes, "the impossible is not nothing. By his own definition, it is precisely that which arrives, that which happens."[8]

Where action does not respond to conditions but leaps into the unconditional, where one does not act out of duty nor according to duty, it is there that there is truly action, ethics, morality, responsibility. This ethics that exceeds ethics – to borrow Derrida's expression –unfolds as a hyperbolic ethics.[9]

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But what, then, is the connection between all of this and literature? At this point, it is worth recalling that Derrida is a philosopher who, perhaps more than most and in ways comparable only to certain literary writers, reflects on the fact that philosophizing is ultimately a linguistic act. Going beyond the philosophical "linguistic turn," he not only makes linguistic articulation the very basis of experience, but – by dislodging language from its purely representational function – also broadens the relation

[7] Although Derrida never devotes a work exclusively to Kant's *categorical imperative*, he repeatedly returns to it as a limit-concept in his reflections on justice, ethics, and responsibility. He reinterprets the Kantian demand for unconditional moral law in terms of the aporia between law and justice. Justice, he writes, is not a calculable rule but an "inconditional imperative," a demand that cannot be codified yet nevertheless compels decision and responsibility. It is clearly traceable how, in Derrida's other writings – such as *Specters of Marx*; *Force of the Law. The Mystical Foundation of Authority*; *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas; Of Hospitality* – he transforms the Kantian notion of the categorical imperative: shifting from the universal to the singular, from the formal to the aporetic, from autonomy to heteronomy – that is, from the law of reason to the demand of the Other. In Derrida, "the categorical" thus becomes the name for what is ethically inescapable yet conceptually unformalizable.

[8] Derrida (2005a, 172.) For the paradoxical or aporetic relation between unconditional and conditional hospitality, see, among others: Derrida and Dufourmantelle (2000, 20–21, 21–23, and especially 55–57, 65–75); Derrida (2005c, 66–67).

[9] Derrida refers to the concept of "hyperbolic ethics" in the interview *Le siècle et le pardon*, where he examines the radical and unconditional aspects of forgiveness and hospitality. He explicitly uses the expression "hyperbolic ethics" to designate a form of responsibility that exceeds any normative framework or utilitarian purpose (Derrida, 2000a. All texts not available in English are quoted here in my own translation.). In this short interview, as in his major texts from the 1990s, Derrida also develops the idea that ethics is not limited to prescribed norms, but rather appears as a form of excess or overflow – always beyond established boundaries. Furthermore, in *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre*, Derrida associates the ethical act with the experience of the "impossible," emphasizing that the essence of ethics lies in an infinite responsibility toward the other, one that cannot be reduced to any pre-established rule or condition. There, he explores the idea of an ethical invention based on the experience of the "possible impossible" (see Derrida 2007, 14). Hospitality, like forgiveness, is conceived by Derrida as an unconditional and paradoxical act – at once impossible and necessary (see also Derrida 2021; Derrida 2022). These writings make it clear that, for Derrida, ethics is not a fixed system, but an ongoing challenge grounded in openness to the other and in an unconditional responsibility. The guiding notion of "unconditionality" runs through the seminars of the 1990s, which explore the questions of unconditional hospitality, forgiveness, and the gift.

between language and philosophy toward performativity and the poetic dimension of language. Meaning and truth, and thus any form of ethical experience or ethical questioning, come into being only through the generative force of language. And if an ethics that exceeds good and evil is articulated through terms such as invention[10] or event, one is immediately led to think that hyperbolic ethics maintains a close relation with artistic experience, and more specifically with literature.

What kind of conception of literature, then, does such an ethicization make possible? Although this question could be explored from several angles within a work as complex as Derrida's, I shall choose here to approach it briefly from the perspective of the secret, since, from the early 1990s onwards, the philosopher increasingly sought in the singular functioning of the secret the characteristic features of the mode of existence of literature.[11]

But what characterizes the secret? What is a secret? Can such a question even be asked, one that – according to the grammar of deconstruction – would be profoundly essentialist? The answer is, of course, yes, provided that one immediately notes that, unsurprisingly, what interests Derrida most is the enigmatic character of the secret: that which is fundamentally inaccessible, unrepresentable, unthinkable. For the secret is something of which we have no phenomenal experience, and/or something we do not say – either because we cannot speak of it (we are not permitted to), or because we do not know how to.[12]

The essential question posed by Derrida is the following: faced with these classical definitions of the secret, which presuppose a hidden meaning or a concealed content, can one conceive of another type of secret? Does there exist another mode of functioning of the secret – perhaps what, in his own terms, we

[10] Derrida brings ethics and invention together for the first time and most powerfully in his essay *Psyche: Inventions de l'autre*. Here, invention is not merely a technical or creative act but the ethical event itself – the arrival of the Other, in which the very possibility of responsibility, hospitality, and language is at stake. "Thus it is that invention would be in conformity with its concept, with the dominant feature of the word and concept "invention," only insofar as, paradoxically, invention invents nothing, when in invention the other does not come, and when nothing comes to the other or from the other. For the other is not the possible. So it would be necessary to say that the only possible invention would be the invention of the impossible. But an invention of the impossible is impossible, the other would say" Derrida (2007, 47).

[11] The question of secrecy first emerged within the framework of a seminar series whose starting point was an ethical one: that of responsibility. What is now referred to as the "seminar on secrecy" arose from this context. The full version of this seminar was recently published under the title: *Jacques Derrida, Répondre – du secret (Seminars 1991–1992)*.

[12] "Is secrecy *as such* not, first and foremost, that which, by refusing all manifestation, all phenomenologization, and having no phenomenological essence, will never give rise to a phenomenology nor to an ontology grounded in phenomenology?" (Derrida 2025, 64)

could call a non-negative secret?[13] In meditating on the nature of the secret, the philosopher undertakes in *The Gift of Death* an analysis of the fundamental biblical narrative of Abraham and Isaac[14] (Derrida 2008, 79–114). As Kierkegaard had already emphasized in his classical work, Abraham, the knight of faith, transgresses the ethical commandment when he accepts to sacrifice his son in obedience to God's command.

For Derrida, it is above all the gesture of silence that becomes central in this narrative: at the moment when Abraham prepares to kill his child, he keeps his secret. He answers Isaac's question, but does not reveal the secret of the demanded sacrifice. The heart of the secret, here, resides in Abraham's silence: he speaks to no one, neither before, nor during, nor after the events. He says nothing of the divine command, nor does he explain his acts. Now, the ethical demand rests upon universality: it presupposes a responsibility exercised in and through language – that is to say, through entry into the order of the general, by which we must justify ourselves, give an account of our decisions, answer for our acts. Ethics requires substitution, just as language does – whereas singularity, irreplaceability, unrepeatability, silence, and secrecy stand in opposition to this.

The story of Abraham exemplarily illustrates the tension between general responsibility and absolute responsibility, between ethics and secrecy, between what can be said and what cannot be said. Whether one sees in Abraham's act the expression of the religious stage (in Kierkegaard's sense) or that of a hyperbolic ethics, one thing seems certain: this act carries a secret understood as absolute singularity, irreducible to any language. The secret at issue here does not consist in hiding a truth, in concealing a content, but in marking an infinite separation, a radical singularity, which binds the human being to an Absolute Other, here: God. Abraham cannot know the divine will; he does not know why God requires this sacrifice from him.

[13] See: "When one declares, 'A secret is what cannot be said,' or when one asserts, 'A secret is what must not be said,' in both cases, the possibility of secrecy is associated with a form of negativity. But is this negativity really as necessary as it seems? Is the question not, on the contrary (and you see that the question, which calls for a response, is neither a position nor a negation): is there not secrecy, a possibility of secrecy, prior to any negativity? Not only prior to any speech, but prior to any negativity, to any emergence of the 'no'? And are not the consequences of such a thinking of secrecy (without negativity) incalculable – especially in relation to the humanist or anthropocentric presupposition that would reserve secrecy for that speaking animal, for that spirit capable of saying 'no,' whom we call 'man'?" (Derrida 2025, 43–44)

[14] The book analyzes the ethical and theological significance of sacrifice, responsibility, and secrecy, through a rereading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling.*

> But as soon as one speaks, as soon as one enters the medium of language, one loses that very singularity. One therefore loses the possibility or the right to decide. Thus every decision would, fundamentally, remain at the same time solitary, secret, and silent. … The first effect or first destination of language therefore deprives me of, or delivers me from, my singularity. By suspending my absolute singularity in speaking, I renounce at the same time my liberty and my responsibility. Once I speak, I am never and no longer myself, alone and unique. (Derrida 2008, 87)[15]

Speech deprives us of our singularity, since language always presupposes substitution. That being so, it has almost become a commonplace since the critique of the system of representation in *Of Grammatology* that, in every use of the sign, the sign merely stands in the place of what is absent – in other words, absence and distance are inherent in every semiotic operation. Now, it is precisely on the basis of Derrida's generalized theory of the trace that one can say that, in an expanded sense, every text is a secret. If nothing signifies directly, one can no longer speak of a simple perception of sense or meaning – there is only deciphering. Every reading thus becomes a confrontation with a certain secret. This perhaps enables us to better understand why literature maintains a privileged relation with secrecy and with the experience of a hyperbolic ethics that exceeds all prescription.

In *The Gift of Death*, within the same chapter devoted to the story of Abraham, there also appears Melville's famous short story: *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street* (Derrida 2008, 60–65).[16] Bartleby, the Wall Street scribe, begins by copying documents with exemplary automatism, in a "dull and mechanical" manner, but progressively refuses to carry out secondary tasks. His polite responses – "I would prefer not to" – completely disarm his superior, the narrator, who is incapable of understanding or reacting. Bartleby's withdrawal becomes increasingly radical, his behaviour almost catatonic, and his spectral presence invades the space. He refuses every injunction, ceases to write, and ends up doing nothing but silently staring at the brick wall before him. The one who had first been the most zealous of workers eventually rejects every form of activity – and, ultimately, life itself.

[15] Due to the communal nature of language, every individual decision and every assumption of responsibility always manifests itself as a solitary, secret, and silent act. This line of reasoning is closely linked to the themes addressed by Derrida in the seminar *Répondre – du secret*, where he analyzes the relations between secrecy, responsibility, and language. (*The Gift of Death* is a reelaboration of this seminar.)

[16] In addition, Derrida discusses Melville's short story in three other texts, in relation to literature and secrecy, or the secret of literature: Derrida (1996, 38); Derrida, Dronsfeld, Midgley, Wilding (1993, 35); Derrida, Ferraris (2018).

Bartleby, the Scrivener is one of the most commented-upon short stories in American literature, particularly by philosophers.[17] It has been read as a sociological critique of the modern bureaucratic environment, as a questioning of the limits of Kantian freedom, or even as a metaphor for the originary mechanization of literary writing. Some see in him a Christ-like figure, others a Marxist resister against capitalism. Agamben perceives in him the pure potentiality of non-action – Bartleby, although he does not act, is able to act. Deleuze, for his part, discovers in Bartleby's reticence a neutral zone between refusal and acceptance: an empty space from which language itself is overturned, rendering Bartleby without attributes or referents.

Derrida, in a similar vein, sees in Bartleby's non-response a masterpiece of irony, saturated with meaning, but whose specificity lies precisely in its capacity to suspend all signification. Melville's short story constitutes a paradigmatic example of literary writing, as the possibility of a writing that continually withdraws from its own ultimate possibility – that of referring to a given or to a pre-established existent. What is at issue here is the effect of secrecy produced by the literary dispositif, an effect which, while presupposing no hidden content, points toward the reserve, the surplus proper to the literary text. Derrida explores an analogous functioning, for example, in his reading of Paul Celan, where he shows that the poem always remains open to the possibility of secrecy, to what it does not say, to what it does not name – a reserve that he qualifies as inexhaustible (Derrida 2005c). Similarly, in another analysis that has since become famous, that of Baudelaire's *Counterfeit Money*, Derrida highlights the infinite overdetermination of the gift (Derrida 1991). The gesture of handing a coin to a beggar – in Baudelaire's narrative – remains charged with an excess of meaning as soon as one seeks to understand all the possible reasons for which such a gift might be made. And we, as readers, shall never know whether the coin was actually counterfeit. From this perspective, the notion of reserve could be considered a quasi-synonym of the non-negative secret in Derridean thought.

Literature itself, writes Derrida, the anti-essentialist thinker, "is neither more nor less than the experience of existence. Writing, literature, refers to that extreme and troubling point for which there is no ultimate explanation" (Derrida 2008, 117). Analyses of the relation between secrecy and literature thus involve a dimension of the desacralization of secrecy: they show that it is not a hidden meaning that the text conceals, but that writing itself is the secret – non-sacred, non-mystical, but structural, singular. Literature – whether that of Melville, Celan, or Baudelaire – is

[17] See: Berkman 2011.

therefore "a secret without mystery." It does not hide a secret, it is the secret. From this perspective, one understands that deconstruction, so often mistakenly taken to be a destructive or relativist enterprise, is not a destabilizing activity but rather the bringing to light of the fact that (literary) writing is itself a singular, unstable, incomparable instance: "literature is the place of all these secrets without secrecy, of all these crypts without depth, with no other basis than the abyss of the call or address, without any law other than the singularity of the event called the work" (Derrida 2008, 120).

Expectation, responsibility, and ethos that are read through – or that emerge from – this dispositif go far beyond classical ethics. In this sense, Derrida's hyperbolic ethics obliges us to rethink humanist representations of literary ethicality.

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