

Preface

[P.S. The *postscript* to this Preface is the “unwriteable” death of Jacques Derrida, on 9 October 2004, occurring as my book enters production. It is unwriteable in the sense of troubling every trace of what has hitherto been written in regard to him. But it nevertheless requires a certain rewriting of the tense of my prose, its time and its effects of torsion: a past perfect becomes here and there a preterite, certain familiarities divulge more clearly their impertinence. If what follows can yet reach across the abyss of loss that his disappearance implies, it will be thanks to the remaining force of his work, which we knew from the start, and the staying power of an indelible friendship that still comes from him.]

The essays in this book represent approximately twenty years of encounters with deconstructions in the form of the work of Jacques Derrida. I had undertaken some research on that work while studying in Paris in the second half of the 1970s, but it was in 1981, back in Australia, when I read *La carte postale*, that I began to revel in it and to find writing on it unavoidable. These essays are therefore in many senses celebrations, and indeed more than one of them marks an anniversary of one sort or another—for example, that twenty-year old encounter—demonstrating also the extent to which “Envois” of *The Post Card* remains for me the determinant text of the Derridean corpus.

Perhaps the intensity of my interest in “Envois” derives from its staging of an autobiographical scene, something that was to coincide with a sense of autobiography that was developing in my own work. It is a theme that returns with some insistence in these essays, particularly as it raises questions concerning practices of reading. In many cases, therefore, the encounters that give rise to one chapter or another have a personal resonance such as my involvement in the translation of *Right of Inspection* and *The Gift of Death*, or in the conference at which Derrida first presented the pa-

per that would become *Monolingualism of the Other*. From this point of view, they also represent tokens of the friendship I enjoyed with Jacques Derrida beginning in the mid-1980s.

Matchbook takes its title from that first essay I wrote on “Envois” in 1982. In response to its publication, Derrida sent me the newly published *Feu la cendre* (*Cinders*) with the inscription “more matches.” These essays attempt to respond to the incitement to read touched off by those matches. To begin, their incendiary conceit refers to an urgency of reading, a need to read while there is still time, while the book and writing of this type lasts in its current form. The essay “Matchbook” was probably the last article I composed on a typewriter, and the fifteen or so years following that have seen the institutionalization of the personal computer and word processors, and more recently the development of the Internet. Within that ambiance one cannot but wonder and worry about the status of the document, the book, academic discourse, and the reading practices relating to each. Treating of such matters has become the imperative of everything I teach and write, and the most urgent question concerning them, returned to a number of times in these essays, is that of speed. To my mind it is in terms of what deconstruction can have us think about the speed of technology and technologies of reading that Derrida’s work has made one of its most important contributions to philosophy and literary and cultural studies, and it is by that means that it continues to prove its incontrovertible relevance.

Given that the speed of technological innovation has also permitted and encouraged a globalization of capital and culture, analyses such as are developed in the work collected here commonly take a political turn. It is therefore also the political effects of an internationalized deconstruction, and specifically its situation in America and the role played by America in hosting it, that are emphasized in more than one essay—still more matches, therefore, for this *Matchbook*, designed less to self-combust than to demonstrate how the example of Derrida continues to kindle the desire to read.



Seven of the essays appearing in this volume have been published in some previous form or language but have been enlarged and revised, often extensively, for this book. Earlier versions have appeared as follows: Chapter 1 as “Jaded in America,” in *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the*

Political, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (New York: New York University Press, 1995); Chapter 2 as “Lemming (reframing the abyss),” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Chapter 3 as “Post/Card/Match/Book/*Envois*/Derrida,” in *Substance* 43 (1984); Chapter 4 as “Donner à la lettre,” in *L'Éthique du don*, ed. Michael Wetzel and Jean-Michel Rabaté (Paris: Éditions Métailié-Transition, 1992); Chapter 5 as “JD-ROM,” in *Passions de la littérature*, ed. Michel Lisse (Paris: Galilée, 1996); Chapter 7 as “Gespartene Zunge. Eine Antwort auf Jacques Derrida,” trans. Ursula Rieth, in *Die Sprache der Anderen*, ed. Anselm Haverkamp (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag), 1997; and Chapter 8 as “Supreme Court,” in *Diacritics* 18, no. 3 (1988). I am grateful to those sources for permission to reuse material published by them.

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