

Introduction: Upside-Down Writing

by Elisabeth Weber

Why can't I avoid speaking, unless it is because a promise has committed me even before I begin the briefest speech. . . . From the moment I open my mouth, I have already promised; or rather, and sooner, the promise has seized the *I* which promises to speak to the other, to say something, at the extreme limit to affirm or to confirm by speech at least this: that it is necessary to be silent; and to be silent concerning that about which one cannot speak. . . . Even if I decide to be silent, even if I decide to promise nothing, not to commit myself to saying something that would confirm once again the destination of speech, and the destination toward speech, this silence yet remains a modality of speech: a memory of promise and a promise of memory.

Number of yes, again, the twenty² interviews collected here represent as many variations on this modality of speech. Each one of them—and the commitment is each time unique—remains faithful to the memory of a promise and to some promise of memory: here and there in the interview, an “I” is indeed “seized,” conscripted, held to the pledge. It is in fact a matter of an always singular address. It begins, one could say, by responding (to the other as well as for itself). Like the “yes,” it is “originarily in its very structure, a response”³: in a dated situation and, as one says, in a “context” that the interview, as one will often notice, does not fail to remark, plying itself and pleasing itself sometimes by analyzing it—right away and along the way, in a more or less explicit fashion.

Each time a speech is addressed or answers, it listens—to the other, itself, the law, I mean that agreement that holds them to its law, even when it is a matter of debate, discussion, dispute, or separation. This speech sometimes gives itself over to improvisation, sometimes mimics it or plays with it, and for that reason one might be tempted to call it by an old name that Derrida is said to have made into a target: *living* speech. One could just as well say *written word* or *given word*, and the three most often intersect in the same sentence, I will even dare to say the same voice. For I often have the impression also of a written improvisation that finds once again, upside down in some way, a spontaneity that the aforementioned living speech would have in reality already lost. We know that especially when readers are in a hurry, Jacques Derrida often passes for someone who has taken the *side of writing*—and against speech! He would have thus opposed the one to the other, then reversed the order or the hierarchy, and so forth and so on. Now, just a little attention, for example to the first move of *Grammatology*, is enough to discredit the simplism of such a *siding with writing*. Without going back over here the theoretical demonstrations that make of this thinking of writing something altogether other than a war against speech, but rather a problematic of *address* and *destination*, which is to say, in effect an *experience of the interview*, I would suggest that one reread for example, in the margins of this collection, a chapter of *Mémoires for Paul de Man* (“Acts: The Meaning of a Given Word”) or certain confidential remarks in *The Post Card*: “writing horrifies me more than at any other moment in the past” (December 9, 1977), claims the signatory of the “Envois.” Elsewhere he at least pretends, out of irony or melancholy, to present himself also as a “man of speech” who writes “upside down.” A card dated May 1979: “What cannot be said above all must not be silenced but written. Myself, I am a man of speech, I have never had anything to write. When I have something to say I say it or say it to myself, basta. You are the only one to understand why it really was necessary that I write exactly the opposite, as concerns axiomatics, of what I desire, what I know my desire to be, in other words you: living speech, presence itself, proximity, the proper, the guard,

etc. I have necessarily written upside down—and in order to surrender to Necessity.

and ‘*fort de toi.*’⁴

Is it enough to recall that this thinking of writing, address, and destination is also an experience of the interview, that is, of the plurality of voices (“The call of the other is the call to come, and that happens only in multiple voices”⁵)? One must also specify that it is marked, sometimes in a suspensive way, sometimes clearly, by sexual difference. Still more specifically, and certain interviews here make it their theme, it is marked by that which in sexual difference carries beyond the one and the two, dual or oppositional difference.⁶ During the whole period covered by the twenty interviews collected here, long before and after *The Post Card* that I have just cited, the texts in several voices proliferated in fact. In each case, a woman’s voice can be heard there, even an indeterminate number of women’s voices. Of themselves they come to *engage* the discussion: to apostrophize, resonate, argue, respond, correspond, contest, provoke, affirm, give—to give one to think or to give, period.⁷

The several exchanges in which Jacques Derrida will have participated over these last twenty years were dispersed in journals, newspapers, or collections, in many countries and in more than one language. Isn’t it necessary, I asked myself, and hasn’t the time come to suspend for a moment dissemination—the time of a few suspension points⁸—and to present a selection of them bound together in a book? At the risk, of course, of arresting them by marking them out, but thereby also underscoring their traits, this *time of suspension points* can also determine, in order to situate it better, the configuration of the other writings, I mean those that were published elsewhere and simultaneously. In a recent publication, Derrida specified in a note concerning that which “*gives rise and place . . . throws into relief the place and the age*”: “The dotted lines of a suspended writing *situate* with a formidable precision.”⁹

Faced with the number and variety, certain selections remained indispensable, but their criteria were difficult.¹⁰ What needed to be

privileged first? I believed I had to let myself be guided above all by diversity, by the greatest diversity possible in the limits and the coherence of a single volume: twenty interviews, twenty years.

First of all, the *diversity of subjects*, to be sure: the collected interviews treat the question of women, but also of poetry and teaching, the media, drugs, AIDS, sacrifice and anthropophagy, the relation to tradition, language—national or other—and therefore translation, philosophy and nationalism, politics and philosophers, and so forth.

Next, *diversity of style and variation in tone* (Derrida has often insisted, in particular in *The Post Card*, on the *Wechsel der Töne*). Playful, strategic, impassioned, analytic, militant, “autobiographical”: the difference in these modulations can sometimes be heard within one and the same dialogue.

These tonalities vibrate, of course, with the interlocutors, which is to say, also with the addressees of the interviews, many of which were published in France, but also sometimes in several European countries, and in the United States: another *diversity, that of others*.

For reasons that have to do also with a certain *logical* linking of the different contents, notably as concerns that which relates them to the sequence thus punctuated of Jacques Derrida’s other publications, *chronological* order had to prevail, almost always, over the presentation of the interviews. As for the titles, it seemed advisable at times to change them, especially when they were chosen by newspaper editors and not by the interlocutors themselves. In each of these cases, the original title has been noted. I also thought it useful to add here or there some clarifications—in notes.