

Introduction: Disavowals (A Foreword)

—Aren't you going to write an introduction?

—An editor once put it to me that whereas a preface presents the book, an introduction presents the book's argument. But *Book of Addresses* doesn't have an argument, or else it has too many.

—Well, how about a preface then?

—I know you're right to insist on the conventions, but here's the thing: a preface would have to refer to *Book of Addresses* as, well, a book, which despite appearances may be a misnomer.

—You're saying that you've given this book a title that may be a misnomer? Is that even possible?

—I don't know, but admit that a book that puts "book" in its title also puts irony in play, whether or not that was the intent.¹ As a result, it may always be impossible to say whether a book that calls itself such in fact deserves the title.

—Still, how could it ever deny that it is a book? But wait a minute, let's back up. We were just having an ordinary conversation about how you needed to finish your book, and I asked—mostly just to keep the conversation going—whether you were going to write an introduction. And now suddenly we're beginning to talk ontological nonsense about books that *are* and yet maybe *are not* books. Can we at least slow down even if we can't change the subject?

—Yes, well, thanks for keeping the conversation going. And you're right, I don't want to change the subject now. But that was your doing. You reminded me of the expectation that certain books will have intro-

ductions or prefaces. Which led me to the “nonsense” that this book’s name may be ironic.

—Ok, I understand the dilemma. I can even see how it accelerates into what I just called ontological nonsense (sorry about that). But you also said a moment ago that I was right to expect that, whether introduction or preface, there would be some presentation of your book, I mean, of *Book of Addresses*—written, of course, after the fact. So maybe I don’t understand after all . . .

—Yes, yes you do, of course you do, you’re right that you do. Except maybe this is not so much a dilemma, which is to say, “a situation requiring a choice between equally undesirable alternatives” (Webster’s Unabridged, 2001), as something else, a chance to invent a liminal text that is both and yet neither, neither introduction nor preface, but . . .

— . . . foreword? There’s another kind of preliminary writing, at or before the threshold of the book proper. A foreword is also part of the apparatus of paratext (to use Genette’s term),² a part of that paratextual part that precedes the rest, rather than running below it (like footnotes) or following it (like appendices or index). So what about a foreword?

—Wouldn’t that be inappropriate? Here’s Webster’s again: “foreword: a short introductory statement in a published work, as a book, esp. when written by someone other than the author.” That “esp.” says it’s inappropriate, unusual, unconventional for the author to write a book’s foreword.

—But I thought you were prepared to set aside such conventional expectations?

—True enough. Perhaps I should write a foreword presenting these essays as though they were the work of someone else. That would not be difficult and, above all, it would not be false.

—Hold it. What do you mean? Is that another riddle? Are you saying not only is this not a book, but you are not its author?

—A riddle if you like, but it goes to what is in question throughout *Book of Addresses*, which is to say, addresses, the condition of addressing, of address, of being addressed. It is not just *about* address, it doesn’t just present arguments or theses on that subject, even though there is a good deal of that. But the chapters are all also in the condition of address; in other words, *they are addressed*. You who are so fond of commonsensical grammar will recognize that this altogether ordinary phrase in English becomes irreducibly ambiguous when isolated and left undetermined or unconditioned by anything else. To be precise, the phrase suspends the cer-

tainty of “voice”: active or passive. So, to say “these pieces are addressed” can mean, grammatically, both that they are spoken, delivered, or written to another’s address *and* they are addressed *by* another, they exist in the condition of being addressed by another. Not all other languages—maybe none?—tolerate such an ambiguous grammar as to the *direction* of “address.” In French, for example, I cannot say “elles sont adressées” unless I’m talking about something like the envelopes of letters and then there is no ambiguity of grammatical voice. French is quite fussy about the way it uses *adresser* and *adresse*. One addresses oneself to another (*on s’adresse à quelqu’un*), but no one can ever be simply or *directly* (?) *adressée* by another, in the passive voice (at least not grammatically). Nor can I say that I delivered an *adresse*, meaning a talk, a lecture, a plenary address, and so forth.³ All these strictures keep tighter reins over the direction of addressing (“address” and “direction” both derive from *rectus, directus*: right, a straight line, etc.), especially as regards personal address, which is buffered with a reflexive construction, as if to make things less direct, thus more polite, if you see what I mean. So, at least in grammatical French, the ambiguity I just called the condition of address (as in “they are addressed”) has generally to signal itself elsewhere and otherwise than directly in this lexicon of address. But the English idiom signals the indirection in the very saying of direction, that is, of address. It can say the indirection more directly. Or more indirectly, as you like.

—Let me see if I still follow where you’re going with this, in which direction. You were evoking the riddle of authorship, when the phrase “they are addressed” got cast up on our shores, in all its wonderful ambiguity.

—Wonderful? Did I say it was wonderful?

—No, but isn’t that where this is going? You were about to show me that the condition of address in *Book of Addresses* suspends the direction of origination, in other words, of authorship. And that there is something wonderful about that. Did I get it wrong again?

—No you’re right (*rectus*, again), but as for “wonderful,” well, that is such a worn word, a cliché, I don’t know. . . . But, yes, ok, it is “wonderful” if between us we can agree to hear still the surprise, the wonder, long lost in the cliché. There is cause to wonder when one’s “own” address is suspended from the address *by* the other, *coming* from the other, and that this *coming* is always a surprise, registered or cognized, therefore, only *après coup*. Otherwise it wouldn’t be a surprise. So, yes, it is “wonderful,” I say grasping at an almost-dead designator, to realize, *après coup*, the condition of *après coup* address. I realize, *après coup*, that everything was ad-

dressed *to me* by another. "Authorship," as a consequence, is but the appropriation (disavowed and therefore guilty) of the other's address, and it is not at all "wonderful," but just what everyone expects to happen anyway, according to all the conventions of authorship. By convention, am I not the author of these pieces? The sole and rightful author and owner? Nothing wonderful about that, on the contrary. If "authorship," as construed by conventions and contracts, is a disavowal of the "wonder" before the suspension of the address's direction, well, then, can one disavow the disavowal? If so, wouldn't *that* really be wonderful? In a foreword, perhaps, as "written by someone other than the author."

—You would avow that, because these pieces are addressed, you are not the author, not the only author, or not only the author? Something like that? But who else then? And in that case aren't we talking about plagiarism?

—Plagiarism is a matter of intention; as always, the law recognizes fault or guilt only when an intentional, self-directed, and self-present subject is concerned (I'm talking obviously about modern law). That's why, when a charge of plagiarism is upheld, the plagiarist's only excuse is to say it was unintentional. Doris Kearns Goodwin, for example, blamed careless note-taking for her failure to distinguish here and there between her words and those of other biographers she cited without specific acknowledgment.⁴ To plead an absence of intention to appropriate the other's words, however, she had to confess an absence to herself, therefore a discontinuous self, which the law naturally disallows from its purview, since it recognizes only self-present subjects. Well, not exactly, because it also recognizes the condition it terms "temporary insanity." Goodwin, in sum, pleaded a species of temporary insanity, the kind of absence from oneself or "madness" that is in force when one reads and writes, when one reads *and then* writes, maybe years later, only to discover, *après coup*, that one has perhaps confused reading and writing, what one read and what one, or rather, the other wrote.

—Isn't that an apology for plagiarism? I mean, does it not offer an excuse or even an alibi, a defense that is a justification? Because you mean, I suppose, to refer this self-absence to what you're calling the condition of address? If that is where this is going, then I'm not sure I want to follow anymore, at least not without some firm distinctions and clear differentiations. It would be irresponsible, would it not, to undermine the distinction made in law between guilty and guiltless acts? And therefore the concept of the legal subject . . .

—Yes, well, as usual, you are not following me, but already in front, pointing out the direction things must take. But I did warn you that a “disavowal of the disavowal” is a most improbable, even impossible undertaking. Now perhaps you see a little what I mean. The distinction you fear to see undermined, as you put it, the one between guilty and guiltless acts, will never disappear from the law, for that simply is what the law is, or rather what it *does* and what it exists to do: make the distinction, i.e., judge, decide, between guilty and not guilty. It determines the responsibility of those subject to it. Your fear, therefore, cannot be for the law itself, as such, which will always be powerless to cease making the distinction (which does not mean, of course, that such decisions are always or even ever just). So what, then, may be put at risk, beyond the law that decides responsibility in those terms? What other responsibility might there be?

—Are you asking me? I don’t know, do you mean like a higher responsibility? The responsibility to justice and not just to or before the law?

—Certainly, if one understands by justice, and with Levinas, the other: “the relation to others—that is to say, justice.”⁵ And if, in “responsibility,” one begins to hear the reawakened “metaphor” of response, that is, of answering another, but also answering to, before, and even for another. That there is response in responsibility, in other words, that there is always some other for whom, before whom, or to whom one is responding when one does what is called *taking* responsibility, this is perhaps what is too daunting to think about, and therefore one doesn’t let oneself think about it too much, but takes refuge in rational law and the law of reason, where there is responsibility only for a subject or a self. It is reason itself, one feigns to believe, that would be at risk if I were to begin to take responsibility beyond the subject.

—Well, wouldn’t it?

—That depends on whether you would call what we are having right now a reasonable conversation. Your word “nonsense” a moment ago suggests you have your doubts, but we are still here talking, which means I’m not just talking nonsense to myself, despite some appearances to the contrary. Only you can decide to go on assuming it is reasonable to say what we are saying to each other and in response. Whatever you decide, by the way, will certainly be right, that is, reasonable.

—That’s it, I’ve got it. I can finally put a name to the vague echo I’ve been hearing for some time now in our talk, or rather in yours. It’s Derida’s post card-writer, in *Envois*, isn’t it? That’s who you are echoing, re-

peating, citing without acknowledgment. I'm right, aren't I, that the very first words of that text are "Yes, you were right," that is, "tu avais raison"?⁶ In French, one says "you are right" by giving or rendering *reason* to you, saying, literally: "you have reason." The text thus begins with this response that gives or gives *back* reason to the other. It renders reason to the other and in that it responds—to him or to her. Derrida's text begins there, which is to say, with the other. It begins by giving (back) reason, and in that it accepts the other's decision. Whatever the decision, the response of love (for the premise of *Envois* is that this is part of a correspondence between lovers) is "You are right, you have reason." That's what finally gave you away, when you said the same thing to me, or almost. You said, whatever I decide will be right and reasonable. And, of course, Derrida's text is a demonstration of undecidable address as the very condition of the relation to the other, in speech, writing, or whatever. Whereas Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, has Socrates appear to say (and the post cards in *Envois* picture Plato dictating to Socrates from behind his back) that this condition afflicts *logos* only when it is written and begins to roll and unroll a scroll or script in any old direction: "Every word [*logos*], when once it is written, is bandied about, alike among those who understand it and those who have no interest in it, and it knows not to whom to speak or not to speak."⁷ In other words, writing afflicts *logos* with a loss of address. This is where *Book of Addresses* is coming from, isn't it?

—Yes, but if your next step is to charge that I've appropriated texts of Derrida's without acknowledgment, well, I'd be truly at a loss to defend myself—except to say, once again, you're right, no doubt, it must be true! You see how much I love discoursing with you! Yes, yes, it's true! Truth to tell, you tell me the truth. And yet, haven't I already confessed, acknowledged this appropriation, and in every chapter of *Book of Addresses*? There's not one of the texts assembled here that does not, to a greater or lesser extent, move to comprehend some piece of writing by Derrida, that is, to take it in, appropriate it in a way. However, one could also describe this relation in the language of responsibility and response I was using a moment ago: by citing and referring to texts of Derrida, I would be taking responsibility for them, not in the legal sense of claiming they return to me as to their author or cause or that they belong to me as does some property, but rather in the sense of responding to what I understand them to be saying, because I hold them to be saying something reasonable, that is, within the call of reason. So, there is *giving* reason and *taking* responsi-

bility, give and take. Here giving and taking signal neither a simple reciprocity, nor a conceptual opposition. The relation between them is other, precisely because it is a matter of response/responsibility to, before, and for another than the one who or which is said to be doing this giving and taking. Like what you and I are doing now.

—So you haven't altogether forgotten I'm here? It had begun to sound like you were giving a lecture. But where is all this taking us? And must we follow it?

—Yes, because it follows that the thinking of responsibility has to be allowed to shift out of its traditional circles around the epistemological, phenomenological, or legal subject (take your pick), where it has always been assailed by contradictions at every attempt to determine its own responsibilities for itself.⁸ These circles, the ideal form of reason, do not adequately describe the movement of appropriation, which is *movement* precisely because the circle cannot properly close on itself, at least not without taking another in. The point would be *not to disavow* the links between giving (back) the response of reason (or of love or of love of reason), taking another in, and taking responsibility, in whatever discourse that expression is commonly understood (legal, ethical, political, economic).

—Why is that the point? And the point of what? Moreover, who gave you the compass? Don't try appeasing me again with another "You're right"!

—So you need appeasing now? Suddenly we're at war? . . . Well, listen, I suppose it is the point of linkage, precisely, our being linked, bound together, and we hope more in peace than at war. That cannot be just an empty sentiment, for whoever professes still to love reason, once reason is acknowledged to be on the side of the other. But I must say something more about my appropriating from Derrida (from others as well, but less voluminously) so many sentences, paragraphs, pages, whole texts, but often just single words, phrases without quotation marks that could distinguish them from the rest, from "my own" words. I just indicated how one might understand responsibility here in terms of response, and I marked that off in distinction to the legal concept. But consider this: if responsibility stopped there, if it didn't have to take things further, would one have taken responsibility for anything *oneself*? Responsibility does not act by itself, without someone taking it for or to himself/herself. In other words, in order to take a responsibility, one has to engage the movement of appropriation. Which means, in principle, that the act en-

ters, irreversibly, into communication with acts of misappropriation as these can be determined, for example, by laws regarding plagiarism, and so forth. It is this principle of communication (or contamination) that prompted you a moment ago to raise an alarm about irresponsibility. You demanded “firm distinctions and clear differentiations” (I’m quoting you). Perhaps now you will see that you wanted to make distinctions and differentiations *within* the movement of appropriation, rather than between it and something else, all that would be outside it as, precisely, in-appropriable. Well, this is also what interests me, although I believe that the distinctions and differentiations you call for can never come to stand, stand still, become established, not even by a strictly legal establishment, because they are always of the order of decisions, acts, performatives, or even just what are loosely called “value judgments,” and thus imply a context that is both particular and not closed. The contexts of decision are infinite, and each time, the act of (taking) responsibility has to do with a singularity, and therefore with a factor of unknowability.⁹ If it were simply a matter of following general axioms, rules, conventions, or a program, the act (or actor) could not take anything upon or into itself as *its* responsibility. We’re led back to the link between responsibility and the movement of appropriation, between a response that *begins* by giving reason (back) to another and a taking-of-responsibility that *begins* to take (itself) away from the response.

—Don’t take this the wrong way, but what you just said sounds like so many things Derrida has written about responsibility, decision, giving/taking and gift, speech acts, context, all boiled down into a few sentences.¹⁰

—“Don’t take this the wrong way”? Which way do you mean? That’s usually something one says to try to avoid giving offense. (But isn’t the expression almost always, well, a little offensive? Shall I ignore that?) I don’t imagine you’re worried I’ll hear another insinuation of plagiarism, or some other misappropriation. I know, and you know that I know, that I wrote those sentences, just now, “off the top of my head,” as we say. You might as well have been there, here, inside the head from off the top of which they came—that’s how much you know about them, where they come from, and that they are not pilfered as such, *tel quel*, from any specific place, not even from, as you put it, “so many things Derrida has written.” So by “wrong way” you don’t mean anything like plagiarism. But apparently there’s another wrong way to take the observation, which I might fall into even though I entirely agree with what you say, at least on

the surface, and thus once again I take it the “right way” by saying, once again, you’re right. The other “wrong” way would be (I’m guessing) to hear you charging: “There is too much Derrida in that head of yours, which is therefore not finally yours at all, and everything you say . . . ”

—Wait, I didn’t say that at all! You’re not quoting anyone but yourself!

—True enough. I’m just remarking on the uncertain pragmatics of the words spoken, the way they can be doing things at a level of the unspoken. This structure can be compared to the symptom Freud called *Verneinung*, whereby a negation stands for its contrary, an assent, confirmation, or affirmation. Freud analyzes *Verneinung* as produced by repression acting against or in resistance to recognition of an unconscious desire or drive. A classic example illustrates the symptom well enough: when the analysand says something like “the woman I desired in my dream is not like my mother, not at all” then the analyst is ready to retort, on Freud’s authority, that “‘no’ is the hall-mark of repression.”¹¹ “Don’t take this the wrong way” might be another illustration of *Verneinung* inhabiting our most polite discourse or even constituting it. (In fact, the first sentence Freud invents to illustrate the symptom is pragmatically very similar: “Now you’ll think I mean to say something insulting, but really I’ve no such intention” [235]). It says, in effect, don’t take this, what I’m about to say, the wrong way, and at the same time it also says that there is a wrong way, and thus “you are right to hear that I am also saying (without saying it) the ‘wrong way,’ which is therefore not simply the wrong way, but also the right way to hear what I say.”

—That’s twisted! And there you go again adding quotation marks as if I myself had said all that, instead of you. I didn’t. Now I suppose you’re going to tell me that “I didn’t” is another, whaddayacallit? *Verneinung*? Go ahead . . .

—You just said it, I didn’t . . . You see the difficulty we face extricating ourselves from this structure? It’s the reason I said that a disavowal of disavowal would indeed be “wonderful.”

—Why “disavowal of disavowal”? Doesn’t that just raise the level of difficulty to a new power, thus guaranteeing failure? Why can’t the disavowal simply be undone, that is, confessed? But what am I saying? Which disavowal? Whose? Of what? Of whom? I think you’re losing me again . . .

—No, no, you’re still ahead of me. For those are precisely the questions one would have to ask on the way to distinguishing and differentiating *within* the movement of appropriation, that task neither of us thinks to

avoid, although we have very different ways of imagining this non-avoidance (parenthetically, and so as not to insist too much on our imaginary difference, you call for such decisions, distinctions, and differentiations to be made once and for all, more or less, whereas I insist on the infinite iterations of the task at hand, never finished once and for all, and never just a task for the moral philosopher, but for all those who have to get on with life and thus with death, with others, in every context imaginable); leaving our differences aside, what is it we are both asking *about*? A structure of disavowed appropriation: if that sounds almost sinister, remember that the same structure is also *involved in* what we both still call and want to call by the noble names of reason and responsibility. I know, “involved in” sounds pretty imprecise, but that’s just it. If we could measure, plot, describe precisely, once and for all, this “involvement,” if we could lay out an *involved* (from *involvere*, to roll in or up) relation in the flat dimension of logical definition, if, in other words, taking responsibility were a matter of just reading off from this definition, well, then, would we even be raising questions about it? No, because there would be no question about what one should, ought to, must do (but also should not, ought not to, must not do) to take his/her/its responsibility. And that’s clearly not the case, the question is always on everyone’s lips, including ours . . .

— . . . and Derrida’s, who I still hear echoing in all you say. All right. Responsibility “involves,” is folded into a movement of appropriation, i.e., a “self” who or which alone takes responsibility. This means that this “self” also acts for, before, in place of, in response to, or simply *as* the involved other(s) “within,” all the others involved or with whom one “is involved,” to use that common expression, but to include all manner of involvements, not just intimate ones, even the most abstract, for example, what one sees on television or learns of through the news or is able to understand at some remove. All the others who are within without being only within so long as they are also without, without and therefore also within (to graft on here some of your convoluted syntax!). I know Derrida has affirmed many times something like “it is the other in me who—or which—decides.”¹² Well, isn’t this exactly the sort of statement of truth, the confession or avowal that is routinely disavowed by, well, by someone like “me” who relies on an idea of responsibility fully grounded in the subject? And who wonders, upon hearing the assertion “it is the other in me who decides, who has decided,” whether it describes a responsible act, a responsible decision when it puts responsibility on the shoulders of a phantom other, an other “in me”?

—You wonder, you say. That's wonderful. For indeed who is wondering, who is asking the question? Who has just said these things? Is it you or rather "someone like you"? Or is it someone else, someone other for whom you speak up or on whose shoulders you stand? Are you speaking for yourself or for another when you worry these matters? And what about the quotation of Derrida? Isn't he another who is speaking here as well, through a textual proxy? These are not easily decidable questions once one suspends the axiomatics of subjectivity that are usually invoked to decide them. No subject's knowledge has ever been sufficient in itself to make decisions, what are called "decisions," which do not merely unfold the consequences of knowledge and calculation, because they have to step off at some point into an unknown, beyond the subject's knowledge or ability to calculate outcomes.

—Yes, yes, this is the necessary distinction between calculated program and decision. But admit it's not easy to do without the axiomatics of subjectivity. Didn't Nietzsche say something to the effect that we won't get rid of belief in the subject so long as we haven't given up grammar?¹³

—Or the law, for which the responsible subject is a conditioning belief, construction, or simply what Joyce called (he was speaking of paternity) a legal fiction. The subject is a legal fiction, which means that, before the law, no one is given the choice to "do without" it. But in the whole lived complexity of involvements and responsibilities, decisions, acts, and sufferings, the legal fiction can be and does get suspended, all the time, even if, by law, it will always be enforced. Before or beyond the law, however, there is always good reason to "do without" the fiction, effectively or practically and through all kinds of "practices," which include experiences of suffering (one's "own" and that of others, the suffering of others as one's own, the suffering of compassion). Practically or pragmatically, we might say that, through these "practices" or experiences, the legal fiction is disavowed, even as it remains in force in every manner of recognized discourse of knowledge (for the fiction concerns above all the epistemological subject, the subject of knowledge, about whom one can ask: what did he know and when did he know it?). Such practical "disavowals," however, would not necessarily be speech acts, in the narrow sense, even though the term disavowal itself calls up speech, or at least voice. *Advocare*, the root of our words *avow*, *avowal*, figures the action of calling to or calling up a voice, more specifically, calling to one's aid the voice or speech of another. The advocate is called to speak in place of the

other, to lend his/her voice to the other's cause, thereby to act as an aid or supplement to the one who stands accused. Likewise, the word vow implies something spoken, a speech act, a voice swearing a vow. Vow, avow, avowal all call up not only voice and speech, but the scene of the law, once again, and the very particular speech acts performed there under the law's command.

—Yes, I see that, but what's your point?

—Merely to point or call to this call to language and even to underscore it, redouble it as when I spoke of "disavowal of disavowal." Perhaps all such a phrase can do is repeat, redouble the call to another's "voice," that is, to language and therefore to thought. And it calls on the other disavowal to disavow the first. The structure of disavowal, we saw, is inextricable for the subject, or for the ego, if you prefer Freud's terminology. By itself, the subject can only disavow that it is not itself. Which is why its disavowal has to call for another to repeat it but with the difference of a spacing that marks the site of another's speech, another speaking. This other site is what no discourse of subject-based knowledge can know, cognize, and therefore recognize, avow. In the strict court of law, the legal subject cannot confess, give testimony, or respond as anyone other than itself. That is why these very discourses themselves need to be supplemented by others, many others, many other sites of the difference they disavow. They thus call up or call for a repetition that does not just repeat the same thing, but changes or displaces something, *does* something, which is what I'm here calling: disavowal of disavowal.

—But where are these sites? In what space?

—I'm speaking now of the necessity to put into language, to bring thought before itself in some form (language as power of formalization) so that it may continue to try to grasp its own contradictions, false ideas, and inadequate understandings. This is not to suggest that language is the only site that matters or the one that comprises all others or any similar such thing. Just a moment ago I pointed to "the whole lived complexity of involvements and responsibilities, decisions, acts, and sufferings," in other words, to the innumerable sites where effectively, pragmatically, something like the disavowal of disavowal goes on, unceasingly in fact, and without any necessary recourse to the formalization of language or even to elementary linguistic expression. It may, it certainly does take place in utter silence, before or beyond any articulated speech: e.g., a caress that is answered by another caress, or an exchange of glances. But if I'm also in-

sisting on the properly linguistic site, that's because this site will and does get called up all the time to supplement and speak for the silent witness to experience as experience of the other.¹⁴ It is true that, still most often, what steps up in answer to this call is a discursive advocate for the subject (for example, as the subject of knowledge of its own experience); what takes over, in other words, is a disavowing discourse.

—Can there be any other?

—Perhaps that is what is in question here and throughout *Book of Addresses*. If so, would that explain the constant reference to writings of Derrida, Nancy, Cixous, Blanchot, and others, all of whom consign the truth of thought to something other than the subject? Their texts would thus be what I called sites for the disavowal of the disavowal of this “something other.”

—That phrase is becoming so awkward! Can't you find a better one?

—How about “deconstruction”?

—Less awkward, but not very original. Besides, how does it mean “disavowal of disavowal”?

—If you want a serious answer to that question, we'd have to take the time to recall what “deconstruction” sought to name when it was initially proposed, when it began to be, as Plato put it, “bandied about, alike among those who understand it and those who have no interest in it.” If we were being serious here, if we were, say, sitting around a seminar table, I'd suggest we reread (for discussion next week) the 1966 essay by Derrida titled “Freud and the Scene of Writing.” And then, next week having arrived, the discussion could begin by situating the essay. So, we'd remark that it begins with a kind of preface or presentation of its provenance in a long lecture for a seminar that met at the Institut de Psychanalyse. In telescopic prose, this prologue sketches the background of the lecture-essay, and indicates which question was “in the air” at the seminar, namely: what is the relation, if any, between deconstruction and psychoanalysis? This question leads to a very concise description of what deconstruction does, and thus of what that term was meant to name, to put into language. Well, although the word disavowal never occurs, I would say that “deconstruction” is here made to designate as well and from the outset a kind of disavowal of disavowal, not first of all as an event within the psychoanalytic transference, but rather as a historical force.

To see this, we'd have to pay attention to what is being said about repression (and you recall that *Verneinung* is an effect of repression). Psy-

choanalysis and deconstruction share an interest in repression *inasmuch as it fails*.¹⁵ Derrida cites Freud declaring, quite reasonably: “Repressions that have failed have more claim on our interest than those that may have been successful; for the latter will for the most part escape our examination.” And Derrida comments that it is a comparable failure that “interests us,” in other words, those who speak (for example, in a seminar) for the *historical* interest of deconstruction. “An unsuccessful repression, on the road to historical dismantling. It is this dismantling that interests us, this unsuccessfulness [*non-réussite*, that is, non-success] which confers upon its becoming a certain legibility and limits its historical opaqueness” (197).

This is very near the crux of the question we’re asking in our own little seminar; one glimpses here, in outline, the idea of disavowal of disavowal, as well as the necessity of its structure: a repetition that does not merely repeat the same, but also dismantles or assists at the dismantling of what remains nevertheless legible. This crux comes fully into view when it is aligned with a certain practice of, precisely, crossing out or erasing. Formalized in writing, deconstruction disavows, puts a cross through the history to which it does not simply belong since it also *thinks* the condition of belonging, i.e., the condition of a self proper to itself, belonging to itself. When deconstruction begins to write this history of belonging, it does so with the double gesture of inscribing and erasing, inscribing, on the one hand, the historical epoch of metaphysics, while with the other hand erasing its archive, but in a manner that does not render it illegible, on the contrary “This erasure, *which maintains the legibility of the archia* [*archie*, emphases added], signifies a relationship of *conceived* [that is, *pensée*, emphasis in the original] belonging to the history of metaphysics.”¹⁶

So, what is interesting to reflect upon now is how, from the beginning, deconstruction has advocated itself (so to speak!) as a different practice of *disavowal*, which is both related to and distinguishable from the psychoanalytic structure of *Verneinung*. This practice is that of an inscribing erasure (or erasing inscription) that does not prevent legibility. Whereas *Verneinung* belongs essentially to the structure of repression as constitutive of the individual psyche, erasure is a practice of *thinking* (“erasure . . . signifies a relationship of conceived [*pensée*] belonging . . .”) that reads the failure of repression as historical dismantling (i.e., the historical deconstruction of metaphysics). It is thus a matter of conceiving differently the relation between these two, *Verneinung* and erasure: “Logocentric repression is not comprehensible on the basis of the Freudian concept of repres-

sion; on the contrary, logocentric repression permits an understanding of how an original and individual repression became possible within the horizon of a culture and a historical structure of belonging" (197).

Did you just sigh? Or was that a groan?

—Maybe I was just testing to see if you were still listening. Anyway, isn't it time for the seminar to end? But seriously, I'm wondering why you took us back to this most classic *mise en place* of deconstruction, as double gesture, reinscription and erasure, writing *sous rature*, the closure of metaphysics, and all the rest . . .

—Were *you* listening? It's because I proposed deconstruction as another name for "disavowal of disavowal," and since to justify that rash translation would take the time of a seminar, I employed a fiction . . .

—A fiction? Yes, go on.

—Fiction: there's perhaps another name for "disavowal of disavowal."¹⁷ I could point to the places in *Book of Addresses* where this idea is worked out with help from Blanchot, Cixous, Derrida again. But also with the help of a literary fiction, a novella by Henry James, *The Aspern Papers*, a partial reading of which opens the collection (and gives some of the most sustained argument here about the condition of address).¹⁸ Now, if we could prolong our seminar, I would choose to add a different text by James to our reading list for next week, his preface for the New York edition of *The Golden Bowl*.¹⁹

—Surely you're kidding? Look at the clock . . .

—All right, I see, but stay and help me read just three words of the text, in fact just one word, because it is essentially the same word repeated three times. Each time, however, it seems to have a different force of meaning, or it goes in a different direction. If I've counted right, James writes "disavowing," "disavowing," "disavowal" at three different junctures in this preface, the first and last falling very close to the beginning and the end of the text. The first time it occurs in the midst or at the turning point of a reflection on what it means for an author of a novel to be responsible, or rather what it has meant, what it must have meant for this author, writing now, *après coup*, a preface for his own book, to have been responsible. As he so often does in these prefaces, James is remarking on his preference for narrating another's impression of an affair or event (the "subject-matter," as he calls it), rather than narrating it directly as the author. "I have already betrayed, as an accepted habit, and even to extravagance commented on, my preference for dealing with my subject-matter, for 'seeing

my story,' through the opportunity and the sensibility of some more or less detached, some not strictly involved, though thoroughly interested and intelligent, witness or reporter. . . . The somebody is often . . . but an unnamed, unintroduced and . . . unwarranted participant, the impersonal author's concrete deputy or delegate, a convenient substitute or apologist for the creative power otherwise so veiled and disembodied."²⁰ The prefacer is then going to be led to analyze this preference in terms of the responsibility that is assumed by letting another stand in as the painter or the poet in his place. Let me cite the whole passage.

—You promised we were going to read just three words, three occurrences of “disavowal”?

—The word comes later, but we need the context to be able to read it. And besides, James's text performs a disavowal before it ever confesses the word. The disavowed thing is mockingly called “the mere muffled majesty of irresponsible ‘authorship.’” But that gesture is immediately followed by another whereby the other, that is, “the painter of the picture or chanter of the ballad,” is declared never “responsible *enough* and for every inch of his surface and note of his song.” Those are James's italics, by the way. And after several more turns and changes of direction, it turns out that the preference declared here is to give oneself “most instead of least to answer for.” You won't mind, will you, if I continue inserting some bracketed remarks into the full quotation?

—!!!

—

Anything, in short, I now reflect, must always have seemed to me better [this “to me” signals that James is speaking still for himself and for his own preference in the matter]—better for the process and the effect of representation, my irrepressible ideal—than the mere muffled majesty of irresponsible “authorship.” [Do you think that “irrepressible” might have called up the look-alike “irresponsible,” which follows it so closely? How does one take responsibility for one's own irrepressible preference? Especially if the preference one is declaring is to let another take one's place as “deputy,” “delegate,” “substitute,” or “apologist,” to recall all of James's terms?] Beset constantly by the sense that the painter of the picture or the chanter of the ballad (whatever we may call him) can never be responsible *enough*, and for every inch of his surface and note of his song, I track my uncontrollable footsteps, right and left [i.e., through changes of direction], after the fact [*après coup*], while they take their

quick turn, even on stealthiest tiptoe, toward the point of view that, within the compass, will give me most instead of least to answer for. (347)

This image of James going back over his own stealthy tracks, watching himself read directions off a compass that points always toward *more* responsibility, is compelling for the note struck of the uncontrollability of it all, I mean the way the footsteps are being drawn once again, right here in the preface, into another's wake, the other that he pretended to be in writing his fictions, but also now, the other that he was when he so pretended.

—I'm still waiting for James finally to call this "disavowing" by name.

—Here it is, in the next paragraph: "It's not that the muffled majesty of authorship doesn't here [i.e., in *The Golden Bowl*] *ostensibly* reign; but I catch myself again shaking it off and *disavowing* [my emphases] the pretence of it while I get down into the arena and do my best to live and breathe and rub shoulders and converse with the persons engaged in the struggle . . ." So, the disavowal of authorship is the condition of doing one's best at what authors do best, which according to James, and he just confessed it again, means representing "the persons engaged in the struggle."

—Why didn't you quote the end of the sentence: ". . . engaged in the struggle that provides for the others in the circling tiers the entertainment of the great game"? This representation, which James has just called his "irrepressible ideal," is itself represented as theatrical. James always insists that a novel must interest, entertain, give its audience pleasure. Here that audience is figured as "the others in the circling tiers" of a theater, even though the "great game" entertaining them is a novel. I seem to recall that Henry James dreamed of triumph as a playwright, but that his plays were far less successful than his novels and tales. But, don't you see that the theatrical figure can also work to disavow the disavowal of "the muffled majesty of authorship"! For what has had to be muffled in novel-writing is the applause from the circling tiers; a novel's readers are always absent and thus silent, there's no call for "Author! Author!" at the end of a play. So James here manages to procure for himself some substitute for that moment by way of the theatrical image.²¹ That's really rather clever.

—Or it may be just another demonstration of the impossible disavowal that James nevertheless meant to declare. For he would say, if only he could, that ostensibly reigning authorship is a pretense, to be shaken off, and yet what he says shows how it still sticks to one, comes back on stage no sooner the disavowal is published.

—But look how late it's getting! I must be off.

—Wait, wait! We can just glance at the second occurrence. At this point, James is going on about the photographs accompanying this edition as frontispieces to each volume. Even though he collaborated extensively with the photographer, Alvin Langdon Coburn, choosing the sites to be photographed for each volume and even dictating the angles of the shots, James betrays some ambivalence about their inclusion here. In particular, he is determined to forestall any notion that the frontispieces serve as “illustrations” of the novels they accompany.²² But at least, notes James, the photographer found a way, “not to keep, or to pretend to keep, anything like dramatic step with [the] suggestive matter [of the volumes]” (331). That is, the photographer did not pretend that he could emulate with his pictures James's own dramas (we're in the theater again). “This,” James comments, “would quite have disqualified them, to my rigour; but they were ‘all right,’ in the so analytic modern critical phrase, through their discreetly *disavowing* emulation” (my emphasis). Saying “all right” (but in quotation marks and with marked irony), James consents to receive the “discreetly disavowing emulation” of the photographs. Does it strike you that this three-word phrase is quite unstable? “Disavowing” can be either a verbal or adjectival participle, and depending on how you read it makes quite a difference for the sense. Do the photographs actively disavow any emulation, that is, not even attempt it, or on the contrary, do they present the novel with their “disavowing emulation” of its grand, dramatic achievement? And what about “discreetly”? Right now that looks to me like the revealing mark of its opposite, the witting or unwitting immodesty of all this disavowed emulation. What do you think?

—I think you've nearly persuaded me that one should not write a preface to one's own writings. But suppose someone had convinced Henry James of that? For all their disavowals, the prefaces are quite wonderful texts in their own right. Still, and again don't take this the wrong way, you're no Henry James . . .

—But who could ever deny it? And these are great texts not *in spite of* the disavowals displayed, but *because* they display them so well, so intricately, so seemingly inexorably. As if disavowal were even the law of their composition. Or rather, since the novels are written in and as the movement that would disavow “the muffled majesty of authorship,” the prefaces are composed according to the principle of a disavowal of that disavowal, in other words, a reappropriation of what only *seemed* to be

painted or chanted by another. But before we can close the book, there is the last occurrence of our theme word, which falls a few lines before the end, in the last paragraph of this, the last of the prefaces. James here is giving a final assessment of what has been done, of the “done things” that are not just the novels and tales, the fictions, but also now these prefaces. It’s rather long, but I beg your indulgence to cite *in extenso*.

All of which amounts but to saying . . .

—Wait, wait!

—

. . . that as the whole conduct of life consists of things done, which do other things in their turn, just so our behaviour and its fruits are essentially one and continuous and persistent and unquenchable, so the act has its way of abiding and showing and testifying, and so, among our innumerable acts, are no arbitrary, no senseless separations. The more we are capable of acting the less gropingly we plead such differences; whereby, with any capability, we recognise betimes that to “put” things is very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them. Our expression of them, and the terms on which we understand that, belong as nearly to our conduct and our life as every other feature of our freedom; these things yield in fact some of its most exquisite material to the religion of doing. More than that, our literary deeds enjoy this marked advantage over many of our acts, that, though they go forth into the world and stray even in the desert, they don’t to the same extent lose themselves; their attachment and reference to us, however, strained, needn’t necessarily lapse—while of the tie that binds us to *them* we may make almost anything we like. We are condemned, in other words, whether we will or no, to abandon and outlive, to forget and disown and hand over to desolation, many vital or social performances—if only because the traces, records, connexions, the very memorials we would fain preserve, are practically impossible to rescue for that purpose from the general mixture. We give them up even when we wouldn’t—it is not a question of choice. Not so on the other hand our really “done” things of this superior and more appreciable order—which leave us indeed all licence of disconnexion and *disavowal* [my emphasis], but positively impose on us no such necessity. (347–48)

It’s getting dark. Are you still there? Did you follow the last turn toward a disavowal that may be freely undertaken, because no necessity imposes it? Unlike those acts that are abandoned, outlived, forgotten, disowned, or handed over to desolation, not always by choice or even against our wish to hold them fast, the act of literature, the act of “putting” things in such a way as “very exactly and responsibly and interminably to do them,”

leaves one free to disavow them—or not. There is then a structure (if we can call it that) of disconnection that “is not a question of choice” but of the “general mixture,” where connection is lost “whether we will or no,” over against which James is adumbrating the “marked advantage” of the literary deed, of our “really ‘done’ things” whose “attachment and reference to us, however strained, needn’t necessarily lapse.” Despite certain appearances, however, there is not an opposition being made here between irresponsible life and responsible art. For one thing, James says clearly that the act of “putting” things is very much part of the deeds and doings that make up the “whole conduct of life.”²³ “Our expression of [things], and the terms on which we understand that, belong as nearly to our conduct and our life as every other feature of our freedom.” Not an opposition, then, but a relation within life between modes of disavowal, the disavowals that “just happen” and are even imposed by necessity, and a kind of disavowal that one would always be free not to make, not to have to make. But can a disavowal “just happen”? Haven’t I been saying that a disavowal is always some kind of act or deed or speech act? Perhaps in the idea of disavowal or disconnection that “just happens,” there is, precisely, a disavowal of connection? James appears to suggest this at one point, before he puts in place the distinction of literary deeds from any other kind of deed: “our behaviour and its fruits are essentially one and continuous and persistent and unquenchable, so the act has its way of abiding and showing and testifying [notice the language of testimony], and so, among our innumerable acts, there are no arbitrary, no senseless separations.”²⁴ That is, just as with our literary deeds, the connection abides and is attested to between acts and behaviours: “there are no arbitrary, senseless separations.” To declare otherwise would be to engage in a disavowal, and it is this speech act that James figures in the following sentence: “The more we are capable of acting the less gropingly we *plead* such differences.” Even if the superior actor (the one who is capable of acting the most, of giving himself “the most instead of the least to answer for”) will be identified, for James, with the doer of literary deeds (or in general with the artist), the “we” of “we plead” is all-inclusive. It includes, that is, whoever *pleads* disconnection (before some court or before one’s conscience), and therefore poses a limit to his or her own responsibility for some attested act. The legal subject must always plead the differences ever more gropingly, for that is its law: so that it may know itself as and at the

limit of its responsibility. The speech act figured in this pleading is thus the disavowal *constitutive* of the subject.

But the same general, unspecified “we” is also subject to the experience of finitude whereby “we are condemned . . . whether we will or no, to abandon and outlive, to forget and disown and hand over to desolation, many vital or social performances.” What I earlier, and gropingly, called disavowals that “just happen” was a reference to this description of finite experience. What’s still unclear is whether James noticed or meant us to notice the connection between his two characterizations of “disconnection”: the first, an act of disavowal that pleads disconnection, while the second is a disconnection that “just happens” by virtue of the finitude, alas, of experience. Is there a connection being made here between these two disconnects, or is the connection being disavowed, precisely, in the figure of what “just happens”? What do you think?

—That, as James said, one can never be responsible *enough*. You’re right. Leave *Book of Addresses* alone, without preface or introduction. But if you like, I’ll write a foreword and confess everything in your place.

—Oh, if only you could, that would indeed be wonderful.