

# 1 Introduction

## HISTORY AND WRITING

IN THE HALF-CENTURY since the end of World War II, three philosophical currents have contested social thought in the West and thrown themselves against institutional ideology: Marxism, existentialism, and post-structuralism.<sup>1</sup> While the Marxism of this period attempted to rejuvenate its nineteenth-century progenitor, and succeeded only in re-axiomatizing it in contemporary terms, the other two currents addressed and critiqued the structure of axiomatics and presupposition themselves, emerging as centers of non-ideological thinking.<sup>2</sup> Surprisingly little has been researched, however, on a possible interface or conjunction between existentialism and post-structuralism;<sup>3</sup> and in particular, very little attention has been paid to a possible relation between the two central (and most prolific) figures of these movements: Sartre and Derrida. What astonishes is that the two figures address some common socio-political questions in a significant manner from their different respective directions, in particular, the role of language in the techniques and technologies of social control, domination, and political manipulation.<sup>4</sup> Yet this has not served to bridge the gap of their differences.

Indeed, so great a separation has been discerned between them that most commentary has been content to enhance it, as if the existence of the hiatus itself had some overriding historical importance. Nothing testifies to the intensity of this hiatus more than the paucity and hesitancy of discussion on it. Very few commentators or critical thinkers have ventured to address it as a critical space. Philip Wood, reviewing the state of dialogue between Sartre and the post-structuralists in 1989, finds it singularly sparse. "Extended confrontation with Sartre's work has been noticeably absent in the post-Sartrean philosophy, being restricted, when reference has been direct, to scathing dismissals without recourse or argument, or when reference has been allusory, to superior scorn." And conversely, "Sartre himself never bothered to develop the testy remarks proffered in the interview [in the journal *L'Arc*] into a sustained engagement with his critics."<sup>5</sup> (That Sartre and Foucault at least were on good terms personally seems to have had little effect on this generally tense philosophical stillness.)

Sartre seems not to have addressed Derrida in particular in writing at all. Until 1996, Derrida made only brief polemical mention of Sartre; specifically, in "The Ends of Man," in *Glas*, and in two interviews.<sup>6</sup> Of course, Sartre was a dominant figure in the milieu into which Derrida stepped; he could pretend to the hauteur of the established in the face of young *arrivistes*. But could Derrida afford such a luxury? Nevertheless, Derrida consistently distances himself from Sartre, at times with what sounds like a certain bitterness (which is addressed below).

One could say that the hiatus was in fact a mutual refusal between them. In general, Sartre thought both the structuralists and post-structuralists were somewhat misguided for having emptied their discourses of what he himself considered essential to philosophy and philosophical politics: an account of the subject, an approach to history, and a confrontation with the a prioris and presuppositions of traditional philosophy (cf. *L'Arc* interview on Foucault, no. 30, October 1966, pp. 87–96). The post-structuralist response, however indirect, was that each account of the subject already constitutes its construction; in other words, one constructs the subject by investigating it. And similarly, an investigation of history as such assumed its own history as its foundation, while a confrontation with presuppositions only prioritized a different set of presuppositions as the condition for the confrontation in the first place. In general, the post-structuralist critique argues that the referential subject matter of a text ultimately acquires its meaning and being from the collectivity of social texts that purport to describe or refer to it. Thus, when Sartre claims that nothing human is strange to him because all subjectivities are expressions of freedom,<sup>7</sup> Derrida points out (in “The Ends of Man”) that Sartre has merely substituted one presuppositional universal (albeit posed in the negative) for another.

Sartre and Derrida are perhaps most disparate in their approaches to writing. Sartre wants to be definitive about what he says. He desires language that is direct, unequivocal, message-bearing; he wants it to say what he thinks.<sup>8</sup> The Derridean critique of writing suggests this is an idle endeavor, that the polyvalence of language calls into question what *say* and *think* mean, and what the *who* that does it is, as well as “about-ness” itself.<sup>9</sup> At the core of this approach is the notion that textual form—namely, the modes, structures, and genres of writing, including reasoning, stylistic constructions, tropes, and self-referentialities—not only operates as a carrier of meaning or expressed content, but has meaning itself. That is, the structure of textuality is understood to purvey meaning, as well as be the means of expression. And that meaning cannot avoid transforming or undermining the textual content it is used to express. As Gayatri Spivak says, “What one is saying is undermined by the way one says it.”<sup>10</sup>

Derrida made this point in 1996 in a contribution to the fiftieth anniversary issue of *Les Temps Modernes* (the journal that Sartre had founded in 1946 with Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty). It was his first friendly approach to Sartre,<sup>11</sup> and he only mildly alluded to his earlier seemingly visceral reaction to Sartre. In this article, called “Il courait mort” (“He runs while dead”), Derrida turned to a short piece Sartre had written in 1948 called “Writing for One’s Times” (“Ecrire pour son époque”). Such an essay was, of course, a “natural” one for Derrida to address in an anniversary issue recalling an earlier “time” in the midst of a far different one. And Derrida affirmed that he considered *Les Temps Modernes* to be of his (Derrida’s) times, but also that it was not insofar as it did not address what was of primary concern for him. He suggested that Sartre’s attempt to secularize writing as engaged in its times was in its form messianic, a soteriology of the writer. Many commentators had previously noticed the programmatic undertone in Sartre’s writing, and some had rejected it on that

score; but few have seen fit to position Sartre's text, so insistent on its secularity, in the realm of the religious, as does Derrida (Wilfrid Desan comes close to doing so in *The Tragic Finale*). Derrida's point is that the form of the text is messianic, which inserts a subversive meaning into a text that bespeaks a secularity in content. Nevertheless, Derrida embraces Sartre for having lived that contradiction and its ambiguities without pretense.

The post-structuralist critique of textuality thus puts in question the ability of language to be unambiguous, or univocal, to say something with clarity and precision without the means of "saying it" turning it into something else. In particular, it regards the capacity of textuality to multiply meanings for itself, to set itself against and beyond its own literal significations, to be of the essence of language and writing. Against Sartre's desire that his writing say what he thinks, the post-structuralists argue that there is always more than we think in what we say or write. With respect to the Sartrean or phenomenological notion of consciousness, the post-structuralists argue that consciousness only apprehends itself in the language that purveys or articulates that apprehension to itself; that is, in finding itself only in the means it must use to describe what it finds, consciousness remains nothing but the content of cultural and philosophical (textual) practices. Thus, post-structuralism might mirror Sartre's sentiment that consciousness produces writing as its text, by affirming that writing produces consciousness as its text.<sup>12</sup> But the issue remains essentially unengaged; Sartre tends to avoid a critique of language as much as Derrida avoids speaking about consciousness, in a form of mutual refusal.

For Philip Wood, it is precisely the philosophical and cultural critique that a reconsideration of Sartre in the light of post-Sartrean philosophy would make possible that would be of benefit. On the one hand, the post-structuralist critique is itself an "engaged" act, while on the other, there is an openness (an untotaled and untotable dimension) in Sartre's notion of totalization that has yet to be fully explored (especially by post-structuralism). He seeks to conjoin the critical concreteness of the Sartrean discourse with the discursive insight into cultural and ideological structures of the Derridean critique. If one can recognize an existentiality in the post-structuralist endeavor, and a deconstructive dimension to Sartre's thinking, Wood concludes, then a foundation should exist for a mutual rereading of each through the other; and that would be, for him, of inestimable historical value, because of what it might make possible for critical thinking, and for social and political understanding. In other words, it is the space between them that Philip Wood seeks to valorize.

Ultimately, the indisposition of Sartre and Derrida toward each other fascinates, in that the aura of innovation that emanates from both contains a misty suggestion of some distant alluring Arcadia in which their thinking flows together. What power would critical thinking gain from some philosophical "unified field theory" conjoining their efforts?

Indeed, the analogy to theoretical physics is not far-fetched. Einstein found little to applaud, from his relativistic point of view, in quantum mechanics in general, and the Heisenberg probabilistic description of matter in particular. Relativity concerned itself with the very large, while quantum theory addressed

the very small, with little occasion for overlap. The question of fundamental forces teased at the physicists as a possible link, while evading their every effort, leaving them to circle each other across untraversable conceptual distances. Sartre and the post-structuralists have similarly found few areas of overlap. For the post-structuralists, Sartre seems to remain in the ranks of the rationalists; and they critique rationalism precisely for its assumption of universality as a rationalist pretension, just as the quantum theorists critiqued relativity's assumptions of continuity and an inability to admit discrete transformations or quantum leaps. Sartre looked askance at what appeared to him to be irrationalism, as Einstein did toward quantum theory. Nevertheless, if this analogy were to have any merit, it would not be for some philosophical "unified field theory," but for the adjoining of realms of understanding, the opening of space between disparate theoretical landscapes in which to think.

However, as things stand today, to ask how the texts of Sartre and Derrida relate is to enter a negative space of incommensurability, and to seek to navigate discourses of mutual refusal. To examine this mutual refusal, because it occurs in the form of language, unstated and all the more emphatic for that articulatory absence, a consideration of some commentators who themselves have gingerly approached that space will be required, in order to see what has held them in thrall in doing so. This will be an introduction not only to the question of incommensurability (something that effects itself minimally between any two writers, and in the extreme in this case) but to the metaphysical obstructions to a common language, to narrativity as the possibility of common experience, and to a common historicity that would need to dimension a traversal of the space between.

Critical commentary mostly served to map the separate rims of this canyon and only allusively appreciate the grandeur of the landscape between. Critics of one have tended to exclude the other, thus ratifying the hiatus. In addressing these commentators, as a context for this present investigation, the question one would need to pose is what those who have not entered the space between have gained by not doing so. One might also ask what they had to do to avoid it. This "between" of an existentiality and an ephemerality, or of historicity and an allohistorical multiplicity, is only part of the problem with respect to commentary. The rest of the problem lies in the attempt to historically understand or tell the story of what has not happened. Let us briefly consider some of the commentators who have approached the space between Sartre and Derrida, and look at the ways they have succeeded in not entering it.

## THE METAPHYSICS OF A COMMON LANGUAGE

Generally, when Sartre has been addressed from a post-structuralist point of view, it has been not only deconstructively but polemically as well. Sartrean thinkers have been content, for their part, to ignore or marginalize Derrida as being beyond the purview of their own thinking.<sup>13</sup> One author who attempts to touch both sides is Hugh Silverman, and his book, *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, is quite exemplary of the perplexity.<sup>14</sup> Silverman is an excellent

reader (and expositor) of both Sartre and the post-structuralists. His book's central focus is Sartre's relation to Merleau-Ponty and various structuralists (among whom he includes Foucault). But in the main body of Silverman's discussion, Derrida is given scant mention; he appears only in the final chapter, one devoted wholly to him. In those final moments, Silverman's brief mention of Sartre seems almost beside the point. As the heading of Silverman's chapter on Derrida, "The Difference Between (and Beyond)," suggests, Derrida and deconstruction become the "beyond" of contemporary thinking. The relationality that Silverman still finds possible between Sartre and the structuralists has all but eroded away.

Christina Howells is another "evenhanded" reader. She makes an intensive attempt to bring the texts of Sartre and Derrida into philosophical relation. In a short and very interesting article titled "Sartre and Derrida: Qui Perd Gagne," she addresses Derrida's seeming animus against Sartre, which she seeks to mitigate (as had Wood) by suggesting that Derrida's notion of *différance* is sufficiently analogous to the Sartrean notion of consciousness to warrant a more positive connection.<sup>15</sup> *Différance* is a neologism Derrida employs to signify the inherently aporetic nature of the sign. Derrida reasons that signs produce meaning only within a system or structure; and they do so through their difference from each other rather than because of any inherent connection between themselves as entities and their meaning. But if so, and if meaning is produced through systems of differences, then it is differing rather than entityhood that is central to a sign's signification, and each sign then must defer to other signs (from which it differs) as the condition for its meaning. Difference and deferral must then be seen as the central operations characteristic of linguistic signs, their spatiality and temporality within a structural system; and it is the conjunction of the two that Derrida seeks to encompass at once in the term *différance*.

For Howells, as the interstice between spatialized and temporalized modes of difference, *différance* is nothingness. For Derrida, *différance* is "neither concept nor name" (*SP*, 130) and has "neither existence nor essence" (*SP*, 134). Howells argues that if "*différance* is not," then it is congruent with Sartre's notion of nothingness, namely, that the for-itself is not. She argues that both resist inclusion in a Hegelian identity, both reside in nothingness rather than being, and both are withheld from presence. She points out that for Sartre, self-presence is "a way of not coinciding with oneself, of escaping identity"; and for Derrida, "the present of self-presence is not simple, . . . it is constituted in an originary irreducible synthesis" ("Sartre and Derrida," 26–7). Thus, she develops certain "basic analogies between Sartre's thinking and Derrida's own," which extend to questions of knowability, the production of meaning, and in particular, to the form of "paradoxical logic" peculiar and common to the for-itself and to *différance*. Ultimately, she suspects that both thinkers are at pains to prevent their "*logique paradoxale* from slipping into a recuperative mode," in order not to be imprisoned there, but instead to continue overflowing the boundaries of their respective discourses.

Howells's article ultimately became the final chapter in a book on Sartre (like Silverman, she reserves Derrida for the finale).<sup>16</sup> In that book, she maps out the systems of paradox or aporia that appear continually in Sartre's writing, paradoxes

that both characterize and represent his philosophical issues. For example, in the Sartrean account, “hate” is always in check, always doomed to failure. It desires a cancellation of the Other’s existence, an end to the Other’s ontological freedom, while in so doing, it must recognize and grant that existence and that freedom to the Other (*BN*, 412). In effect, it must bring about the opposite of what it intends, as the very condition for intending it. Howells reads Sartre’s notions of nothingness, absence, and the inarticulability and inapprehensibility of the Other’s subjectivity within the paradoxical logic. And for her, it is the ability to sustain a reasoning in the mode of paradox that opens Sartre to correlation with corresponding aspects of Derridean thought. Overall, she reflects on their common recognition that language’s universalizing properties destroy the individual aspects of either experience or writing, and lead to a falsifying and alien codification of the human (*Necessity*, 137).

In singling out the “*logique paradoxale*” in both texts, Howells puts her finger on a formal correspondence that is important in the present essay. Yet she is content to rest at recognition of the formalism. That is, she stays within the literal meaning of a logic, and thus loses a certain perspective on the significance of the difference bestowed upon *this* common logic by the disparity of (textual) languages from which it emerges. Instead, her analogy embeds both discourses in a single language. To assume a common language for this logic means to choose one as the common one, and for her, that is ultimately the language of ontology. Thus she privileges the substance of the logic rather than the parallelism of structures that she has discerned. The structural connection she makes seems to decontextualize her approach, but the philosophical content she insists on recontextualizes it—within the ontological.

This is actually a common phenomenon. From within the Sartrean tradition, a number of commentators have attempted to focus on apparent ideational similarities. Sebastian Gardner, for instance, argues that Derrida implicitly describes a notion of the subject quite close to Sartre’s, one that can be resolved through Sartre’s critique. And Noreen Keohane-O’Connor reads a phenomenological parallel by arguing that Derrida’s text contains within it an implicit theory of intentionality.<sup>17</sup> Where Keohane-O’Connor privileges Sartre’s critique of self-presence and considers it within the relation of the self to the other, Gardner privileges Sartre’s sense of the subject by entering Derridean discourse to discover it there by using a (Sartrean) criteriology from elsewhere.

It is this endeavor that collides with the central problem and thus discloses it, namely, the difference in philosophical languages of the two. Seeking to engage both thinkers within a single discursive framework requires choosing one of those languages for the conjuncture. Whichever one chooses, the other gets absorbed into that chosen language and rewritten in its terms. The effect of adopting a phenomenological language is to transform (translate) Derrida’s text and to co-opt Derrida’s language into a philosophical realm that is not its own. It is to this disparity that Derrida refers when he mentions that *Les Temps Moderne* is of his times and yet not. To adopt a deconstructive language would be to transform Sartre’s terms, against their own internal logic, revealing his inner assumptions, but leaving his text other

than it is. To deconstruct Sartre's text would mean to submit it to its own hidden aporias, to reveal how its underlying presuppositions were precisely what it had produced for itself as its foundation, and from which it drew its justification; it would demonstrate that there is always a self-justifying dimension to whatever authority a text pretends to claim for itself. With what, then, would the Derridean text be brought into relation? Ironically, while the choice of a critical language is made pursuant to a critical endeavor, it obstructs its own project by obviating the possibility of a critique of the difference dispelled by the act of choosing.

This suggests a dimension of the problem, the extant incommensurability of language between Sartre and Derrida. To choose a language in which to relate them would be to exclude one and thus obviate the possibility of relation. Either choice would establish one of the languages in question as a metaphysics of that relation. The attempt to enter the space between them seems to erect a barrier to entering that space. The resolution of this problem, if one wished to bridge the hiatus between them, would be to somehow speak of both while respecting and preserving the disparity of language. Howells's work is significant in being as close as anyone has come in daring to venture into that Sartre/Derrida space in that way.

In general, the central value that deconstruction has bequeathed the world is to show that though traditional metaphysics claims to refer to the world, it cannot. It deconstructs through disclosure of the pretensions of metaphysics to coherence, while hiding beneath presuppositional disguises and ploys the inconsistencies to which all language is heir. To show where the language of metaphysics is self-referential is to reveal where its pretensions to referentiality and explanation become infinite, and thus where the text plays god. This is not merely circular reasoning; it reveals the places where critical thought brings itself to a halt—those places where it must realize that a text brings into existence what it refers to in the manner by which it refers to it in the very act of referring. While the world of reference continues to exist, as does the referential text, their inseparability signifies aporetically that all reference remains self-reference. It is the valorization of aporia, the embrace of its inescapability in language, the richness of our relation to the world that the nonrejection of aporia provides, that the post-structuralists, and Derrida in particular, have given us. (This is what has driven some people fairly to distraction; the poets don't mind because they knew it all along, but the logicians get upset.)

This would seem to suggest why a deconstructive language could not be used to bridge the gap between Derrida and Sartre. Under such an operation, Sartre's text would itself become what filled the abyss between itself and deconstructive critique, since it would be transformed into a self-referential language that referred back to itself as Sartre's text (on the other side of the abyss of language). But interestingly, deconstructions of Sartre do not simply render Sartre just another deconstructed text. Something else happens; a different process of philosophization occurs, perhaps because, for Sartre, the aporias are open and practically flaunted (the stylistics that Howells noted as their common paradoxical logic). Dominick LaCapra provides an example in his book *A Preface to Sartre*.

LaCapra's book was the first deconstructive critique of Sartre written in the United States. In it, he addresses the realms of both writing and ontology. His goal

is to reveal how Sartre's text undermines itself because it does not escape or critique the language of the philosophical tradition from which it attempts to depart. In particular, LaCapra argues that the distinction Sartre establishes between poetry and prose (in *What Is Literature?*) by which he theorizes how writing is "engaged" (*engagé*) produces a truncated notion of prose that undermines Sartre's ability to conceptualize *engagement* (*PS*, 67ff.). The source of the problem, for LaCapra, is Sartre's unquestioned affirmation that writing is an instrumentality, which in effect reifies writing.

In making this argument, LaCapra is following a lead given by Derrida in "The Ends of Man." There, Derrida takes Sartre to task for not submitting the very central terms of his philosophical discourse such as "Man," "consciousness," or "human reality" to critique, while pretending to go beyond their traditional philosophical meaning. By leaving them unexamined and unquestioned, Sartre ends up appropriating the tradition from which they come and being appropriated by it in turn. That is, in disregarding the assumptions of that philosophical tradition, he tacitly accepts the meanings given to those terms by history, which then reimposes on his text the very tradition he claims to contest. For Derrida, these (non)acts (of leaving unquestioned) have a meaning. To ignore the "history of the concept" (such as "human," "reality," or "man") renders the concept "self-evident," as if it had "no origin, no historical, cultural, or linguistic limit," and transforms it thereby into an *a priori*. The concept becomes self-referentially presuppositional, rather than something to be investigated. Though Sartre's project is to existentially transcend the assumptions of previous metaphysics, he does not transcend those assumptions in the language by which he does this, which then continue to reside at the interior of his enterprise.<sup>18</sup>

LaCapra argues that this insulates Sartre's project from, and reinforces, what he wishes to contest, namely, certain aprioristic ideological constructions of the world (Sartre focuses specifically on Christianity and Marxism). For Sartre, such ideological structures seek to dragoon writing to their causes. And it is to free writing from such constraints that he proposes the notion of being *engagé*. The deconstructive critique should itself be wholly engaged in the heart of this project. And Sartre's notion of *engagement* almost does this, but not quite.

For Sartre, the writer is engaged in writing in and for his/her time, and not simply in and for the language that the writer inherits or might invent, capriciously or purposefully. To be engaged, the writer must reveal to his/her readers more options and choices for living and dealing with the world than are extant, to free all readers to think beyond the terms and constraints given by their world. The necessary condition for doing so is to guarantee the freedom of the reader as such. Since all writing is a gift given without obligation, all writing does this; that is, it is already engaged. And Sartre's injunction to the writer is be authentic in this, to take responsibility for it.

To demonstrate how the writer is engaged, Sartre makes a distinction between the prose writer and the poet. For the former, language is transparent, instrumental, and capable of representing the world; for the poet, on the contrary, words are objects, capable only of relating to, and gaining sense from, each other.



For the [prose writer], words are domesticated; for the [poet], they remain in the wild state. For the former, they are useful conventions, tools that wear out little by little and that one throws away when they are no longer serviceable; for the second, they are natural things that grow naturally on the earth like grass and trees (*WL*, 7).

If prose can be engaged, it is because it can represent the world to itself, and do so transparently, without getting in the way. Poetry and other arts cannot do this; they always represent themselves. “The man who talks is beyond words and near the object, whereas the poet is on this side of them” (*WL*, 7).

For LaCapra, this amounts to a return to symbolism, for which poetry has sense but without referential signification (*PS*, 73). He interprets it as creating a binary “categorical opposition between prose and poetry” (*PS*, 68, 70), a “sharp” analytic distinction between pure identity and pure difference. That is, poetry must stand in analytic antithesis to prose, as of a different substance. But LaCapra then argues that, from the point of view of engaged writing, poetry must be in bad faith. It seeks not to represent the world, in order to be poetry. As Sartre puts it, the poet “engages himself to lose,” “is certain of the total defeat of the human enterprise and arranges to fail . . . in order to bear witness to human defeat in general” (*PS*, 74). That is, for Sartre, the poet cannot represent if his/her words are to remain of the poetic substance, as things, yet they must represent that nonrepresentation. And LaCapra then concludes that Sartre’s notion of prose must be in bad faith as well because, in reducing language to the purely instrumental, to pure identity, Sartre “mystifies that which is literary in the use of prose”; he ignores the artistic, the literary or poetic in prose writing itself (*PS*, 72). Ultimately, Sartre himself must be in bad faith if he does not see either form of bad faith (*PS*, 71).

The polemical issue at stake for LaCapra is clear; it is the politics of what writing is. Yet one could ask, based upon the above quotations, on what basis could words wear out and get thrown away? It could only be metaphorically as objects; that is, prose words have the character of objects as well, at least metaphorically. In that case, what wears away can only be a word’s meanings and the meaning of its use. This introduces a sense of impurity, a nonstrictness, into Sartre’s distinction between poetry and prose that LaCapra is ignoring in seeing the distinction as analytic. In fact, Sartre’s metaphoricity concerning the distinction between prose and poetry would itself render LaCapra’s distinction less than (more than?) analytical. Perhaps LaCapra has attributed a strictness of distinction to Sartre that is not Sartre’s (*PS*, 72). Indeed, he further quotes Sartre as saying,

the poet has withdrawn in one stroke from the language-instrument; he has chosen once and for all the poetic attitude that considers words as things and not as signs. For the ambiguity of the sign implies that one can at one’s will penetrate it like a pane of glass and pursue the thing signified, or turn one’s gaze toward its reality and consider it as an object. (*PS*, 71)

The distinction, then, is not between modes of writing, but between choices, intentionalities toward the double character of the word as sign. And it is the double character of the sign that becomes Derrida’s focus in his initial critique of language.

For Derrida, the “natural order of relationships between linguistic and graphic signs” (*Gram*, 35) (between meaning and object) is the foundation for the deconstruction of what he identifies as a philosophical or metaphysical binary between speech and writing (that writing is only a representation of speech, a dependent and secondary form of the sign). He argues that both have the same structure as a confluence of signifier and signified (the Saussurean schema), which is more profoundly discernible in writing than in speech (I return to the import of this later in this book). But if signifier and signified are incommensurable and yet inseparable aspects of the sign itself, then they do not stand in binary opposition to each other; instead, they present the possibility of focusing on either of their two aspects, of conceiving this doubleness without the possibility of sundering it, either as “reality” or as writing. Rather than being analytic, Sartre’s distinction accepts the impossibility of any ontological boundaries between prose and poetry. In other words, his distinction is grounded elsewhere, in the writer’s project, rather than in the ontology of words where LaCapra locates it. LaCapra is perhaps a little too eager to be deconstructive, forcing a separation between prose and poetry, in order to find it reflected between writing and political engagement.

One might add, since LaCapra uses it to buttress his case, that strict binary divisions are not at all foreign to Sartre. In *The Psychology of Imagination*, imagination and perception are seen as mutually exclusive. For Sartre, they cannot be done at the same time. And for LaCapra, both binaries present us with totalities that expel to a radical otherness all sense of alterity that inhabits them (*PS*, 127). That is, self-identity and difference are radically separated and strictly prioritized. The political implications are clear for LaCapra; Sartrean freedom obscures its own foundations in “a logic of mastery and domination.”<sup>19</sup> And indeed, Sartre would agree that mastery and domination are precisely what are at stake in such analytic distinctions.

But again, Sartre is more complex than this allows. As he explains, “Imaginative consciousness may be said to be representative in the sense that it goes out in search of its object in the realm of perception . . . as does perception in relation to the object perceived.”<sup>20</sup> But it is creative in its representative aspect, whereas for perception that “representative element corresponds to a passivity of consciousness. . . . The object of an image is never more than the consciousness one has of it.” And the context for this distinction is the phenomenological notion (from Husserl) that perception constitutes its object for itself from an infinity of determinations while the imagined image comprises only the finite determinations of which we are already conscious (*PI*, 21).

To read this as a “sharp analytic distinction” (*PS*, 126) is to forget that, for Sartre, different modes of consciousness nevertheless remain inseparable even in their mutual exclusion. Though the poet “withdraws from the language-instrument,” that can imply a withdrawal neither from the imaginative use of language nor from the perceptive use of it. The poet perceives words as objects as part of his imaginative use, and the prose writer imagines a world represented in the transparency of his sentences that represent his perceptions. The idea that one cannot do both (perceive and imagine) at the same time means that one is in effect “doing” neither; rather,

what one is “doing” is elsewhere, “at” the intentionality constitutive of image, meaning, and recognition. One apprehends the world as meaning, recognizes it imaginatively, and images it perceptively.<sup>21</sup> Again, there is both an incommensurability (of infinite and finite) and an inseparability (of realm) of the two.

Furthermore, Sartre’s distinction between perception and imagination could not be analytic, since an analytic totalization of difference would have to rely upon a certain commensurability. It is here that the meaning of his “mutual exclusion” resides. Imagination and perception are incommensurable and inseparable at the same time. Ultimately, there is a kind of skewed relation between perceiving imaginatively and imagining perceptively. And thus too between consciousness and representation. If LaCapra sees an analytic distinction, it is because he has imposed an analyticity upon what remains inseparable precisely because it involves an incommensurability instead.<sup>22</sup> In effect, to submit Sartre’s text to its own aporias, one faces an ironic necessity of displacing those aporias first in order to render them recoverable or rediscoverable beneath the metaphysics created by that displacement. In other words, while approaches to the “space between” from the Sartrean side end by imposing a phenomenological language on the nonphenomenological, those from the deconstructive side run the risk of similarly imposing a metaphysics in order to deconstruct it. One constitutes language as a metaphysics of the text in either case.

Though LaCapra’s adventure with Sartre suggests that certain serious boundaries exist between Sartre and analytic philosophy, Howells’s argument concerning a “*logique paradoxale*” goes further and suggests why analytic philosophers themselves have in general had a problem with both Sartre and Derrida.<sup>23</sup> Richard Rorty, for instance, relegates them to a kind of philosophical background for himself.<sup>24</sup> He divides philosophy into two camps: philosophies of public account, of objectivity and consensus (what we know how to talk about), and world-disclosure philosophy, or “philosophy that leaps in the dark” toward world transformation or transcendence (philosophizing on what we do not know how to talk about; DTP, 210). The first comprises those who deploy problem-solving rigor and reference in their arguments, and the latter those who deploy poetry and transcendence. And he can imagine no synthesis between them.<sup>25</sup> “Poetic world-disclosers like Hegel, Heidegger, and Derrida have to pay a price, and part of that price is the inappropriateness to their work of notions like ‘argumentation’ and ‘rigor’” (DTP, 211). There is thus no place in Rorty for a metadiscursive argument, a discourse about discourse, because it would be about a non-referent. Derrida’s textual world has “as little room for transcendental deductions, or for rigor, as for self-authenticating moments of immediate presence” (DTP, 208). Thus, Rorty renders deconstruction unintelligible for himself, ironically by being meta-discursive toward it.<sup>26</sup>

He treats Sartre comparably (in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*), though in slightly different terms. Dividing discourses into the epistemological (natural philosophy or science; again, what we have adequate articulations for) and the hermeneutic (phenomenology; what we have inadequate articulations for), he claims that consciousness can be considered either as essentially unknowable

(insofar as it produces incommensurate discourses), or no less knowable than things (articulable through commensurate discourses). Sartre and existential philosophy in general, of course, fall on the hermeneutic side (*MN*, 315ff.). But Rorty likes Sartre as a theoretician of bad faith, which has value for Rorty's approach to systematic philosophy of mind. The problem one confronts in describing the human subject is that one must render it an object and thus not describe it. Though Sartre theorizes bad faith within the unknowability or undecidability of ontological freedom, he shows one can develop a certain epistemological explicitness in speaking about it. Rorty finds the existential suspicion involved in that move difficult because it must critique the definitive without itself being definitive (*MN*, 371); but he sees that Sartre seems to manage. Sartre's existentialism becomes a kind of self-awareness for systematic thought, the conscience of philosophical activity itself.

In sum, for Rorty, both Sartre and Derrida are marginal to what philosophy is about. While he would leave Derrida at the artistic periphery, he would employ Sartre as a witness. If Sartre can tell us something about ourselves, as a mirror of self, Rorty's opinion of Derrida is that he produces what is behind the mirror, beyond telling, behind the self. Where Derrida exemplifies a boundary between spaces, Sartre is their interface, the connecting link. Thus, Rorty reaffirms the sense of incommensurability so far discerned as a hiatus between these thinkers. But he nevertheless does not believe in incommensurability. As he says, "There is no metaphysical reason why humans should be capable of saying incommensurable things" (*MN*, 347). That is, for him, the difference between discourse and metadiscourse is without significance. Though Rorty grants both a certain respect, in his taxonomization of philosophical ideas he places both on a common plane, relating across common boundaries constituted by his notion of philosophical reasoning. Thus, he collapses to a mere interstice the more essential space that opens between them.

## THE NARRATIVE OF METAPHYSICS

The question of writing that LaCapra raises, and of prose versus poetry, is important and bears further discussion, since for both Sartre and Derrida, it is where one goes beyond "what we know how to talk about." Sartre's sense of *engagement* defines a threshold that Rorty considers nonmarginal insofar as it signifies how the writer opens the present to greater possibility for his/her readers. For Sartre, it is not writing that contextualizes *engagement*, but *engagement* that contextualizes writing. Sartre dissociates poetry in the context of the writer's being engaged in his/her "times" because poetry has a different project; it is a different use of language. Prose seeks to express the world transparently, to which a perception and imagination of meanings are relevant, while poetry self-concernedly uses words as objects for its own constructions, to which a perception and imagination of structures and relations (rather than representations) are relevant.

But Sartre is not attempting to posit a mutual exclusion between them when he says that poetry (or the poetic element of a text) fails. For him, it "fails" because it

defeats our attempt to communicate or to have been communicated with. In that case, however, it fails in our project, not its own. It has not set out to succeed where prose does. In its own project, its failure is its success (precisely at defeating communication, in calling the transparency and intention of communication into question). Derrida performs roughly the same operation deconstructively in “Signature Event Context” (*Marg*, 309ff.), in which he asks “whether the word or signifier ‘communication’ communicates a determined content, an identifiable meaning” or not; and if it does not, if it contains a nonsemiotic as well as a semiotic sense, and if that is contingent upon the “problem of context,” then not only is context not “absolutely determinable” for the same reasons, but language itself calls the concept of communication into question. In other words, for Derrida, what Sartre posits for poetry would seem to hold for language in general. Sartre’s issue is simply directed the other way, namely, that poetry must fail to be engaged in order to succeed as poetry; this is what constitutes its particular *engagement*. It is on this basis that Sartre found Mallarmé to be in good faith, writing in unparaphrasable poetic forms; for Sartre, Mallarmé had taken poetry’s being into fullest account.<sup>27</sup>

This notion of *qui perd gagne* by which Sartre characterizes poetry (in his fashion) becomes critical insofar as it signals the incommensurability of those media. If it does not imply the poet’s bad faith, nor represent the nature of the poetic medium or the poetic enterprise, then it points to the aporia of speaking from within prose about a poetic medium that is incommensurable with it. In referring to the problem of the writer, it differentiates the poet from the prose writer precisely in that their situations are different. Poetry and prose do not stand in binary opposition; such a dialectic would require them to be in the same situation. Poetry does not simply “hang on” the ambiguity of language, whether “lived” or “surpassed,” as Joseph Fell would have it, for instance. He interprets Sartre’s distinction as meaning that “poetry and prose are to be understood relative to a perpetual dialectic.”<sup>28</sup> But Sartre has obviated the dialectic in positing the prosaic and the poetic as mutually exclusive while remaining inseparable in their incommensurability. As a form of “*logique paradoxale*,” this amalgamation of inseparability and incommensurability takes on the aura of an inner logic in Sartre’s writing that transcends the reasoning in his prose.

In addition, should we extend Sartre’s sentiment (that the poet “is certain of the total defeat of the human enterprise and arranges to fail”) to metaphysics, we would find Sartre describing a defeat that is not dissimilar to Heidegger’s notion of *destruktion*. When Heidegger etymologically recuperates a word, while projecting it forward to a meaning he enjoins for it—giving it residence between the already and the not-yet—he is not counterposing it to the already but to its present and its presence, which it defeats in Heidegger’s analytic by always being other than that presence.<sup>29</sup> When Sartre’s poetic word projects itself into the milieu of other words in its poem, it only makes itself the object that they then make of it, through a contextualization that the word provides for itself only through them. Or, as Fell says in a somewhat Sartrean vein in reference to Heidegger, “In order to build at all I must take over these existing materials and make them my own by subordinating

them to my own ends” (Fell, 273). By counterposing prose to poetry, Sartre has not generated a binary opposition, but what Derrida will call a supplementarity.

In this sense, the distinction Sartre makes between prose and poetry reaches forward tentatively toward the post-structuralist critique of language. But it has a further significance. Grasping the word as an object, as Sartre’s poet does, raises the question of seeing language as an object. The post-structuralist critique does not do so because it understands language as what one sees with rather than something that will loom into view. Sartre refuses objecthood for language in a different way, through an unabashed nominalism, a drive for the particular. Echoing Heidegger, any objecthood for language disappears between the already and the not-yet of language itself. If the Sartrean objecthood of the word looks forward to the not-yet of the post-structuralist critique, the Sartrean nonobjecthood of language stands in relation to the already of a philosophical history.

All this comes together in Denis Hollier’s complex deconstructive homage to Sartre, “The Politics of Prose”—again a critique of Sartrean *engagement*.<sup>30</sup> Hollier addresses Sartre’s novel *Nausea*, engaging in a form of guerrilla theater whose purpose is to reveal the general crisis of the sign. He discursively envelopes and harasses a “personage” named Sartre whom he isolates as a character in Sartre’s own novel, and simultaneously narrates Sartre as a personage in the historical moment in which he, Hollier, finds himself acting as an (ostensibly) minor character. That is, he places Sartre between two narrativizations, where he toys with him, with his (Sartre’s) language, and with the language of his own critique of Sartre’s language.<sup>31</sup> But in all this, there is a tribute to Sartre in that Sartre must himself be narrativized in order that his philosophical language be deconstructed.

Hollier focuses on those narrative moments in *Nausea* when Roquentin is writing (the novel is a found diary in which Roquentin is both writer [diarist] and the written [character]). At those moments when he is writing about writing, the novel’s tense becomes idiosyncratic (*Prose*, 70ff.). Past and present conflate themselves, as if Roquentin were doing something and writing at the same time. When Roquentin writes in the present tense, he is no longer a narrator of past action; he is enacting himself by writing, while enacting something else, represented in his writing as a narrative in which he is the character—thus, a character twice over. In the present tense, he is self-conscious about writing, about being “there” writing, while he cannot be “there” because he is elsewhere, doing what he is narrating. Roquentin’s self-consciousness about the act of writing shifts to a self-consciousness in the act of writing that itself is effaced in writing narratively. There is for him a double failure; the “character” (Roquentin) either fails to be “there” for what happens, or the “writer” (Roquentin) is unable to be writing because he is doing something else.

In effect, the diary, in the present tense, must be doubly elsewhere, prior to the event as a narrative consciousness, and subsequent to it as a diary. When the diary tells of its own past (the past of Roquentin’s writing), it (the diary) is elsewhere than the present or the past of the novel. The novel, as a diary, takes its place in a present that is later, written after the event, even in the present tense. In effect, the novel and the diary circle each other, like boxers looking for an opening.

Thus, what Hollier narrates in his critique is not what is absent in the narrative, but narrative absence itself. Writing becomes impossible because there is too much of it; it produces a murkiness of supplementarities, rather than an ontological clarity for itself. What constitutes writing exists only in a temporal space that opens in the time of the novel, in which it becomes impossible. And Hollier concludes that writing cannot be engaged in one's time because writing cannot occur in one's time. It becomes an empty hope, a back-to-back confrontation of a narrator with himself across a difference in tenses.

When Hollier decides that Roquentin represents Sartre's supplement or alter ego (*Prose*, 83), it is to signify that he (Hollier) has wryly narrativized a certain character status for Sartre as his own *engagement* in and with Sartre, a "Sartre" who paraphrases Sartre in the same way Roquentin's diary can only paraphrase Roquentin. This supplementary "character" then represents literary *engagement* in practice. That is, *engagement* becomes a form of character status. Sartre's practice of literature engages itself as a *mise en abîme*; the literary must constitute a character who will write the work of literature that will then be engaged "in its time."

Of course, this "deconstruction" of Sartre's narrator looks suspiciously like the structure of temporality in *Being and Nothingness*, in which the past exists as an object in the present, for an intentionality whose future is imaginary, but that is constructed using that past as its language. It only remains to add that the present does not exist, because one is always ahead of oneself in terms of the objects that lie behind, as the language by which one situates oneself up ahead. The present becomes merely the flutter of the metaphysical imagination as it allows brief unanalyzed quanta of perception, ignited by intentionality's projection into the future, to shine into the darkened chambers of past certainty through the cracks of recognition—like the diary as the future of the event shines only briefly back upon it through the moments of writing it only imagines in the present. But such a critique would suggest that Sartre's account of temporality is also a deconstruction, which Hollier's renarrativized supplementarity only serves to highlight. If Sartre is actually accounting (philosophically) for the facticity of time, then the space between Hollier's critique and the novel's temporality repeats that space as that which Sartre generates between the ontological and the situational. Hollier's double reading (in two characters) constitutes both a deconstructive and an ontological metatext to the novel's text (which is itself double).<sup>32</sup>

In other words, there is not only a confrontation at work between Sartre's nominalism and the post-structuralist critique of language, but an interwovenness. In "The Ends of Man," Derrida suggests that the meaning of a sign (such as "man") has to have its story told, as a history, in order not to become itself philosophically presuppositional. Though, for Derrida, a history is a story only in a philosophical sense, an etymology or archaeology of a concept, for Sartre, it is the operation of philosophy that always has narrative unfolding. To place or to see something in "its" situation is to narrativize it, to give or permit it its own self-generated context, its history, and its project. This is the center of Sartre's nominalism. However unwritten or underarticulated such a narrativization may be, its attachment to a history and a project is a mode of residence in the particular.<sup>33</sup>

For instance, Sartre says that in the world of others, “I meet with meanings which are mine and which I have not given to myself” (*BN*, 510), meanings which are revealed, but which “resist me and remain independent of me” (*BN*, 511). While this is standard phenomenological fare, it is couched in a complex of narratives of coming upon and counterevasion. As a binary of narrated movements, it does not differ from the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole*, that is, the specific acts of coming upon each spoken phrase, and the givenness of rules that withhold themselves from the meaning for which they are essential. They embed themselves in each other with no preexistence except with respect to their common moment. The multiplicity of interfaces efflorescing here, between the synchronic and the diachronic of the Saussurean sign, or philosophy and narrative, or the already and the not-yet, come together when Sartre says, “If the phrase is necessary to illuminate the given and to make the word understandable, then the sentence is a moment of the free choice of myself” (*BN*, 516).

Thus, language is not transparent. Neither does it build its meanings through itself, nor does it make transparent the thought of the speaker, as a worldly object. For Sartre, one discovers one’s thought in discovering the words that express it. This is not an escapable circle, but an inescapable mutual conditioning of narrative and meaning. The “I” of an utterance must already discover him/herself to be different from the “I” who had spoken. Or, as Sartre says somewhere, “I have a rendez-vous with myself in the future, but I don’t know who will show up.”<sup>34</sup>

Two things follow from this. First, when Derrida argues that the history of the term must be included in its use, Sartre responds that there is no history, that the term leaves it behind in surpassing it toward the end of the speaker who uses the term, and who makes his/her own history in using it. The fundamental level of language is the contextualization of the phrase or sentence, in which the term loses itself by generating itself there. Second, both escape psychology’s linearizing rejection of the hermeneutic circle and its mutual conditioning: Sartre by contesting and transcending it through the notion of the undiscoverable, in that “speech refers to thought and thought to speech”; and Derrida in questioning whether we even discover thought since the language we speak must always multiply its meanings beyond reference to an already that is not there and a not-yet that is not that to which reference is ostensive.

Thus, they tug at each other by ignoring what the other uses to push the one away: Sartre dissolving “the history of the concept” in an affirmation of the speaker’s constitution of himself or herself in the act of speaking, and Derrida ignoring the remaking of language through his own affirmation of the word’s constitution of the speaker in each act of speaking. That is, where speech (or writing, reference) is for Sartre an instrumentality whose historicity is precisely its escape from historicity, the conditions of possibility for reference (as speech, or writing) are for Derrida precisely the conditions for its impossibility. They evoke each other across an inversion of the possible and the impossible, of narrative and philosophy that constitutes their incommensurability. Rather than a dialectical convergence, there is a much more complex discursive relation involving narrative, circularity, the structure of language, and the space between temporalities and temporalizations.



Yet when, in *Glas*, Derrida makes passing reference to Sartre, mostly through innuendo, as if to say that his point goes without saying, he suggests that what there is to say is what must remain unsaid. To conceive of a confrontation between Sartre and Derrida is perhaps to confront the inconceivable.

## THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

Historically, phenomenologist critics have regarded what came after Sartre with a certain dismay, though at times turning to it with serious interest. They saw themselves too often rewriting what Derrida was doing in order to understand him or critique him, threatening to violate his project by ontologizing his escape from ontology. But no strategy for entering into the space between revealed itself. Of course, reaching back toward Sartre from the post-structuralist side tended to incur an analogous misadventure. As suggested above, to critique Sartre deconstructively, one has to give him a metaphysical aspect he may not always have had, which threatens to transform his aporias into a form of metaphysical coherence in order then to reveal them as hidden aporias. At best, each strategy turns the other into a dramatic character whose acts of critique are then narrativized and restaged. At worst, both become forms of violence that render the subject of critique other than it is, thereby delegitimizing itself as a critique and obviating any understanding of a relation. In both cases, rather than understanding the narrative dimension of philosophy, narrative is turned against philosophy.

Perhaps, as Hollier suggests, postwar France was too philosophically dominated by Sartre to permit direct confrontation or leave space for a bridge. Those who came upon the problem found the scene too much in Sartre's shadow. New philosophical thinking could thrive only through a modicum of rejection or rebellion.

In addition, post-structuralism emerged in an era of political upheaval that not only sought to change the world's political configuration but called into question its accepted foundational philosophical notions. In the wake of World War II's horrors, with its Nazi invasions and occupations, and the discovery of assembly-line genocide—whose possibility still remains an unanswered question today—a refusal of complicity with further political criminality became an important issue. And an important dimension of that refusal was a nonacceptance of the philosophical ground of the culture that had produced such criminality. In the flush of newness, the post-structuralist practitioners saw themselves on a one-way street moving to overthrow the dominant Euro-American discourses. They took to heart many of the questions that had emerged from the anticolonialist movements and national liberation revolutions of the time, especially in Africa, which had begun a vast problematizing of the accepted categories of Western Eurocentric philosophy. These categories included the nineteenth-century class analyses of history and the white Western account of the subject and of agency in the world, along with its universalist ethics and conception of culture and civilization.

In this context, for the post-structuralists, Sartre presented a difficult problem. He represented, in his philosophical thinking, both a continuation of the philosophy

the new thinkers sought to transcend and a thinker who stood on the front line against colonialism and chauvinism. To openly confront and critique him philosophically would entail a stance against the man in a realm in which he was to be respected; and not to critique him would be to accept the constraints of the philosophical tradition he represented, and indeed dominated. It was not an enviable position to be in. One possible resolution to the dilemma was to address philosophical issues or concepts specific to that tradition, even in Sartre's thinking, without locating them in Sartre. Thus, without confronting the systematic totality of his thought, one could at the same time walk side by side with him in the world's streets. Many chose this route. Roland Barthes perhaps keyed it as an approach in *Writing Degree Zero* (a veiled response to Sartre's *What Is Literature?*). There, he takes Sartre to task almost allegorically on the question of writing while mentioning him only marginally, as merely another figure on the cultural horizon. Others followed suit.<sup>35</sup> The effect was to intensify the philosophical abyss while leaving untrampled the fabric of certain political motivations.

In this context, a 1983 interview with Derrida in *Le Nouvel Observateur* is instructive.<sup>36</sup> Derrida explains that Sartre initially constituted a model for him, toward which he had gravitated. Under the aegis of Sartre, he was introduced to the pantheon of the moment: Husserl, Heidegger, Blanchot, Bataille, and so on. And he found himself reading these texts against Sartre, concluding that Sartre had misread them himself. Ultimately, he came to see Sartre's influence as ill-fated, and even "catastrophic" for himself. It constituted, Derrida intimates, a traumatic process for him (*DD*, 75; *Nouvel Obs*, 86). Yet Derrida's focus, in the interview, is not on Sartre as such but on Sartre's France, and the boundary between Sartre's thinking and his intellectual world. Derrida asks, "What must a society like ours be if a man who, in his own way, rejected or imperfectly understood [*méconnu*] so many theoretical and literary events of his time . . . came to dominate the cultural scene." Derrida admits a certain self-historicization inherently attaches itself to one who disrupts or overturns [*bouleverser*] the literary and philosophical landscape, but he does not think Sartre did that. Rather, he charges that Sartre valorized his particular philosophical (mis)understandings through a popularity bestowed upon him through his academic and publishing connections, in spite of his self-exile from the academy.

One might ask, however, in response to Derrida, how discernible a boundary there is between misunderstanding and innovation. How would one recognize it? From which understanding, reading, or interpretation of a text will "an understanding" be judged to have misunderstood [*méconnu*], misrecognized, or simply be "less than perfect"? Is it not the nature of a "perfect understanding" (and one is implied in Derrida's judgment) to be blind to the innovative, to have already perforce obviated the point of view, inventive or not, that produces a different understanding? One would have to ask how Derrida is reading the texts Sartre had supposedly misread in order to read Sartre as having misread or misinterpreted. How is the question of "misunderstanding" more than only "imperfectly" separable from that of "a different reading"?

That the question of "misreading" is always only "imperfectly" separable from "a different reading" is not only at the core of Derrida's every reading, but is

something he has theorized. In “Ousia and Gramme,” Derrida writes that a text exceeds metaphysics because a “trace must be inscribed within the text of metaphysics, a trace which continues to signal not in the direction of another presence, or another form of presence, but in the direction of an entirely other text.” That is, a deconstructive critique of metaphysics relies upon “misreading” it against the terms of its own reading of itself.<sup>37</sup> Robert Bernasconi accuses Derrida of doing this himself, of rendering Levinas’s text metaphysical in order to give it “another reading,” and he quotes this passage (*DD*, 24).

Ultimately, to be “imperfectly understood,” or even misunderstood, is the necessary fate of previous thinkers when viewed through an innovating perspective—the fate of Heidegger at Sartre’s hands, and similarly the fate of Sartre at Derrida’s. That is precisely the way innovation historicizes itself, the way historicization occurs. Granted, a certain popularity enters the process, as a cultural acceptance of one’s particular (mis)understandings. And one’s innovations of thinking may emerge as special only from a larger innovative milieu or movement. But these aspects only serve to transform one’s “misunderstanding” or misrecognition into one of the understandings or recognitions of one’s time. Sartre’s popularity, his misunderstandings of previous or contemporary thinkers, his effect on the literary or philosophical landscape, his domination of the cultural scene (however momentary), his self-historicization, and his innovativeness are all simply facets of the same thing.

That it will always be the fate of an innovator to be subsequently misunderstood at the hands of yet another innovator’s subsequent self-historicization is the very dynamic that carries Sartre toward Derrida. It is Derrida’s own role as innovator that renders Sartre his context, his victim, and the necessary milieu of Derrida’s own reading against Sartre’s France, against the society that itself produces the force of Derrida’s question, the force of his own self-historicization against Sartre. And indeed, in his concern about the intellectual’s relation with a cultural milieu, Derrida leaves himself no less free than Sartre to misread, to misinterpret, as a function of his own innovation. As he says in the interview, “What I write resembles . . . a dotted outline of a book to be written in what I call . . . the ‘old new language,’ the most archaic and the newest, unheard of, and thereby, at present unreadable” (*DD*, 73; *Nouvel Obs*, 86).

But what is the “reading” Derrida has given Sartre? In the few (“counter-hegemonic”) moves Derrida has made toward Sartre, including this interview, Derrida decries having discovered Sartre to be metaphysical—in the “catastrophic” sense of being “merely another metaphysician.” But it is Derrida’s critique of metaphysics that produces the situation he decries; that is, it is his critique that sees Sartre’s own critique of metaphysics as still metaphysical, and renders Sartre’s thinking catastrophic for him. Derrida’s critique has engendered for itself what it then discovers. There is a self-reflexiveness in the historicity of his critique of Sartre that Derrida ignores, though he embraces that historicity in most of his other writing, where it appears as an attention to his own textual form. This omission testifies to a polemical component in Derrida’s approach to Sartre, as well as to a blind spot concerning a refusal, an unacknowledged legislation of Sartre’s status.

On the other hand, Derrida is also indicting the star system of the “cultural scene” that ostensibly gave Sartre his fame, his meaning as “Sartre”—even for Derrida in his youth. In other words, the catastrophe could not be Derrida’s discovery of the necessity to read “against Sartre” vis-à-vis Sartre, or even to give Sartre another (a mis-)reading; it could only be catastrophic for Derrida (and perhaps also apostrophic) to read against Sartre vis-à-vis the “cultural scene.” But Derrida’s own historicization as innovative also depends upon the star system. It is what provides him with an outside from which to critique Sartre. What then constitutes the misfortune in Derrida’s relation to Sartre is actually his confrontation with a star system that embraces (misreads) a metaphysician, and his (Derrida’s) enthrallment to that same system while recognizing its misreading of the misreaders as his own destiny, his own future anterior limit. To reproach that boundary, and the intellectual world it guards, is then to pay homage to Sartre’s innovativeness precisely as a misreading that came to dominate the cultural scene.

In other words, Derrida is understating the case when he says of Sartre, “I do share the affection, almost the kinship, which many feel for this man . . . who doesn’t belong to the period of works which are important to me” (DD 75; *Nouvel Obs*, 86).

But then, too, which “period” does this exclude Sartre from? Is it the metaphysical tradition (from Plato to Husserl) that Derrida has overturned to which Sartre does not belong? Is it from Sartre’s own time, that of Husserl, Heidegger, and Blanchot, with whom Derrida is in continual dialogue? Or is it that of Sartre’s future, whose “works” Derrida so rarely discusses (Foucault, Lacan, and Sollers are the major exceptions)? Does not this temporal exclusion-in-general of Sartre precisely conjoin Derrida to Sartre in the same (atemporal) historical elsewhere, that of innovation? In his double enthrallment (to Sartre displaced onto the milieu, and to the milieu displaced onto Sartre), Derrida is indeed claiming Sartre as a kindred soul.

## A COMMON UNCOMMONALITY

On their disparate planes of endeavor, Derrida and Sartre do emerge as kindred souls, addressing what can surprisingly be seen as common themes. Each proposes a critique of the rationalist view of the subject: Derrida shows it to be a concept, a text, while Sartre discloses it in and as narrative. Each offers a notion of history that is itself a critique of an ideological dimension inherent in all historical discourse. For Derrida, each historical text is a simulacrum, a representation that reconstructs the past and a construction that the past then represents; for Sartre, history and historical discourse can only be understood as contingent upon a project. And each focuses on writing and the role of writing; for Sartre, it is the overriding form, and for Derrida, the underwriting content.

In all this, Derrida’s intention appears to be the more radical. His project is to “shake metaphysics” and to exceed it.<sup>38</sup> Derrida’s question is not what makes metaphysics possible, but rather what lies behind and within language that makes metaphysics unavoidable, while making the questioning of metaphysics possible.