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Derridean Gaming and Buddhist Utpada/Bhanga (Rising/Falling): How a Philosophical Style Can Devoid Substantive Field

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- ¶1. This paper aims to demonstrate how Derrida's *stylistique* (here meaning "stylistic practice") acts-out in the style of his philosophical discourse the same project as is evident in its overt semantic level. This is to say, the style as well as the thematics of Derridean philosophy undertake the project of deconstructing identity. In *Derrida on the Mend* and *On Deconstructing Life Worlds* (henceforth, ODLW), I have argued at length how the Derridean deconstruction of identity (of both personal identity and of things-in-the-world) intersects with "devoidness" (*sunyata*) as the Madhyamika school of Buddhism generally understands it. Here I shall be trying to show in particular how Derridean style acts-out self-devoiding, and thus participates in this intersecting. Intersection does not mean a sharing of common ground—lines have no width, so there is no common ground when they cut across each other: we are dealing at most with what can be called analogy; nor do we mean that a Buddhist agenda is Derrida's express intention in any sense: what we do mean is Derrida designs his style to undo entities and itself, and this undoing happens to remind a comparative philosopher of Buddhist self-undoing. The intersection may even draw Derrideans to a study of Buddhism, and this would be—I think—a beneficial result indeed.

The Buddhist Devoid, In Early Buddhism and the Madhyamika

- ¶2. In early Buddhism, Buddhist "causality" is explained in terms of rising/falling (*Pali upadha/bhanka*), and is usually treated as momentary so as to best account for *anicca*. (The Law of Buddhist Causality is also explained in other ways, but these mesh with the notion of rising/falling.) Awareness of rising/falling undoes the illusion of an intact human ego. Nagarjuna's *Madhyamika* takes the further step of arguing even the Law of Buddhist Causality is devoid. He does this by arguing that theories of rising/falling, if followed through with logical rigor, would have the alleged rising and falling either tangling-up in each other, or cancelling each other out. Nagarjuna also deconstructs the holistic micro-entities which—in the philosophy of some early Buddhist schools—build the illusions of the world. Rising/falling are thus "cut-off," but some *Prasangika-Madhyamika* subschools of *Madhyamika* emphasize that rising/falling in deconstructed form can still function as *prajnapti* (clues that beckon to enlightenment) for those already on the path but not yet at the "fully awakened" stage. This is an important provision in terms of applicability to Derridean thought, since—as we shall see—Derridean devoiding often is accomplished by a kind of rising/falling (Derridean positing/bottomless breaking-up), and Derrida often goes on to tangle up the rising/falling into a chiasm or double-bind (as ways of deconstructing unity).
- ¶3. As Jeffrey Hopkins has established very convincingly, in *Prasangika-Madhyamika*, *pratitya-samutpada* is generally understood to mean "having-depended together-rising," because *pratitya* is taken as a grammatical continuative.^[1] Thus in *Madhyamika*, a privileged *prajnapti* is the "infinite retreat of dependency," or "infinite regression." Since "infinite regression" approximates Derrida's usage of "pure effect," or the infinite retreat of signifiers without signifieds, I prefer *Prasangika-Madhyamika* over *Yogacara* and even *Yogacara-Svatantrika*. *Yogacaric* traditions, in one way or another, propose a theory of "mind-basis-of-all" which—to a secular Derridean—seems so patently "centered" or "foundational" that s/he would out of hand reject dialogue with Buddhism. And one of my philosophical callings for a long time has been precisely to encourage Derridean/Buddhist dialogue. In short, for me to emphasize *Yogacaric* Buddhism—and—I might add much (not all^[2]) of the Chinese Ch'an which grows out of it—would be a violation of *upaya*, "skillful means."

- ¶4. Nagarjuna asserts of course that "*samsara* is *nirvana*," and in much Tibetan Prasangika-Madhyamika this is understood to mean that only a Buddha can mystically cognize the emptinesses or devoidnesses (note plural) of the stream of conventional things before him,^[3] and this without even perceiving the appearance of inherent existence (though of course he can perceive appearances as conventions).^[4] For all those accessing "*samsara* is *nirvana*" via lower-order jñanic practice, as well as all those accessing it in merely philosophical or analytic terms, usually the Prasangikan version of *samvrti-satya* (mundane truth) means "*samsara*-taken-conventionally" and the Prasangikan version of *paramartha-satya* (supreme truth) means "*samsara*-taken-as-pure dependency." The "world" is a stream of "there's" or tattvic traces which are not entitative but are "*there*" (much like Derridean *traces* are "there" but not "present," that is, not holistically there: traces are a "mark of absence").^[5] Thus, "devoidness," as I use the term, means the "stream of tattvic traces" understood in this sense: I eschew the term "voidness" because it implies Nothingness, or no "thereness" at all. Ch'anists invoke, most of the time, a formula or at least a rhetoric of "all and nothing," i.e., "*samsara* is *nirvana*" means for them that the object is "present" as both "full" (a plenum of presence) and "empty" (Nothing). A Derridean does not, cannot, find such a means to enlightenment congenial, since paradoxes for a Derridean are holistic.
- ¶5. I proceed now to a study of Derrida's stylistic practice, and the reader will find that the techniques discussed correlate in intriguing, if only analogical, ways to the account of Buddhist devoiding proposed above. Derrida acts-out devoiding maneuvers which derive in large part, on his French side, from Stéphane Mallarmé, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and other writers of the French avant-garde movements; and on his Hebraic side, from Talmudic scholars and their Midrashic style. Derrida's style *theatricalizes* (for pedagogical effect, among others) the devoidness of self and world. Because the *monde anglo-saxon* tends to read Derrida only thematically, and/or only in translation, the stylistic game-playing whereby he does so much of his philosophy is bypassed. For Derrida, gaming is not a "mere" game: it is "doing philosophy."

The Derridean Devoid, By Way of Stylistic Maneuver

Themes Undoing Themes

- ¶6. Since the driving wedge of Jacques Derrida's work is precisely to show that within a given author's *oeuvre*, or a given tradition's canon, and despite all purposeful intention to the contrary, some themes and sub-themes contradict each other and thus undo the intended consistency, thematic deconstruction is already well-known and widely understood. Furthermore, of the many features of written language, in general it can be said that thematic material more easily survives passage into translation, relatively speaking, than do smaller features such as individual morphemes or sub-morphemic elements such as graphic or phonetic traits. Nonetheless, in the case of complicated deconstructions such as those at work in Derrida's *Glas*, the reader still must be keenly attentive to formatting and *stylistique*, of course.
- ¶7. In *Glas*, the left column of each page expositis and overtly critiques the grand dialectical tradition represented by Hegel (whom *Glas* sometimes cites in the original German and sometimes cites in French translation). The right column of each page quotes and expositis the work of Jean Genet and the "criminal class" Genet concretizes. One reads the "columns" on Hegel by leaping over the right column of each page and resuming the left column on the following page; and one reads the columns on Genet by doing the opposite, leaping over the left columns and continuing with the right columns. But the highly stylized formatting comes into more sophisticated play because the right column of each page thematically deconstructs the left column, that is, what Genet is saying (and what he is said to say by Derrida) deconstruct/s what the Hegelian column puts forth. Example: Hegel, from his column and mounting his customary dialectical ladder, proposes the synthesis that, "Le concept n'est pas seulement *âme* (*Seele*), concept libre et subjectif qui est pour soi et possède de ce fait la *personnalité*," but also "concept objectif, pratique . . . pas une individualité exclusive de toutes les autres, mais pour soi une universalité et une connaissance," and it has "dans son autre sa propre objectivité comme objet." Hegel continues, "Tout le reste est erreur, trouble, opinion . . . ; seule L'Idée absolue est *être* (*Sein*), vie qui ne passe pas, vérité se connaissant, et elle est toute vérité." [6] ["The concept is not only *soul* (*Seele*), concept free and subjective which is for itself and possesses from this fact a *personality*," but also "concept objective, practical . . . not an individuality exclusive of all others but for itself a universality and a knowledge," and has "in its other its proper objectivity as object." Hegel continues, "All the rest is error, trouble, opinion . . . ; only absolute Idea is *being*, life which does not pass, truth knowing itself, and it is all truth."] [7]

- ¶8. But on the very same page, in the column to the right, Genet presents Gabriel penetrating the body of "Divine": he becomes part of her but most decidedly without any *Aufhebung*: "Il est vrai que en la pénétrant, à supposer qu'il porte quelque part le même prénom que cette putain de mère, il ne fait que retrouver sa forme et son lieu. Divine lui a dit: 'Je t'aime comme si tu étais dans mon ventre.' " ["It is true that in penetrating her, in order to suppose that he carries somewhere the same first name as this prostitute of a mother, he need only join form and place. Divine had said to him, 'I love you as if you were in my paunch.' "] Decidedly no absolute Idea here. Genet is proposing travesty, and the scene is a tawdry one, reaching across the white space between the columns and making "error" and "trouble" for the Hegelian synthesis. And the reader must be attentive also to the inset (in smaller print) lodged like an indigestible Midrashic commentary in the body of the Hegelian column and abetting its undoing, for the commentary—presented as a "gloss" to the phrase "dans son autre" [in its other, *in seinem Anderen*] above—argues that the alterity of this common Hegelian syntagma is deceptive because Hegel puts it to the service of the absolute Idea's absolute "proper/propriety."
- ¶9. In short, the theme on the right, further abetted by the gloss embedded to the extreme left, undoes the theme on the left. (You may notice that Derrida is making a political joke too, here, by way of reversal: Hegel the political Rightist constitutes the Left column, and Genet the social outcast is on the Right!!)
- ¶10. Example Two: ODLW, in its auto/otobiographical first part, decries the seeming impersonality and indifference of God,[\[8\]](#) quoting Melville's *Moby Dick*, "man comes at last to that celestial thought which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God." Then, nine pages later,[\[9\]](#) ODLW goes on to approve of Macrina's famous attack on iconoclasm, an attack which—founding itself on the Fatherhood of God and the Incarnation of the Son—lambastes precisely the impersonality of the iconoclast's God: "Iconoclasm new or old has the same results for all its fervor: Priceless treasures forever lost, for white-washed walls pale inspiration and a neutered divinity makes impotent love." But then, in the last section of ODLW's second part, the theological project becomes to develop "a theology of the 'impersonal' in God"[\[10\]](#)! Themes negatively overlapping with themes—here in ODLW, features of a life-world and the texts which perform them.

Image Motifs Undoing Themselves

- ¶11. In rhetoric, the term "image" means a word or group of words which represent a sense-perceptible phenomenon, real or imaginary. For a long time, much of the work of a hermeneutics of the imagination has been to trace the recurrence of like images through a text, and to infer the "value" or "meaning" associated with this string of appearances (called an "image motif"). A reader typically follows and interprets the "continuing" or "developing" or "changing" meanings accompanying variations in the motif. Philosophically speaking, the image motif represents the ongoing self-identity of a sense-perceptible. Derrida dissolves the self-identity of the sense-perceptible, and he often does so by cutting or tangling the string. Examples: In his treatment of Philippe Sollers' *Nombres* and other texts bearing the image of the *colonne*, or column (in the title-essay of *La Dissémination*), any attempt to correlate the image "colonne" to a thread of sustained import gets lost in a maze of dissociated instances. Derrida even lists them for us: "Colonne en marche, colonne de nombres, colonne-miroir, colonne d'air, colonne de mercure, colonne d'or . . . ,"^[11] ["Moving column, column of numbers, vertical mirror, column of air, column of mercury in thermometer, gold column . . . ,"] so that "La colonne n'est rien, n'aucun sens en elle-même," ("The column is nothing, no meaning in itself").
- ¶12. The same sort of dissemination (in the sense of a proliferating tangle) of meaning occurs in Derrida's "Des Tours de Babel" (note the unexpected plural), "Of the Towers of Babel," (aside: *des* is a homonym in French for *dés*, "dice," indicating "risk," the aleatory). The meaning of "Tower of Babel" slides between "Tower of the City [or Gate] of God" (in Assyrian) to "Tower of Confusion," and in the Biblical story this very Confusion slides between the "confusion of the architects" because their building plans are thwarted and "confusion of tongues" because human languages have themselves "disseminated." More examples: In ODLW, one of the many disseminating images is that of the "olive," *elaia* in Greek, and any reader will be hard put to find a "motif" of meaning accompanying this image's many appearances: "Krung Thep (Thai name for Bangkok), . . . formerly known (before 1782) as 'Place of Olives' " (xxii); the "Blackolive" of "Girls' Heads Bent on Taking a Test;"^[12] the "olive-skinned" Mary of Carmel who is forever my Patroness;^[13] the "oleum" (Latin, "oil" from Greek *elaia*, "olive") in Petrine Petroleum politics;^[14] the rows and rows of Taiwanese olive-stalls;^[15] the *Ölberg*, Mount of Olives;^[16] the homograph in the name of St. Rose of Lima, "Isabel De Flores Y Del *Oliva*;"^[17] the "Olive" and "Olive-tree" (symbols for the Jewish People);^[18] etc.

Undoing Personal Self-Identity

- ¶13. Here we restrict ourselves to just one of Derrida's several stylistic techniques for the dissolution of personal self-identity, namely, the technique of dissipating the self-identical referring accomplished by a Proper Name. There are, of course, Derrida's many programmatic statements of his own multiplicity, as in the beginning of the "Envois" ("Sendings/Parcels") of *The Post Card (La Carte Postale)*: "I regret that you do not very much trust my signature, on the pretext that we might be several. This is true You are right, doubtless we are several,;" [19] but our example is from Derrida's treatment in the same source, *The Post Card*, of one of the names of his biological mother—Esther (Estér). Throughout *The Post Card* (and in several of his other works) Derrida dissipates the applicability of this Proper Name, confounding the referents in such a way that the reader is never quite sure in any given instance to whom he is referring. For example, the September 7, 1977 post card [20] has its author (Derrida?) calling his addressee "Esther," yet a few lines later he thanks another for giving *him* the name of Esther. Throughout the post cards on pages 71-77, the history of the Biblical "Esthers" is mixed with the addresser, his mother, and the addressee. Even the "proper" applicability of the name Esther to the referent cited in the scriptural Book of Esther dissipates, in that the name is Persian and the personnage may be fictional. [21] There is the connection of the name Esther to the Biblical Hadassah, [22] the meaning of Hadassah as the plant the myrtle, and a discussion of Hadassah/Myrtle as ritual symbol in Greek rites to the goddess Aphrodite: [23] the immediate contexts mix these values thoroughly enough so no intact personal self-identity survives.
- ¶14. However, perhaps cleverest of all is Derrida's philosophical expropriation of the word Esther/Estér: in French the name (intl. phonetic est r) is a homophone for "est/R," since in French the alphabetical letter R is pronounced "r" (like English "air"). What is more, the Latin word *est* (also phonetically *est*), as the grammatical third person singular of the verb *esse*, "to be," becomes the philosophical term for the entitative "it is," or even the entitative version of "there is," thus invoking for any western philosopher the subject-matter of Ontology. In short, Derrida is momentarily capturing the name Esther as a cryptic code-name for his many famous treatises on the philosophical "it is," and even of the *es gibt*, the "there is," the ontologies of both of which he deconstructs by way of what he calls the R or +R factor. Namely, he demonstrates at length that the ontological foundationalism of the *est*, as well as the identity-function of the *est* whereby we can conclude "*x* is *y*," say, are necessarily subverted, always, by a supplement, i.e., a "reserve" (and Derrida's longstanding code-sign for this "supplement/reserve" is the R or +R). Est/R.

- ¶15. Another example: Gregory Ulmer, writing in the Derridean mode, deploys this same technique in his *Applied Grammatology*, where he dissolves the self-identical referent, Joseph Beuys (the contemporary German performance-artist), by dissipating the Proper Name, Joseph Beuys, by the off-rhymes "die Beute" (German, "quarry," "game") and its homonym, "die Beute" (German, "a wooden beehive"), and by a further ideological expropriation so that "quarry" and "beehive" become cryptic code-names for theories of hunting and creativity.[\[24\]](#)

How the Uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) Deconstructs Logical Formations

- ¶16. Derrida quite often treats the theme of the Uncanny (that which seems of preternatural or supernatural origin; eerie), tracing its naturalistic interpretations in Freud and others; and crossing these with his treatments of the *revenant* (literally, "the returning," but sometimes "a ghost"). Sometimes Derrida allows the Uncanny its most preternatural function, leaving it stand as an unsettle of the "natural," the "logical," the "normal flow of empirical events." Examples: In *The Post Card*, "he" reports that on the morning of August 22, 1979, while he was typing the manuscript of *The Post Card*, he was interrupted by a collect call from America, and the operator asked in English if he would accept a collect call from Martine [sic] Heidegger (Heidegger's name makes frequent appearances in the manuscript, and the "post card" represents telephonic exchanges too, especially overheard or misdialed or collect calls). Taken aback, Derrida refuses the call, "It's a joke. I do not accept." When he returns to his typewriter, he notes with astonishment that he had just typed, ". . . de Freud et de Heidegger," ["from Freud and from Heidegger,"] when the phone had rung. Derrida assures us, "I know that I will be suspected of making it all up [Heidegger having died long before, of course], since it is too good to be true. But what can I do? It is true, . . ."[\[25\]](#) "Coincidence?" Coincidence like on the day, perhaps, that Derrida first discovered the names of the four brothers in his family happen, very unintentionally, to follow the sequence of the New Testament's epistles—Paul, Jacques, Pierre, Jean (Paul, James, Peter, John).[\[26\]](#) Coincidence? Here the uncanny overtakes and confuses logical program, leaving one "at a loss" for explanations.

- ¶17. When I visited the University of California at Irvine for one week in the spring of 1996, I attended, on May 2nd, Derrida's public seminar, which that day was devoted to a long sequence in Plato on *mortality*. The next day, I visited him in his office, and we discussed an implication, close to my own biography, which involves his famous (and undeciphered) code-phrase, "Il y a là cendre" (literally, "There is there cinder"). [27] When I said my prayers that evening, I consulted my religious calendar and found, to my surprise, that May 2nd, the day of Derrida's lecture on mortality, had been—surely unbeknownst to him—the Feast Day of St. Athanasius, whose name literally means in Greek, *St. Immortality*. St. Athanasius, defender of the divinity of Christ (in the Logos [!] controversies of the fourth century), had been the Patriarch of Alexandria, North Africa. What Derrida and I had talked about during my office visit had been "Alexandre" (French) and "Alessandra" (Italian), very near homophones for his "-a là cendre." [As for the first part of his phrase, "Il y /a/-," the words "Il y /a/" constitute—as Derrida readily acknowledged to me—"his" homophone for his given Hebrew name, Eli-jah (□*lijah*), Elijah in English, though no doubt the "name" and the phrase disseminates in many other directions as well, both controlled and uncontrollably uncontrolled.] Intending to inform him—at least by way of a written note—of this coincidence, I asked my daughter for any postcard she had at hand: without knowing anything of what had transpired, my daughter reached into a drawer and supplied me the only post card at hand. It turned out to be a French tourist post card, featuring a photograph of the Pont d'Alexandre (Bridge of Alexander) in Paris. That very morning, I wrote my note on the back of *The Post Card* and sent it to Derrida. Indeed, the *Unheimliche* can reach out of a text and out of our academic work and deconstruct our most "reasoned" Life-Worlds, our most unified philosophical and even personal narratives.
- ¶18. More examples: In ODLW, there appear instances where the historical Uncanny crosses with the Apocalyptic (Greek, "uncovering"), though the "apocalyptic"—as Derrida is always quick to add—inevitably "covers over" at the same time. The *Prophecies of St. Malachy* (mss., sixteenth century), despite the accusations of fraud brought against it, still intrudes and startles now and then: witness its prophecy for the Pope after the present John Paul II, a "next-to-last" Pope who shall be *De Gloria Olivae*, "From the Glory of the Olive." [28] Apart from any connection to the prophecy, there has been for the last several years a new coalition in Italian politics, the Ulivo, the "Olive-tree" Coalition. And there is also a Cardinal of Jewish blood waiting in the wings. Or again, more deconstructive prophetic/apocalyptic appears, in the correlation between ". . . a time, two times, and half a time" (Daniel 7:25; Rev. 11:2,3,9,11; 12:14;13:5) and the cumulative sequence of the names of the last four Popes: the names double, then double twice, with—perhaps (?)—a half to come,—John, Paul, John Paul, John Paul, ____ ? [John XXIII, Paul VI, John-Paul I, John Paul II, ____ ?]. [29] —Das Unheimliche—.

How Enumeration (Counting, Repetition) Undoes Ontology

- ¶19. The word *one* comes with an implanted mark of contradiction in the West, because it can mean "one" in contrast to two or more (this is an enumerative, mathematical function, and it is relative and necessarily diachronic); or, it can mean "one" as a description of "simplicity," the word "unified" deriving from the Latin word for "made or bound together" (this is an ontological assertion, and it is meant to be static and synchronic). Since western philosophy traditionally favors the ontological usage, Derrida is famous for showing how the enumerative subverts the ontological. That is, even what "appears" as an ontological "one" is in fact always already (*toujours déjà*) irreducibly divided by the divisions, the repetitions, the "counting," which appear as if bound together. What appears as synchronic is always irreducibly cut-apart by the diachronic, the ongoing stream of instants which are thought to "compose" it. And these so-called instants are themselves in fact an "infinite retreat" or an *abyme* (abyss, "bottomless") because they in turn always further sub-divide. Counting (and mathematical repetition in this sense) never stops.
- ¶20. That Derrida argues the above case is of course already well known. We are concerned here only with his use of *stylistique* to "act out" the philosophical case he makes on the overt semantic level, and we have space (time/space!) for only a few examples. Among his many other uses for it, Derrida often uses *rhyme* to attract attention to "counting," the ineluctable "passing" or passage^[30] which prevents entitative identity. This use suits his general strategy, which is to examine written signs as the most effective *clues* to the nature of *all* entitative (substantialist or holistic) thinking. (He prefers writing as clue because speaking is more illusory, i.e., it hides its diachrony better than written marks can). "Un terme et un germe,"^[31] ["A term ("term," "word," derived from the Latin for mathematical "stop") and a germ ("seed," "germ"),"]; "un terme qui se dissémine, un germe qui porte en soi son terme," ("a term which disseminates itself, a germ which carries in itself its term,"). Each word is an apparent thing which disseminates because of the repetition of "stops" within it. Each word is a germ which carries within itself an infinite series of "stops." "Se faisant fort de sa mort." ("[Thus] making itself strong from its own death.")

¶21. That is, passage is strong because each moment undergoes simultaneous birth and death (compare Buddhist rising/falling of each instant). The positing which constructs it and the timing/counting which deconstructs it. Derrida closes the pertaining paragraph of this discussion with the rhyming words "Le sperme: ferme." ["The sperm (germ): Closes-down (other homonyms, n. "farm," adj. "vigorous")."] Whatever sounds the "same" in this rhyme forces us to count the "difference" that drives it. In short, the rhyme here reminds us of the repetition of counting, and Derrida often uses rhyme this way. "Le sperme: ferme." In *La Carte Postale*, the conspicuous omissions within the post cards (marked by spaces, sudden interruptions) and *the post cards that have disappeared completely*[\[32\]](#), *function in much the same way (among other ways)—they force us to enumerate, and to attend to the irreducible passage of "stops."*

¶22. Even in my own work I have tried my hand at this sort of *stylistique* . See "One decade of the rosary: A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose." [\[33\]](#) Or see the proliferating entry "Taylor, Mark (series)" in ODLW, the Index. [\[34\]](#) Or the stylized appeal to the repetition marking the etymology of the English word "bariolage (from Fr., *barioler*, "to variegate," prob. blend of *barrer*, "to cross-out," and *rioler*, "to cross-out"!)." [\[35\]](#) That is, the word for variegation is composed of two synonyms for "cross-out," forcing us to *count* the bizarre repetition: if something is "one" already, why repeat it? The repetition stylistically "acts-out" how repetition undoes notions of ontological unity. [\[36\]](#) One more example from ODLW, the mark of the elliptical line within the fourth lemma of the tetralemmic ascent of the Truth(s) leading to God:

¶23.
neither not-only-one nor only-one
neither not-only-one nor only-one
.....
neither not-only-one nor only-one [\[37\]](#)

How Derridean Homophones and Homographs Shake Correspondence-Theory

- ¶24. The human sensory apparatus so functions that sounds (technically, "phones") seem—at least on the psychological level—to impact us more intimately than written signs ("graphs") or even physical "sights" do. In linguistics, Saussurean theory implies that this intimacy ensures a greater reliability. Derrida often deploys homophones (words that sound the same but have different lexic senses) or off-homophones (words that sound almost the same) precisely to confound this naïve reliance on the phonic to correlate accurately to lexic senses, or to the referents of the senses. A good example is his recurrent distribution, throughout his work, of the off-homophones *oreille* and *aurait*, often in close proximity. The French word *oreille* means "ear," and in Derrida's "Tympan" and *L'Oreille de l'autre*, he treats the physical structure of the ear as an emblem for the trickery of sound itself: the ear, because of its flaring cup-like appearance, seems so open to the outside, but the middle and inner-ear subject incoming "sound" to such a labyrinth, to such mutation and reinscription along this devious route, that the "message" received by the brain differs considerably from the initial "vibration." The French word *aurait* means [she/he/it-] "would have" or "should have," and—since it is in the "present conditional tense"—Derrida treats it as a figure for the gap between purpose and performance, or obligation and actuality. Of course, if in Derrida's writing, *oreille* and *aurait* themselves always corresponded with each other in this emblematic way because they are homophones, then we would really be looking at the restoration of a holistic (i.e., one-for-one) correspondence in its own right (!), but Derrida thwarts any such expectations. In most cases, it remains irreducibly unclear whether the given instance is so functioning. That *oreille* and *aurait* sound alike may or may not refer to the meaning-formation whereby they reflect themselves parabolically. In ODLW, the verb *braille* (in French, pronounced *brej*) is a homophone for the French surname (and tactile writing for the blind) Braille [though Braille is pronounced *br**il* in English],[\[38\]](#) and for the English verb "bray,"[\[39\]](#) and the French noun *brai*,[\[40\]](#) and the *bré* of the French "proper" nouns Debray and DeBré[\[41\]](#) [an allusion to /a/ French political personage/s].
- ¶25. The Derridean use of homographs (words that are spelled the same but have different linguistic senses) puts into play a similar strategy. The French word *four* (oven, furnace) is spelled the same as the English word "four," but is pronounced differently and obviously has a different meaning. An oven can be sometimes four-sided and the number four can sometimes evoke an oven, at least a figural oven of some kind. Derrida sometimes reminds his readers that the Hebraic graph for God's name is composed of four Hebrew letters (Romanized as YHWH), a Divine Number Four, and the Old Testament speaks very dramatically of God's furnace (French *four*) in Jerusalem;[\[42\]](#) and Derrida problematically links these referents with the Nazi crematory ovens. But he links them as well with many other disseminating words likewise spelled f-o-u-r, and in the preponderance of instances the reader cannot ever be sure of the operative correspondences. Derrida is here again theatricalizing through verbal play the self-deconstruction of holisms and holistic formations: but let me remind the reader once again that he is *not* reducing everything univocally to the

neutrality of chaos,-he always permits the reader some correspondences, some tentative holisms (otherwise, how could he even argue, and argue overtly as he often does, the logical "case" justifying the deconstruction?). Rather, his verbal play is theatricalizing how holisms are *in the same* stroke devoid. And I add, just as—in Buddhism—unities and holistic formations are conventionally valid but in terms of *paramartha*, or supreme truth, devoid.

Free-Floating Syllables

- ¶26. Derrida has taken a great interest in the controlling vocabulary of the European languages, and especially the Romance or Latinate family of languages (Italian, French, Spanish, etc.), subjecting a considerable number of key terms to a genealogical analysis which lays bare their "philosophical" equivocation. A Latin word like *caput* (Greek *kephal*) reproduces both the track of words meaning "head" (e.g., in English, the word *capital*, meaning "of primary importance," "head-city," etc.) and the track of words meaning "supplement for the primary" (e.g., in English, the word "cap" which "covers" the primary, be the primary a head or a container; or "cape," which is a mantle covering the body). Embedded in the word *caput*, then, and its cognates and antecedents, is the equivocation between primary and secondary, and the role of the "supplement," a catch-term which Derrideans will recognize but which it is not our purpose to discuss here.
- ¶27. What it *is* our purpose to discuss here is the *stylistic* feature of Derrida which exploits and confounds his etymological/philosophical pursuit described above. That is to say, the alert Derridean aficionado will find sequences in his work where the syllable-motifs come in large numbers and proliferate,-the words "capitaliste" ("capitalist"), "décapite" ("beheads"), "capitonner" ("to pad," "to stuff"-a favorite Lacanian term Derrida plays off), "capitulation" ("surrender"), "capote" ("hood"), etc., may all appear within a paragraph of three or four sentences, say; and the alert reader should realize that no matter what Derrida's immediate discursive topic, he is also signalling that the equivocal workings of "supplement," of the interchangeability/manipulation of primary and secondary, are operative *too*. But then Derrida throws us off-track by planting *cap*-syllables which do *not* derive from the Latin *cap*- and its associated senses, but which are only spelled the same or nearly the same. The paragraph in question may suddenly thrust upon us the word "capharnaum" ("a disordered or crowded place," from the Aramaic name of the Biblical town) or the acronym C.A.P. E.S. (initials for "Certificat d'aptitude au professorat de l'enseignement du second degré," the government teaching certification), wherein the signifier spelled *c-a-p* derives not at all from the Latin root-meaning for *cap*-. Derrida has let the syllable "float" away from the fixed Latin signified we have been lead to pursue. Like a Zen Master does when he "plays the fox" with his disciple. The theatre of dissemination. And for analogous reasons I have bespeckled ODLW with many floating syllables—the Sanskrit "*yana*" floats and reappears in George Santayana's name, for

example, and words bearing the Latin root *cap-* connect to the noun "cope" (mantle, cape) derived from the same Latin trunk-line, but then the spelling "c-o-p-e" reappears as the verb "to cope" ("to overcome"), which derives from a different Latin root altogether (the Latin word *colaphus*, "strike," "blow"). Floating syllables. The style of ODLW teaches that sustained formations break down, that all univocities rise/fall.

Floating Graphic Traits

- ¶28. We now enter upon the most intriguing stylistic feature of all, Derrida's fielding of graphic traits. By "graphic trait" he means a consonant cluster treated as an element, independent of whatever meaning-unit it happens to help constitute (along with a vowel) *ad-hoc*. For example, if I am pursuing in English the consonant cluster *tr-*, I may find in one paragraph the words "transfer," "intransitive," "pantry," "poltroon," "train," "subtract," "tree," and "tref." Since syllables are normally a combination of consonant and vowel sounds, the *tr-* in each of these words combines with a vowel sound to form a meaning-unit. But what is interesting to us here is whatever import the consonant cluster has *independent* of its vowel association. Thus, the *tr-* goes on, whether it closes into a series of syllables sharing the same root (e.g., "transfer," "intransitive," "train," come from the Latin root syllable *tra-*, "through-," "across-") or whether into a syllable coming from a different root (and, in the case of "tref," "ritually impure," coming from even a non-Sanskritic Ur-root).
- ¶29. Derrida suggests that these graphic traits, strung together—despite their discontinuous provenance—as they stream along the page, wend an off-way which is *neither meaning nor non-meaning*. He pays special attention when a given sequence of text generates disproportionate, let us say, *abnormal*, concentrations of a given graphic trait. I would recommend in particular his study of this phenomenon in the essay "+ R (Into the Bargain)," of *The Truth in Painting*, and in the interview "Du Tout" of *The Post Card*, wherein *tr-* and *gl-* traits and their transformations are studied. Of course, in his own work Derrida *intentionally* plays the "serious" game of concentrating graphic traits, acting-out those episodes in the lives of us all when elements arise *too frequently* for "mere chance" but *too inchoately* for meaningful, that is, holistic sense. "Exceeding mere chance, and Falling-Short of logically (available-) meaning," one might say. In the long "Envois" section of *La Carte Postale* and in *Glas*, Derrida acts-out this theatre very intensely indeed. Streams of the pervasive *gl-* trait, not only "glas," "glisse," "gloire," "glane" in such large numbers, but even large numbers of "sigle" and the German "Mitgleid" and "zugleich." And streams of the *gr-* trait, "grave," "greffe," "gratte," "griffe," "grille And the *tr-* trait, not only "transe" and "traduction" and "entraîne" everywhere, but the *tr-* of the proper name "Littré" itself (*Glas* is awash in references to Littré's great dictionary). In ODLW I have floated, throughout, not only *tr-* traits and *br-* traits but others too, the unexpressed implication being that they enact those uncanny repetitions in our lives which we cannot interpret but which can somehow signal what a Catholic Christian calls the

hidden workings of Divine Providence and a Buddhist calls the hidden exactitudes of karma. I say "hidden" because for the Catholic, barring some extraordinary revelation, s/he cannot know in any detail the "design" of God for her/him; and for the Buddhist, s/he cannot cognize the track of her/his "personal" karma unless s/he is already in a very advanced state of enlightenment. For both of them, the Buddhist no less than the Catholic, the rest is faith, faith in God or faith in the efficacy of the Eight-fold Path.

Palindromes and Scrambled Words

- ¶30. The letters of scrambled words are out of sequence as they stand on the page, and must be recombined to unconceal what is crypted. Derrida uses many such anagrams, and since they are so often explicated in the secondary literature surrounding his work, I address only one example here, and briefly. The figure of the anagram acts-out what Derrida maintains is the case with life in general—namely, that manifest discourse always masks subtexts. A favorite Derridean word such as *carte* ("card," "map," "menu") is an anagram for *trace* ("trace," "track," "mark") and *écart* ("gap," "digression," "mistake"): that is, *carte*, an innocent postcard, comports *écart*, an emblem for the exposure of communication to chance, and *trace*, the mark of absence.
- ¶31. More intriguing is Derrida's fielding of the palindrome, a line of words which reads the "same" in forward and reverse. An example to which I allude in ODLW[43] is Derrida's expropriation[44] of Gérard Titus-Carmel's citation of the palindrome, "Léon, émir cornu d'un roc, rime Noël" ("Leo/Leon/lion, horned emir of a rock (or "rook" in chess, or "roc," legendary Asian bird), rhymes Christmas"). A quick perusal of the line in French reveals at once that it is technically a palindrome, i.e., the letters appear in the same sequence backwards and forwards. For our purposes, the many historically-connected possible meanings of this particular palindrome are not an issue: they are complicated, highly problematic, and—in the way I take them—invite many pages of exegesis. For our purposes here, what matters is the form of this palindrome *as palindrome*.

- ¶32. Derrida no doubt fields palindrome as a figure of "reversal," that deconstructive moment when secondary becomes primary and primary become secondary. My strong suggestion—taking its clue from the very meaning of "palindrome" in Greek, "*palin*" + "*dramein*," "again" + "running-back"—is that "running back again" textually configures the Buddhist "wheel of becoming," the rising/falling which characterizes every moment, rendering it *annica* ("impermanent, " Skt *anitya*), or—in specifically Madhyamikan terms—*sunya*, "empty. " I would point out that even the deconstructive strategy of the Madhyamika applies here, namely, the "rising" gets tangled up in the "falling," reducing the process to "devoidness. " That is to say, the palindrome "Léon, émir cornu d'un roc, rime Noël, " does not *isometrically* match when read forwards and backwards: the diacriticals, apostrophe-mark, and spacings between words do *not* coincide ("Noël" read backwards does not match "Léon" in its accent mark; "d'un roc" read backwards wedges a gaping space into "cornu; " and so on). The lines read forward and back are asymmetrical, and thus get all tangled up in each other. One might say—taking the lead from the Japanese Zen Master Dogen, who in this matter was citing his own Chinese Ch'an master^[45]—entanglement itself gives us insight into devoidness, and this insight in turn can deliver enlightenment.
- ¶33. I close with some citations from Derrida which describe textuality—"writing" which is "Writing"—that is to say, the condition of samsaric life:
- . . . violemment sectionnés, fragmentés, redistribués, avec des blancs, des déplacements d'accents, des lignes sautées ou décalées; comme si elles nous parvenaient à travers un téléscrip-teur détraqué, une table d'écoute dans un central téléphonique encombré . . . ^[46]
- . . . violently sectioned off, fragmented, redistributed, with some whites [of blank page], some displaced accents, some lines jumped-over or intercalated, as if they reached us across a teleprinter off-track, a surveillance-site in a congested telephone exchange . . .
- ¶34. "Cise, edging, cut edges, that which passes and happens, without passing, from one to the other."^[47]

END NOTES

1. Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, rev. ed., Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publishing (1996), 163-4.
2. That is, no doubt, Ch'an draws from Madhyamikan and other traditions sometimes.
3. Jeffrey Hopkins, *Meditation on Emptiness*, rev. ed., Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publishing (1996), 408.
4. *ibid.*, 417.
5. Remarkably, even the Sambhoga-kaya, or Bliss-Body of a Buddha, is a stream on the move: it rises/falls every instant, immortal but still impermanent [*ibid.*, 345].
6. Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, Paris: Galilée (1974), 96.
7. Where the French text is provided in this paper, the English translation is always my own.
8. Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), 67 (Originally published by Scholars Press, American Academy of Religion, 1997.)
9. *ibid.*, 76.
10. *ibid.*, 189.
11. Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination*, Paris: Editions de Seuil (1972), 381.
12. Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), 42.
13. *ibid.*, 46.
14. *ibid.*, 35.

- [15.](#) [ibid.](#), 83.
- [16.](#) [ibid.](#), 102, 125.
- [17.](#) [ibid.](#), 131.
- [18.](#) [ibid.](#), 74, 157.
- [19.](#) Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1987), 6. Original Fr. ed., *La Carte Postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà* (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1980).
- [20.](#) [ibid.](#), 73.
- [21.](#) [ibid.](#), 74-5.
- [22.](#) [ibid.](#), 74, 77.
- [23.](#) [ibid.](#), 77.
- [24.](#) Gregory Ulmer, *Applied Grammatology*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press (1985), 260-61.
- [25.](#) Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1987), 21.
- [26.](#) [ibid.](#), 254.
- [27.](#) Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), 4-5.
- [28.](#) [ibid.](#), 73-4.
- [29.](#) [ibid.](#), 72-3.
- [30.](#) Jacques Derrida, *La dissémination* , Paris: Editions de Seuil (1972), 361.

- [31.](#) *ibid.*, 361.
- [32.](#) Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, translated by Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1987), 4.
- [33.](#) Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), 105.
- [34.](#) *ibid.*, 201.
- [35.](#) *ibid.*, 104.
- [36.](#) Many Chinese words are composed this way, of course, i.e., two characters that are so-called synonyms together make the word: I of course leave it to Chinese philosophers to adjudicate any applicability of the Derridean reading here to Chinese words.
- [37.](#) Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), 131.
- [38.](#) *ibid.*, 52, 102,105,108,109, etc..
- [39.](#) *ibid.*, 43.
- [40.](#) *ibid.*, 35.
- [41.](#) *ibid.*, 108.
- [42.](#) See Isaiah 31:9.
- [43.](#) Robert Magliola, *On Deconstructing Life Worlds: Buddhism, Christianity, Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2000), 35.
- [44.](#) Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian Mcleod, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1987), 251. Original Fr. ed., *La Vérité en peinture*. (Paris: Aubier-Flammarion, 1978).
- [45.](#) David Putney, *Dogen: Enlightenment and Entanglement*, *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 17 1997, 25-46, 35.

- [46.](#) Jacques Derrida, *D'un ton apocalyptique adopté naguère en philosophie* , Paris: Editions Galilée (1983), 85.
- [47.](#) Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, translated by Geoff Bennington and Ian Mcleod, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1987), 143.

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