On Reading Heidegger: An Outline of Remarks to the Essex Colloquium

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(EDITORIAL Note: Jacques Derrida did not read a formal paper at the Essex Colloquium but presented some remarks on "Reading Heidegger" based on conversations of April, 1986, at Yale University, with Tom Keenan, Tom Levin, Tom Pepper, and Andrzej Warminski. David Farrell Krell has provided a brief outline of Professor Derrida's remarks, followed by a transcript of the discussion.)

Four threads are to be drawn out here, emanating from four areas of hesitation and disquiet in my current reading of Heidegger:

I. The privilege of questioning in Heidegger's thought and the gesture of affirmation;

II. The privilege of essence in Heidegger's account of technique and the necessary contamination of essences;

III. The thought of life and animality in Heidegger's ontology;

IV. The thought of epochality and epochal suspension (ἐποχή) in Heidegger's history of Being.

I. The privilege of questioning in Heidegger's thought and the gesture of affirmation.

A. The question is privileged everywhere by Heidegger as the mode of thinking.

1. Heidegger often redoubles the question—"Why the why?"—yet never doubts its dignity: the Denkweg is always a way of questioning.

2. That way appears to be subjected to both teleology and
archaeology: for even in errancy there may well be orientation, destining, and—above all—provenance (Herkunft).

3. Such insistence on the questioning way would in that case limit the being under way of questioning.

B. My own gesture is to sketch a movement of thinking, tracing, writing, that begins in affirmation.
   1. Questioning is a particular form of discourse—one could perform a grammatical, rhetorical, and pragmatical analysis of it.
   2. In addition to what Heidegger calls das Gefragte, das Befragte, and das Erfragte, there must be someone or something else [quelqu'un d'autre] involved in questioning: there is the call of the other [l'appel de l'autre] that precedes, must precede, philosophy and the path of thinking.
      a) For Heidegger, Sein is the "totally other," and yet such otherness is not totally unrelated to the Socratic/Platonic tradition.
      b) It is necessary to pursue what in Was heißt Denken? Heidegger calls verheissen, "promise."
   3. The moment I set out on a path of thinking there is already the trace of the other; the trace calls for questioning yet does not itself pose questions.
   4. The trace is an ever-renewed affirmation of questioning: "Yes, one must question!" and "Yes, one must question again!" The "yes" of affirmation must always be confirmed by a second "yes": affirmation promises the memory of itself.
   5. Yet by the very necessity of such repetition, affirmation is inevitably exposed to the menace of supplementarity, parasitism, technique—in a word, contamination.

II. The privilege of essence in Heidegger's account of technique and the necessary contamination of essence.
   A. Heidegger avers that the essence of technique is nothing technological: his thinking of technique as such and as an essence tries in a classically philosophical manner to shelter the thought and language of essence from contamination.
   B. Yet can anything in language and in thought be sheltered absolutely from technicity? In the very will to protect oneself against "x" one is more exposed to the danger of reproducing "x" than when one tries to think contamination.
   C. Contamination, a contagion born of contact and a kind of touching, foils every strategy of protection; it puts at risk the