**Presence and Appropriation**
Derrida and the Question of an Overcoming of Metaphysical Language*

DOMINIQUE JANICAUD
*Université de Nice*

... verlerne dich und jede Stelle wo du noch eine Heimat siehst...

Gottfried Benn¹

It would be foolish on my part to deny the difficulty of trying to deal with Jacques Derrida's work in one short paper. But, of course length has nothing to do with it, since the actual difficulty lies in the hermeneutical conditions of the approach.

Let us try to start: how is Derrida to be understood? Is it possible, at all? Is not Derrida, especially since *La dissémination* and *Glas*, more and more difficult, enigmatic, disconcerting? Though everybody knows that contemporary thinkers—like musicians and painters—are less easily intelligible than their forerunners, one is reluctant to be paralysed on the threshold of the work. I suppose that many literary scholars are in such a situation when they try to read Derrida, since I have found philosophers in such a difficult state.

Rest assured that I will not provide you with a fairy's wand to guide you through the labyrinth. I will only try to ask Jacques Derrida two questions at the end of this paper. But before reaching that point and in order to reach it, I have to make it clear what my guiding clue could be.

It is easy to notice that Derrida's books and papers mostly consist in commentaries on other texts. Seldom do we find Derrida's thought isolated as such and for itself. This does not mean that Derrida is not an original thinker at all (I am,

---

* This text was first presented at a conference on "Philosophy and Literary Criticism: The Post-Structuralist Enterprise," held at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, September 30-October 1, 1977, under a grant from the SUNY Conversations in the Disciplines Program. I would like to thank Robert Van Roden Allen for his kind assistance with my text.

on the contrary, convinced that he has made a unique breakthrough in contemporary French thought). Derrida's frequent references to other thinkers help us to seek out a leading thread: Derrida very often alludes to metaphysical closure and, above all, to the Hegelian achievement of absolute knowledge. I, therefore, suggest that the convenient clue could be Derrida's relationship to the metaphysical tradition, provided we do not proceed in a naive way, that is, provided we try to do our best to take into account Derrida's hermeneutical warnings about the rereading of metaphysical texts. The first part of this paper, consequently, will take for the most part a negative approach.

1.

Is it necessary to recall that metaphysics is understood by Derrida as metaphysics of presence, of what is proper, of Being (or, in better terms, of proper Being present to knowledge)? This also means, put in a more linguistic way, that the main feature of our Western civilization, as the achievement of metaphysics, is logocentrism. It is thus not surprising that Hegel has been chosen as the best sample and as the apex of that achievement. One reads in De la Grammatologie (p. 39) that Hegel "has . . . summed up the totality of the philosophy of the logos." Derrida, then, continues: "He (Hegel) has given to ontology the determination of an absolute logic; he has collected all the delimitations of Being as presence; he has assigned to presence the eschatology of parousia and of the proximity of infinite subjectivity to itself." Innumerable passages refer to Hegelian philosophy as a closure. I should like to cite a phrase from "An Hegelianism without reserve" (the paper on Bataille in L'écriture et la différence, p. 405): "The Aufhebung is understood within the circle of absolute knowledge, it never exceeds its closure. . . ." Let me indicate, by underlining the last word, that the end of this extract remains ambiguous in English as well as in French. We do not know whether the closure qualifies the Aufhebung or the absolute knowledge. I think that this ambiguity is needed; there is a circle between the former and the latter, since the absolute knowledge is the Aufhebung of itself. This very difficulty leads back to the nature of metaphysical closure, instead of being a mere terminological parenthesis. As a matter of fact, metaphysics has never been an ontical closure which could have been included within definitive limits. For example, the Aristotelian Being outstrips any kind of logical genus. Therefore, the closure that Derrida indicates is the appropriation or, better said, the perpetual reappropriation of a moving limit, and not at all the delimitation of a border line.

As metaphysics breeds this perpetual possibility of reappropriation, and particularly through the Hegelian Aufhebung which is always rising again from its ashes, the question becomes the following one, as Derrida puts it in "Tympan," the Preface to Marges (p. VIII): "Under which conditions could it be possible to