Deconstruction as a work of mourning: on the relationship between religious identity and grief in Jacques Derrida's *Circonfession*

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English Abstract

This thesis is an interpretive study of *Circonfession* by Jacques Derrida. I investigate the relationship between Derrida's account of mourning the imminent death of his mother and the recurring theme of his religious identity, which he deconstructs. The text is written in response to Geoffrey Bennington's *Derridabase*, which is an attempt to systematize Derrida's thought and make it accessible. *Circonfession* is composed of 59 stream-of-consciousness periphrases that make several references to different works throughout the author's career. This makes it difficult to interpret without first referring to "outside" sources. In the first part of the thesis, I follow clues in Bennington's *Derridabase* to provide an outline of deconstruction and related notions in Derrida's early works (1967-1972), namely, *différance* and the *trace*. The outline underscores the philosophical heritage of Heidegger, Husserl, and Kant in Derrida's thought, and it highlights how the trace is intimately linked to mourning and to what he calls the economy of death. I build my reading of *Circonfession* on the hypothesis that its idiosyncratic style is a performative treatment of Derrida's notion of the trace, which is a radicalization of phenomenology resulting from the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. In the second part, I demonstrate how the trace is enacted in *Circonfession* in ways that deconstruct religious identity. I pay attention to how the text draws a parallel between the author and Saint Augustine: Both of their mothers were concerned with the religious identity of their sons, and both of them write about mourning their mothers. *Circonfession* ties the figure of the mother to the questions of Derrida's belief in God, his atheism, circumcision, and Jewish name. The parallel with Augustine and the thematization of circumcision make salient how Derrida's relationship to Judaism is mediated by a Christian colonial culture and the antisemitism implicated in its history. *Circonfession* underscores the limits of both individual authenticity (confession) and communal belonging (circumcision), terms through which this thesis conceptualizes religious identity. At the same time, *Circonfession* affirms the desires for presence and life that drive every attempt of authenticity and belonging. This irresolvable tension between deconstruction and desire reflects the economy of death and invites mourning. Such a reading of *Circonfession* allows for an interpretation of deconstruction as a kind of mourning.

French Abstract

Ce mémoire est une étude interprétative de *Circonfession*, par Jacques Derrida. J'interroge la relation entre le récit du deuil de la mort imminente de sa mère et le thème récurrent de l'identité religieuse de l'auteur, qu'il déconstruit. Le texte de Derrida a été écrit en réponse à *Derridabase*, de Geoffrey Bennington, qui est une tentative de systématiser la pensée de Derrida et de la rendre accessible. *Circonfession* est composée de 59 périphrases écrites en flux de conscience qui font plusieurs références aux différentes œuvres de la carrière de l'auteur. Cela rend le texte difficile à interpréter sans se référer en premier à des sources à son 'dehors.' Dans la première partie de ce mémoire je suis les pistes évoquées par Bennington dans *Derridabase* afin d'offrir un aperçu de la déconstruction et d'autres notions connexes dans les premières œuvres de Derrida (1967-1972), à savoir, la *différance* et la *trace*. Cet aperçu souligne l'héritage philosophique de Heidegger, Husserl et Kant dans la pensée de Derrida, et il met en évidence comment la trace est intimement liée au deuil et à ce qu'il appelle l'économie de la mort. J'élabore ma lecture de *Circonfession* sur l'hypothèse que son style idiosyncratique est une performance de la notion de la trace, voire une radicalisation de la phénoménologie produite par la déconstruction des métaphysiques de la présence. Dans la deuxième partie, je démontre comment la trace opère en *Circonfession* de telle manière qu'elle mène à la déconstruction de l'identité religieuse. J'y souligne le parallèle que le texte fait entre l'auteur et Saint Augustin : les mères des deux auteurs se souciaient de l'identité religieuse de leurs fils, et ces deux derniers écrivent sur leur deuil de leurs mères. *Circonfession* attache la figure de la mère aux questions de la croyance de Derrida en Dieu, de son athéisme, de sa circoncision, et de son nom juif. Le parallèle avec Augustin et la thématisation de la circoncision dans *Circonfession* mettent en évidence comment la relation de Derrida avec son judaïsme est médiée par une culture coloniale chrétienne et par l'antisémitisme impliqué dans l'histoire de cette dernière. *Circonfession* souligne les limites de l'authenticité individuelle (confession) et de l'appartenance en communauté (circoncision), les termes par lesquels ce mémoire conceptualise l'identité religieuse. En même temps, *Circonfession* affirme les désirs de présence et de vie qui motivent tout essai d'authenticité et d'appartenance. Cette tension insoluble entre la déconstruction et le désir reflète l'économie de la mort et invite au deuil. Une telle lecture de *Circonfession* permet d'interpréter la déconstruction comme une forme de deuil.

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If not too pretentiously, I would also like to thank Jacques Derrida, whom I have never met, but with whose traces I have wrestled for the last three years. The time that was spent doing this was both pleasant and stimulating, and I have learned a great deal I will continue to carry with me.

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Abbreviations

When possible, these abbreviations are based on the ones found in the French online source *Derridex* (Delain 2005) and on John D. Caputo's *Deconstruction in a Nutshell* (2021).

The French and English editions of the primary text by Jacques Derrida:

Circon. "Circonfession." In *Jacques Derrida*. Les Contemporains 11. Paris: Seuil, 1991.
Circum. "Circumfession." In *Jacques Derrida*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Religion and Postmodernism. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999.

The French and English editions of Geoffrey Bennington's text, to which the primary text responds:

DDB "Derridabase." In *Jacques Derrida*. Les Contemporains 11. Paris: Seuil, 1991.
DDBe "Derridabase." In *Jacques Derrida*, translated by Geoffrey Bennington. Religion and Postmodernism. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999.

Works authored by Jacques Derrida in the respective editions used in the thesis:

CFUFM *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde*. Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault. Collection la philosophie en effet. Paris: Galilée, 2003.
DLG *De La Grammatologie*. Collection "Critique." Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967.
ED *L'écriture et la différence*. Points 100. Paris: Éd. du Seuil, (1967) 2014.
LPP "La Pharmacie de Platon." In *La Dissémination*, 73–196. Tel quel. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972.
LVLM *La Vie La Mort: Séminaire (1975-1976)*. Edited by Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf. Bibliothèque Derrida. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2019.
Marges *Marges de la philosophie*. Collection "Critique." Paris: Ed. de Minuit, (1972) 2006.
VP *La voix et le phénomène: introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*. 5th ed. Quadrige. Paris: PUF, (1967) 2016.

Other important works referenced regularly throughout the thesis:

BT Heidegger, Martin. (1927) 2019. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Reprint of first edition (1962). Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books.
CPR Kant, Immanuel. (1781, 1787) 2009. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. 15th printing. The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
KB Heidegger, Martin. (1929) 1997. *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*. Translated by Richard Taft. 5th ed., Enl. Studies in Continental Thought. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
Proleg. Kant, Immanuel. (1783) 2004. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics: With Selections from the Critique of Pure Reason*. Translated by Gary C. Hatfield. Rev. ed. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Introduction

This thesis is an interpretive study of Jacques Derrida's text *Circonfession* (1991). It seeks to answer the following question: What is the relationship between the deconstruction of the author's religious identity and the mourning of his dying mother? In order to answer this question, I first reconstruct the connection between deconstruction and death which permeates much of the language of Derrida's early works, particularly *De La Grammatologie* (1967) and *La Voix et le Phénomène* (1967). In those works, discourses of identity are represented as enacting an "economy of death," which is to be understood as an activity. This notion is elucidated by making recourse to the 1975-1976 seminar *La Vie La Mort* (2019), and also the collection of eulogies *Chaque Fois Unique, La Fin du Monde* (2003). Informed by these works, I argue that deconstruction problematizes both representation and auto-reproduction as the concepts through which we represent presence and life. In Derrida's reading of many important texts of Western thought, he identifies a tendency where these two concepts are articulated in a manner that presupposes theological ideas, such as the possibility of presence without absence and life without death. Against this tendency, deconstruction shows that these discourses about representation and auto-reproduction do not rid themselves completely of absence and death because they depend on them to conceive presence and life. I underscore how Derrida portrays the processes of affirming, upholding, and even deconstructing these discourses—to which he offers no alternative—as always marked by a desire, the same desire behind representation and reproduction, namely, the desire for wellness, wholeness, acceptance, knowledge, safety, perpetuation, and so on; in other words, the desire for life without death and presence without absence. By paying special attention to the author's religious identity and the mourning of his mother, I argue that *Circonfession* performs a desire to affirm the life and presence of the Self and of the Other[1] while being systematically undercut by the aporias of representation and auto-reproduction. This performance allows for the representation of deconstruction to be analogous to the work of mourning: They express a desire towards life and presence that has been marked by the experience of their impossibility, but which nonetheless persists through the affirmation of their limits.

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[1] Throughout this thesis, the words "Self" and "Other" are capitalized whenever they refer to the structure of whatever is recognized by a given subjective standpoint as "who one is" (Self) and "who one is not" (Other).

My reading underscores how representation and auto-reproduction are always understood by Derrida as presupposing relational or interpersonal contexts. This means that their aporetic structure, revealed through deconstruction, is not simply an analytical or philosophical problem, but is rather better understood as an unavoidable opening to the existential, ethical, and political. This is enacted in *Circonfession*'s portrayal of its author's desire for representation and reproduction as being conditioned, for example, by the relationships of the author with his mother, with Geoffrey Bennington, with the readers, and even with God and with Saint Augustine, whom the text quotes extensively. The text represents the connections between the author's thought and his life as being defined by the lived experience of being Jewish under a Western Christian hegemonic culture. The mournful stance towards the relationships that define him allows for interpreting Derrida's career of deconstruction as an effort to cope, to mourn, and to strive to make sense of this lived experience in the wake of recent Western history and its entanglement[2] with Western thought. In other words, *Circonfession* portrays his career as trying to make sense of what it means to be an Arab Sephardic Jew from colonial French Algeria born in 1930 who proceeded to make his career in France and abroad without ever finding much recognition with his family (e.g., Circon. 196). I approach this question with the awareness that Derrida's life placed him at the intersections of political and ethical contexts that demanded conflicting allegiances from him, all of them deeply marked by violence. For instance, he moved from Algeria to France at the age of nineteen in 1949, around the time of the Nakba and the formation of the state of Israel (1948), a few years after France was liberated from German Nazi occupation and transitioned into a new regime (1944-1946) in the wake of the Shoah (1941-1945) and WWII (1939-1945); he then pursued his education in post-war France during the same period of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62). Accordingly, *Circonfession* portrays his lived experience as one of constantly needing to negotiate his identity depending on the people he encounters, always needing to sacrifice one side to fit another, and never being fully recognized or accepted as a whole.

This contextualization is particularly interesting to the study of religion because Derrida understands the entanglement between Western history and thought (in the wake of Nazi-Fascism, the Shoah, the Nakba, the colonization and independence of Algeria, and so on) to be inescapably

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[2] Derrida understood his own work as a kind of history of discourse that sought to understand its function in the reproduction of ideologies. He saw the history of thought and political history as indissociable, even if the nature of this "entanglement" is not clear or decidable. I return to this question below.

tied to Western religion. As a Jew, he has a precarious position in this history, which *Circonfession* portrays by alluding to his heritage of being a Marrano that survived the Inquisition in the Iberic Peninsula. Through a multiplicity of voices, which are not always coherent, the text depicts someone at pains to negotiate their identity: What does it mean to be circumcised and to suffer antisemitism, and to choose not to circumcise one's children, being an atheist who prays using the language and logic of Christianity?; how to reconcile with one's mother when one has rejected so much of her identity (beliefs and community) while also constantly recognizing its traces in oneself?; how to seek her recognition and forgiveness at the end of her life, when she is no longer mentally present? By elucidating the relationship between religious identity and mourning in Derrida's thought through the lens of *Circonfession*, my aim is to produce more than a literary case study of the deconstruction of religious identity in the context of end of life. I hope to articulate an opening on a text that offers a standpoint through which other scholars can problematize, rethink, and better understand the roles and functions of discourse in mediating the intersubjective process of individual religious self-identification within their familial, social, ethical, political, and historical situations.

This thesis is written in two parts. The first part sketches the genealogy of deconstruction through Martin Heidegger's notion of *Destruktion* in his work *Being and Time* (1927), a work developed in relation to the Heidegger's interpretation of Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787). The influence of Edmund Husserl on Heidegger plays an important role in this history. The purpose of the first part is to demonstrate how Derrida inherited a philosophical concern about the limits of knowledge, particularly knowledge of self and God, which correlates this limit with human finitude and death. The first chapter sets the terms of this heritage, while the second makes explicit its genealogical relationship to Derrida's own works through an exposition of Derridean deconstruction, *différance,* and the trace. For this purpose, *De La Grammatologie* (1967) serves as an indispensable source. Finally, in a third chapter I articulate how these notions are intimately linked with what Derrida calls the economy of death, which relates to Derrida's understanding of mourning. Having established these connections, grounding them on their history and philosophical context, the interpretation of *Circonfession* that I wish to proffer in the second part should be clear.

Part two begins with an outline of the composition, form, content, and language of *Circonfession*, and it problematizes the question of authorship. A chapter is then devoted to each of the reference points in the title of the work, namely, the themes of circularity, confession, and circumcision. I argue that the theme of circularity depicts the deconstruction of the phenomenological search for authentic self-knowledge. This is tied to the themes drawn in the genealogy earlier traced.

The theme of confession represents the deconstruction of an explicitly Christian theological search for self-knowledge. This is pursued in the second chapter. This search is done through an Other who holds the possibility of absolute knowledge and who can recognize and accept the Self. This representation is continuous with the deconstruction of onto-theo-teleology in Derrida's early works. As for the theme of circumcision, I argue that it represents the author's attempt to assert his Jewish identity in terms of a search for purity and belonging, impossible for Derrida to claim at two levels. First, because of the history of being a Jew under Western Christian hegemonic culture, which is expressed through the discourse of the Marrano. Second, due to ruptures in the personal relationship between Derrida and his mother. Together, these themes represent how discourses of religious identity in terms of authenticity and belonging have an aporetic structure. In all cases, however, these aporetic discourses are motivated by the desire for wholeness, presence, perpetuation, safety, life, and so on. The process of deconstruction reveals how the enactment of this desire for life without death is only possible through the activity Derrida calls the economy of death. All of this allows for an understanding of *Circonfession* as portraying Derrida's work of deconstruction throughout his career as a work of mourning: An activity that attempts the delicate work of affirming life in the face of death.

For the sake of conceptual clarity, allow me to be explicit about an important working assumption in my question, followed by some methodological remarks. The question about the relationship between the deconstruction of the author's religious identity and the mourning of his dying mother presupposes certain significant elements: Religious identity, deconstruction, mourning, and a relationship between these three. The first part of this thesis shows how Derrida's deconstruction of the traditional concept of identity is a common theme in his works that is intimately related to finitude and to mourning. This gives one reasonable ground to inquire on the relationship between deconstruction and mourning, which are three out of four elements. As for

the second part, it is important to acknowledge that the term "religious identity" is not used in *Circonfession*. However, it is used here to flag a topic Derrida writes about without naming it as such. Circularity, confession, and circumcision—all these themes deal with the process of drawing boundaries that serve to identify something discrete. In the case of confession, this happens through a logic of authenticity wherein the subject has immediate access to itself and can articulate something about it to another. In the case of circumcision, it is a marker of belonging to a community that is passed on from one generation to another. Due to the religious history of circumcision and confession, it is reasonable to abstract the notion that these themes deal with *religious* identification, even if Derrida's treatment of them might also destabilize the boundaries of what is or is not religious. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of confession and circumcision makes salient the theoretical challenge of defining religious identity in terms of an individual voluntary and autonomous association, affiliation, and assertion of a set of beliefs (confession), and it does this over and against a view of religious identity anchored in rites, symbols, practices, and group belonging (circumcision). In other words, the term "religious identity" in the analysis articulates how *Circonfession* explicitly addresses the problem of differentiating a "Jew" from a "*real* Jew," an "Atheist" from a "*real* Atheist," and even a "Christian" from a "*real* Christian," and so on.

Methodological Remarks

My analysis operates at the intersection of philosophy and literature. Derrida's reading of philosophical texts was informed by the notion, inherited from Maurice Blanchot, that the philosophical and literary uses of language are always in tension (Hammerschlag 2010, 218). The decision of whether a text is philosophical or literary does not lie in the texts themselves, but rather in how the reader relates to them (Hammerschlag 2010, 219). It is with this in mind that Derrida claims that his work is not that of a philosopher who is concerned with metaphysics, but rather that of a historian of ideas (DDB 122; *DLG* 24-25, 334) who pays special attention to the function and reproduction of ideologies in and through discourse (DDB 214-15, 221; *DLG* 107, 124, 330; Caputo 1997, 127). He also argued that in order to study any discourse, and to understand their influences and positions within a larger ecosystem of discourses, one must question the boundary between concept and metaphor (*LVLM* 98). This perspective is essential in this thesis, particularly in part one. A genealogy is sketched from Kant to Derrida, passing through Heidegger and Husserl, in order to draw the general contours of deconstruction, *différance*, and the trace. My interest there is to ascertain the rhetoric, concerns, imagery, and metaphors that Derrida inherits from them.

Circonfession is a text where Derrida does not provide its readers with a philosophical argument about any definite position. It is a work that does not articulate any identifiable thesis as such, gesturing at many things at once. One senses that *Circonfession* was written to frustrate traditional philosophical approaches that attempt to contain a thinker's views into an organized whole. It avoids making truth-claims, but rather describes the uncontainably spasmodic interiority of its author, sometimes in a contradictory manner. *Circonfession* is a literary production where the author writes as an artist who is *performing* his philosophy. It is a self-representation shaped by deconstruction, and more particularly, by the trace. Reading *Circonfession* as a performative act of the trace aids in the appreciation of its unusual and nonlinear style. This is why I proceed by providing an outline of significant aspects of Derrida's philosophy and then turn to an exposition of how they are embodied in *Circonfession*.

A good example of how Derrida understood his own hermeneutical process, which shapes his writing, is found in the untitled preface to *La Pharmacie de Platon* (71-72). It establishes a helpful metaphor, depicting texts as cloths constituted of many threads carefully weaved together. The weaving of the threads is a kind of game, which follows certain rules, and these rules are always hidden at the first glance. These rules determine the procedural pattern of how the threads are weaved to produce a given type of cloth and not others. For example, threads might be weaved with different patterns and techniques for a summer shirt than it would for a winter one, for example. This set of rules, which is the structural condition of possibility of the text, dissimulates[3] itself and reconstitutes itself in every act of reading that looks only at the surface and does not dare to *pull its threads* (LPP 71). The kind of reading that Derrida proposes, instead, is one that follows the thread in the cloth as if adding a new one, which makes the gesture of reading and the gesture of writing the same gesture (LPP 72). Because both follow the same set of rules, this means the reader cannot simply add whatever they want to a text (LPP 72). Nonetheless, reading never leaves the text intact. Derrida refuses strict norms of objectivity which differentiate between "serious" and "unserious" readings (and which assume the very possibility of that distinction), considering them "silly" and "sterile."[4] Rather, the rigor of writing and reading depends on the rules of the

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[3] Dissimulation is a term that comes up often in Derrida's writings and it can signify a diverse set of operations depending on its context. Generally speaking, however, dissimulation refers to an act of behaving as if one is not behaving, to hide one's disposition, or to act as if one is not there and has never been.

[4] "Même niaiserie, même stérilité du 'pas sérieux' et du 'sérieux'" (LPP 72).

game of composition, which are dissimulated by the text itself. Later, Derrida goes on to demonstrate that these rules are understood through a good grasp of the language and of the historical, social, and religious context of writing, along with attention to recurrent metaphors and rhetoric (LPP 80, 146-53). In other words, a text must be understood by how it follows the patterns established by an ecosystem of discourses. It is with all this in mind that I approach *Circonfession* with the aim to remain faithful to Derrida's texts on their own terms.

A few words are appropriate regarding the choice of specific texts. *Circonfession* alludes to Derrida's numerous works, directly and indirectly. References abound in it to many terms that are, in one way or another, key to Derrida's many other writings: word, sign, text, trace, *différance*, signature, Jew, *pharmakos*, circumcision, forgiveness, gift, death, life, voice, blindness, memory, spectre, and so on. It also constantly makes wordplays that illustrate the movement of going-around, turning-around, looking-around, drawing a circle, going round-about, and so on, which are expressed in a number of ways including different applications of the Latin root "circum-" (including in the title). Because *Circonfession* appears to go in circles while also counting on the reader's familiarity with an extensive terminology, it provokes a reading experience that is overwhelmingly disorienting to readers unfamiliar with his other works. These other works, in turn, reach further "outside" of Derrida's corpus because in all of them he writes by reading other thinkers (DDB 82). This means that an exhaustive reading of *Circonfession* requires sufficient knowledge of his and other thinkers' works he comments on. Some of these major thinkers and philosophers are Husserl, Heidegger, Saussure, Nietzsche, Levinas, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Rousseau, Freud, and Plato. My intention, however, is not to exhaust its contents. Instead, my hermeneutical procedure aims to pull a single thread, or perhaps to make a single incision on a large body. This allows for a reading that avoids being exclusive or final.

In order to pierce through the immense complexity and vastness of Derrida's corpus and his philosophical heritage, my starting point is Geoffrey Bennington's work *Derridabase* (1991), to which *Circonfession* is written as a response or complement.[5] Beyond these two texts, my guideline has been to narrow the scope to be incisive about my primary concern, namely the thesis question. Originally, my plan was to focus on how *Circonfession* draws continuities with the three

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[5] More details on this are provided later.

1967 books, *De La Grammatologie, La voix et le phénomène: introduction au problème du signe dans la phénomenologie de Husserl,* and *L'écriture et la différence*. Together, these defined the rest of Derrida's career by establishing his thought of the trace, *différance*, and the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence. Through careful reading I found that *DLG* and *VP* provide sufficient material to pursue the thesis question, so I left *L'écriture et la différence* aside to keep the work manageable. I also found that the later text *La Pharmacie de Platon*, in *La Dissémination* (1972) synthesizes many of the central ideas from these books while giving a clear, concise example of how Derrida interpreted a work that was simultaneously philosophical and literary. Therefore, I chose this text to be my main methodological reference, as the previous paragraphs indicate. A text that surprised me during my research, compelling me to turn to it for the sake of philosophical clarity, was Derrida's famous conference *la différance*, delivered in 1968 (directly following the 1967 books) and later published in *Marges de la philosophie* (1972). Alongside the 1967 books, my plan was to use the collection *Chaque Fois Unique, La Fin du Monde* (2003), first published in English as *The Work of Mourning* (2001), to explore Derrida's thoughts on death and mourning. The English title is the inspiration for the title of this thesis. Later, I discovered that Derrida's 1975-1976 seminar *La vie la mort* was published in French in 2019 (An English translation followed in 2020). Due to it being a recent publication, and also due to the clarity of the lecture format of a seminar, I chose to prioritize it over other possible texts on the topic.

The choice of texts that were made are based on a mixture of my academic interests, my strengths, and an awareness of my weaknesses. For example, I wanted to prioritize the 1967 books to understand the religious and mournful character of deconstruction before Derrida's more explicit treatments of religious themes in texts like *Schibboleth, pour Paul Celan* (1986), *Donner la mort* (1999), and *Foi et Savoir* (1996), among others. I also generally wanted to focus on works that predated *Circonfession*. However, if the chronology of publications was the determining factor, it would make little sense to prioritize *CFUFM* and *LVLM* to elucidate death and mourning, as I do. Now it is clear to me that *CFUFM* has been chosen because it matches the personal tone of *Circonfession*; a collection of eulogies is a sensible place to understand the kind of mourning that *Circonfession* accounts for, which is the mourning of one's own mother. As for *LVLM*, I was honestly moved by the enthusiasm of a new publication where Derrida uses far more accessible language than many of his writings. I was pleasantly surprised to find in it an elucidating articulation of the economy of death, which is a theme drawn in both *DLG* and *VP*. This articulation

clarified the connection between representation and reproduction, which is central to my interpretation of *Circonfession*.

My research is directly informed and shaped by my scholarity—this thesis is a product of three years of work in the context of a Master of Arts degree, which followed a Bachelor of Theology degree. During these years, I had the opportunity to study the works of Heidegger, Kant, and Husserl, which are central to understanding *DLG* and *VP*. I have also studied the works of Saint Augustine extensively, whose book *Confessiones* is quoted repeatedly in *Circonfession*. My greatest blind spots are an unfamiliarity with Hegel's and Levinas' oeuvre, whose traces are present throughout Derrida's works, but which I am not equipped to identify without the aid of secondary literature. I have kept mentions of them at a minimum. I am confident that an alternative reading of *Circonfession* that answers my research question by tracing the influence of these two would be possible, but it would be a different work than my own.

My choices of texts—and of specific passages within those texts—seek only to be exemplary enough to substantiate my interpretation of *Circonfession*. The hermeneutics applied in this interpretation are informed by Derrida's deconstruction of traditional discourses about reading and writing. This deconstruction operated through analyses of other thinkers that depended on choices of examples[6] that Derrida openly acknowledged could not be justified, if by "justified" it is meant that these examples are final, exhaustive, or the best (e.g., *DLG* 222-23). Furthermore, the institutional practice of establishing a clear program and trajectory that delimits a procedure before it begins, and which seeks to make its conclusions evident before the process of presenting evidence, is one that Derrida held with suspicion and sought to destabilize (*LVLM* 24-26, 47-48). The clarity and fidelity of his work towards the texts of other authors only becomes evident through the process of accompanying his readings, which cannot be anticipated in a preface or foreword. The way this thesis navigates Derrida's texts attempts a similar approach. Despite this lack of finality or exhaustion in my reading strategy, at the end of this thesis I conclude that *Circonfession* offers a representation of Derrida's whole career of deconstruction—that is, that the work of deconstruction is a work of mourning. One basis of this claim is that in *Circonfession* the author claims that he is always writing about the same thing (Circon. 70-71), even if that thing is somehow

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[6] In part two I discuss Derrida's deconstruction of the concept of exemplarity in the context of Jewish identity.

not a thing, and there is an indeterminate number of possible words and ways it can be talked *about* (*Marges* 13). By focusing on the trace, deconstruction, circularity, confession, and circumcision, my analysis stakes on these words being a few of such ways. Another basis for the claim is that *Circonfession* was written to be included in a volume titled *Jacques Derrida*, which had the express intent of representing the author and the totality of his work.

Derrida uses the French language in many creative ways, often playing with words and sentence structures to allow for double, triple, or multiple possible meanings of a single phrase. His relationship to the French language is also an important topic of *Circonfession*. While it is true that something always gets lost in translation, in the case of Derrida's works, and specially with *Circonfession*, that which might be lost is essential to its interpretation. Therefore, my analysis relies on the original versions of Derrida's texts, namely, their French editions. Accordingly, these are also the editions I quote. English translations that are provided are all mine, unless indicated otherwise. These matters are all discussed in detail at the beginning of part two, with a few important examples from the text.

Part One: Deconstruction and Death

Derrida reads philosophy like a historian who is concerned with the function and reproduction of ideologies in and through discourse. Philosophy is read like literature, blurring the boundaries between these two. The assumption is basically that discourse cannot be dissociated from its history (DDB 260-61; *DLG* 33-34; 350). *Circonfession* presents a similar dynamic with respect to Derrida's philosophy and his personal history, entangled as they are and mutually affecting one another. My sense is that *Circonfession* represents Derrida's life and history as filled with reasons to mourn, but this representation is inseparable from deconstruction and the thought of the trace, which are concerned with finitude and death. However, this does not mean that Derrida has a morbid relationship to thought due to personal tragedy. It also does not mean that he has a philosophical penchant for life's demise that leads him to perceive life morbidly. The question of causality between history and thought, both at the level of his personal life and of significant historical developments, is one that Derrida does not attempt to answer. Rather, the possibility of being definitive about such things is something he puts into question. The next two chapters outline deconstruction, *différance*, and the trace, which are essential to interpret *Circonfession*. I focus on how they emerge from Derrida's treatment of a particular philosophical heritage, paying special attention to the works of Heidegger, Husserl, and Kant. The influences of Freud and Saussure are also discussed, albeit briefly. Considering the previous metaphor of texts as cloths, the first of the following chapters identifies a few of the individual threads that are weaved in Derrida's early works. The second chapter traces how these threads are weaved through a close reading of an important passage of *DLG*, making the genealogical relationship between his philosophical heritage and his own ideas explicit. In the closing chapter of this part, I elucidate the theme of the economy of death that emerges in the prior chapters, correlating it with insights from *LVLM* and *CFUFM*. Together, these provide the important philosophical background and vocabulary to begin my interpretation of *Circonfession*.

Chapter I   Heritage: Heidegger, Husserl, and Kant

Derrida's use of the word "deconstruction"[7] is an original reading of what Heidegger called *Destruktion* (DDB 158).[8] The term appears in *Being and Time* (1927), where Heidegger's aim is to recover the question of the meaning of Being (*BT* 19).[9] Heidegger's starting point is that we cannot simply investigate Being, but we can investigate the kind of being that we are, which he calls Dasein[10] (*BT* 32). Most of *BT* is concerned with a phenomenology of Dasein. Although Heidegger defines phenomenology in his own way, it is nonetheless an inheritance from Husserl, both of whom were close readers of Kant. Because Derrida's early academic career focused on the works of Husserl, one can understand his approach to phenomenology and its relationship to deconstruction, and particularly the trace, as emerging from his reading of these three thinkers. A brief overview is in order to situate Derrida's ideas.

What Husserl called phenomenological reduction emerges as a development of the theory of intentionality: The view that "consciousness is always consciousness-of" (Luft 2011, 248). The gist of it is that our experience of objects is always constituted by subjectivity. The first step of the procedure, the reduction, is referred to as *epoché* or bracketing, that is, to suspend judgement regarding epistemological foundations when observing an object. For example, if I look at a tree, I would focus on the experience of that tree without wondering whether the tree is "real" (and the implicated question of what that means), a replica of something else, or even a dream (see Luft 2011, 246). Part of this process is an "unbuilding (Abbau)"[11] of the layers of theoretical assumptions carried in everyday experience (Luft 2011, 249). The second step is to make visible things "as they are" (letting them "appear"[12]), by which Husserl means the transcendental structure of the experience of conscious life and of the world that is constituted by it (Luft 2011, 248–50). What this structure reveals is that there is a transcendental consciousness, a consciousness that

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[7] The English word is a direct correlate to the French "déconstruction."

[8] One German word for destruction.

[9] In other words, what does it mean when we use the word "being"?

[10] Literally, "There-being." By making this one word, Heidegger wants to emphasize that we are "being-in-the-world," that our experienc.es of things and our experiences of ourselves are inextricably tied together: I always experience myself somewhere at some time (here and now), and everything that I experience is defined in my experience by it being experienced by me. See *BT* 58-63, 95, 125-134.

[11] Derridean "deconstruction" is informed by, among other things, Heideggerian "destruction" and the Husserlian "unbuilding."

[12] "Appearance" is the most common translation of the Greek word from which we derive "phenomenon" and its variants, including "phenomenology."

fundamentally does not belong to the world because it constitutes both the world and the subjectivities that experience it (Luft 2011, 247–48, 250–51).

When Heidegger raises the question between Being and the kinds of being that we are (Dasein), we can interpret him as seeking to elucidate the relationship between these two levels of consciousness, mine and the transcendental. However, he avoids Husserl's terminology in order to avoid his assumptions. These two levels of consciousness more or less correlate to two opposing referential chains of methodological technical distinctions he makes: The first chain is "Being," "ontological," and "existential," which refer to phenomenal general structures, possibilities, and conditions of possibility, which are drawn from the particularity of its opposing referential chain, identified by the words "entities," "ontic," and "existentiell." The relationship between these two chains is analogous to historical metaphysical distinctions in philosophy, like the distinctions between form and matter, universals and particulars, or the transcendental and the empirical, despite Heidegger's attempt to distance himself from this history. His greatest departure from this traditional binary structure is by deconstructing[13] the assumption of a fundamental difference between subjectivity and objectivity, and even consciousness and experience. Dasein is Being-in-the-world, a unified experience that never detaches that which habitually we call "ourselves" from what we call "the world" and the things in it. He grounds this assertion on the claim that we have a "pre-phenomenological experience and acquaintance" of ourselves as Being-in-the-world. The history of philosophy has made this acquaintance "invisible" through an interpretation of experience that is "ontologically inappropriate" (*BT* 86). This is how the history of philosophy covers up, or forgets, the question of Being (*BT* 21-21, 55-60), which is why that history must be "destroyed" (*BT* 44-45).

This covering-up is itself a clue for Heidegger's project of a fundamental ontology since it reveals a key issue about the constitution of Dasein, namely, that it is the kind of being that has the possibility "to be itself or not itself" (*BT* 33). We are somehow the kinds of beings that can think we know ourselves when we do not, that can forget ourselves and what we are. In other words, we can be inauthentic. The very possibility of inauthenticity is worth investigating. One part of its explanation is public conformity and alienation, that is, we are too concerned about what others

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[13] Applying *Destruktion*: destroying, analyzing to the point of dissolution, de-composing, making presuppositions evident and challenging them.

(the "they" in Heidegger) think instead of thinking for ourselves (*BT* 164-166, 210). This "they," *das Man*, is a phenomenal structure revealed by this phenomenological investigation of inauthenticity. Put otherwise, our experience of ourselves and the world appears to be structured in relation to a public eye that is more than simply the judgement of particular individuals we encounter throughout our lives. *Das Man* acts as a ready-made understanding of Dasein that can simply be received by it, giving it a pre-packaged sense of self and world, direction, and purpose (*BT* 164-166). Heidegger can be understood to be referring to something like a social identity or culture. Religious worldviews can also be included in *das Man*, since they provide narratives about who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. For Heidegger, our everyday comportment, such as being busy, being concerned with work, engaging in idle talk, and so on, are fundamentally inauthentic because in them we structure our lives and our concerns primarily according to *das Man*. This means that science, technique, and any other notion that exists for the sake of public usefulness, such as objective measurements of space and time, differences between nature and artifice, objectivity and subjectivity, and even common sense, are also inauthentic (*BT* 466).

The reason why conformity to *das Man* is considered inauthentic—not what Dasein is fundamentally—is because, despite being a function of Dasein's collectivity, the phenomenon of *das Man* covers up the individuality of Dasein by giving it a misrepresentation of what it is. *Das Man* gets in the way of Dasein having authentic knowledge of itself because it answers the existential questions of Dasein before Dasein even asks them. This makes it easy for Dasein to not think for itself about itself. *Das Man* leads Dasein to identify closely with the concerns of a collectivity which, unlike Dasein, does not die and treats time as if it were endless (*BT* 477). Heidegger argues that Dasein only grasps itself when it sees itself as distinct from *das Man*, and this is only possible when it is in a state of anxiety in the face of Death,[14] when Dasein apprehends with certainty that it will die, and it will die individually (*BT* 284, 297, 308, 477).[15] By grasping one's mortality, one can finally see oneself as one is: a being with an indeterminate but certainly limited amount of time, with possibilities that are already determined by the past and by a context, but with the freedom to decide to take up these possibilities and live them resolutely (*BT* 435-436).

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[14] Death is capitalized whenever referring strictly to the Heideggerian formulation of it.

[15] "*No one can take the Other's dying away from him…* Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself at the time. By its very essence, death is in every case mine in so far as it 'is' at all" (*BT* 284).

Heidegger also argues that the individuation resulting from apprehending Death reveals the world as "uncanny," reducing the prepackaged meanings given to Dasein by *das Man* to nothing (*BT* 232-234). It is a moment of vision where ordinary time and space suddenly become unfamiliar to Dasein, where life loses its everydayness, but also where one is confronted with the choice to affirm it—as it is—towards its already-conditioned future (*BT* 387-88). For example, by realizing that one's social identity as Jewish or German is arbitrary and grounded outside of one's own individuality, one does not simply stop being Jewish or German, but one can resolutely choose to be what one has been, namely, Jewish or German (*BT* 437).[16] To him, this is the condition of possibility of "*authentic historicality*" (*BT* 437). The alternative to this resoluteness is to avoid anxiety and to return to the meanings provided by *das Man*, which make the world familiar, and which shelter Dasein from a confrontation with its fundamental mortality (*BT* 222).

Authenticity and inauthenticity in *BT* are neutral categories and not moral judgements (68). Indeed, possessing an understanding of Dasein that is "existentially primordial"—that is, in line with the findings of Heidegger's phenomenology of Dasein—has no bearing on the judgement about the "moral quality" of any particular Dasein (*BT* 341). Nonetheless, the ontological difference between authentic and inauthentic Dasein raises a radical challenge to the history of philosophy, including moral philosophy, inasmuch as it makes the claim that it interprets human beings—the subjects and objects of ethics—better than the tradition has. *BT* suggests that Heidegger understands Dasein authentically while important philosophers before him, like Descartes and Kant, were lost in inauthenticity (*BT* 45-46, 122-125). This is why the history of philosophy must go through *Destruktion*, and why his approach to it must be violent (*BT* 360). He claims the tradition must be "loosened up," in order to "dissolve" the concealments and allow us to "arrive at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—the ways which have guided us ever since" (*BT* 44). He proposes that the ancient Greeks, from whom we inherited the tradition of ontology, had an authentic relation to Being which was somehow covered up by subsequent tradition. By destroying the tradition, we free it for its

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[16] "The resoluteness which comes back to itself and hands itself down, then becomes the *repetition* of a possibility of existence that has come down to us. *Repeating is handing down explicitly* – that is to say, going back into the possibilities of the Dasein that has-been-there. The authentic repetition of a possibility of existence that has been – the possibility that Dasein may choose its hero – is grounded existentially in anticipatory resoluteness; for it is in resoluteness that one first chooses the choice which makes one free for the struggle of loyally following in the footsteps of that which can be repeated."

own possibilities while "keeping it within its limits" (*BT* 44). In other words, his project is to claim access to the original experiences of Being which generated the tradition in order to show how the tradition must be superseded due to covering up that original experience. This search for the authenticity of the tradition has a similar structure to Dasein's apprehension of its own authenticity. That is, through a realization of finitude, one dissociates from the interpretation of the world inherited by the public in order to apprehend one's Dasein authentically. This authenticity opens up the possibility of affirming one's place in history, inscribing oneself in the web of interpretation of the world that was received by the public. By violently *destroying* the tradition by affirming its limits, Heidegger resolutely takes it up and inscribes his place in it.

I draw this analogical correlation between death and Heidegger's destructive violence towards the tradition because, at its most basic structure, he defines Death as "the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein" (*BT* 294). In the same paragraph he explains that what he calls "absolute" is that which is not relational. Heideggerian Death is individuating, it cuts Dasein off from *das Man* so Dasein can apprehend itself as it is. Analogously, the destruction of the tradition determines the possibility of its "absolute impossibility," its limits, its incoherences and unshared assumptions, but only with the aim of opening up the possibility of appropriating it resolutely. Fundamentally, the line between authenticity and inauthenticity comes down to a delineation of finitude in the sense of the limits of life and knowledge. The association between these two is further grounded by Heidegger's following work, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (1929), where he claims that he wrote *BT* as a kind of response to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

CPR is primarily concerned with determining the limits of the human capacity to access and assess reality without empirical experience (that is, through "pure reason"). Part of Kant's avowed goals is the rejection of theology and traditional (medieval and ancient) metaphysics as possible sciences, while still asserting the necessity of religion and morality (*CPR* B375, A849/B877, A852/B880, etc.). To accomplish this, he sees his primary task as one of drawing boundaries and limits (*CPR* Bxix, B8-9, B294-97, etc.; *Proleg.* 4:261). A key boundary is between what he calls *phenomena* and *noumena*. Kant argues that our experience of things in the world (phenomena) is always already shaped by the structures of our experience, which fits everything into the molds of our mental and organic faculties. For example, space and time are the respective structures of outer and inner intuition, and not properties of particular objects or of the world independently of us

(*CPR* A42/B60). Kant also proposes that our mind projects objects and ideas that belong only to itself (noumena[17]), for example, the notion of objects in-themselves (independent of experience), the free autonomous self, God, and the world as a totality (*CPR* A244/B302, B307-308, A254-255/B310-311, etc.). These are not "real" objects in the sense that there is nothing given in experience that we can correlate directly with them, but they serve the structural function of making experience make sense, that is, they make it unified and rational. They are mental representations of strictly logical relations (A254-255/B310-311; *Proleg.* 4:327-33, 4:350), and it is an illusion, an error, when they are mistaken for real objects to be known scientifically (A5-6/B9-10; *Proleg.* 4:328-29).

It is significant to note that Kant's language throughout *CPR* sets up the analogy of experience as a circle (B8), a circle forming an island where we are grounded and have access to truth (A235/B294-95). From the island is seen the foggy horizon of an ocean of illusion (A236/B295). These illusions are put in place by the mind itself in order to situate experience, which means they are unavoidable problems (B6-7) that can only be conceived as, themselves, boundaries (A255/B310-11). To Kant, the history of metaphysics before him cannot be reduced to a mistake. Rather, notions like God, freedom, immortality, and even the newness of new discoveries, are not only necessary boundary-concepts but are also things that are desired by human beings. In his analogy, metaphysicians are adventurers who set sail from the land of truth because they desire and hope for new things, unaware that the objects they think they perceive are simply the representation of the structural limits of experience. They are doomed, in the end, to fall back on the circle of the land of truth (*CPR* A5-6/B9-10, A235-36/B294-95; *Proleg.* 4:332-33, 4:352-54).

Heidegger affirms that regardless of what Kant proposes or what might be extracted from *CPR*, what is really interesting about it is how it thematizes human finitude (*KB* 150-53). To Heidegger,

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[17] The word "phenomena" is derived from the Greek word for "appearance," and the word "noumena" is derived from the Greek word for "mind." Much of the reception and debate around the proper understanding of Kantian Transcendental Idealism depends on the interpretation of the meaning of these two words and the relationship between them. It is my personal interpretation, following Occam's razor, that Kant chose these words because he meant them to represent what he was talking about: objects of appearance (given through the senses) and objects of the mind, in the sense that they exist only in the mind and not elsewhere. This interpretation is above all based on paragraphs A254-255/B310-311 of *CPR* and §59 of *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783). Unfortunately, the scholarship on the matter is far from unanimous. A proper defense for this position would demand a considerable departure from the task at hand. My present interest is simply to underscore the critical, if unsettled, influence of *CPR* in Derridean thought.

Kant's whole investigation is built on the *finitude* of human knowledge (*KB* 14-15). In my reading, there is a parallel between Heidegger's discussion of Death as the simultaneous possibility and impossibility of Dasein—authentic Dasein only appears by grasping its impossibility—and the boundaries Kant draws around experience. The limits of life and knowledge are thematized as the avenue for authentic self-understanding, and its boundaries are what makes it possible for experience to be unified and rational. These limits are composed of aporias that are impossible to solve but endlessly enticing (*CPR* Bxv, A744/B772). As Heidegger understands it, Kant's investigation of finitude, to which *BT* responds, is fundamentally anthropological, and thereby existential. It ties together the question of knowledge (what we can know) to the questions of action and ethics (what we can and ought to do), and also to the questions of desire, dream, and even religion (what we might hope for) (*KB* 144-45; *CPR* A805/B833). To Heidegger, this investigation opens up the path to a fundamental ontology, the question of Being.

It is here where, in my reading, Derrida's departure from Heidegger is most pronounced, which is why I position him closer to Kant and his affirmation of the impossibility of metaphysics. In other words, Derrida makes no move towards understanding "Being," which is partly why he identifies as a historian and not as a metaphysician, even if his work is deeply informed by metaphysics. However, these claims are disputable and ultimately diverge from the present task. My limited aim here is to delineate the problematic[18] genealogical relationship between Kantian transcendental philosophy and Heideggerian existential phenomenology, which Derrida inherits. In this genealogy there is an evident connection between aporias of thought, finitude, and death. The Kantian adventurer was moved to attempt to go beyond the boundaries of experience by a desire for something new, something he could hope for. Derridean deconstruction radicalizes this dynamic by constantly putting into evidence, simultaneously, the desires that move us and the impossibilities that define them. By making epistemological, metaphysical, political, and ethical aporias surface from different discourses, Derrida's many works do not attempt to solve them, but rather give us an occasion to critically affirm these desires by mourning their impossibility. In

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[18] Heidegger has been heavily criticized for inaccurately rendering Kant's ideas, even of "philosophical ventriloquism" (McQuillan 2017, 84). Heidegger himself admitted his misrepresentation of Kant, for example, in the 1973 preface to the fourth edition of the *KB* (1929, xviii).

Circonfession, this is pronounced by a working metaphor of the circle, which in my interpretation is tied to this genealogy. Allow me to continue.

Heidegger is aware that his reasoning and method in *BT* are largely self-authorizing, and he expects the accusation that they are *circular*. He argues that when we interpret something, this interpretation is based on the fact that, somehow, without articulation, we already have a grasp of that which we are interpreting (*BT* 191). In other words, Heidegger argues we already have a fundamental understanding of Being, which he calls "obscured or still unillumined" (*BT* 25); it needs interpretation and articulation. This understanding is revealed to us in the intuitive knowledge that we are "there" (*da,* from *Da-sein*), somewhere in a world we always and already perceive as *ours* and where things *have meaning to us* (*BT* 185). To Heidegger, meaning is a function of the very structure of Dasein, which projects itself spatially and temporally, making sense of everything it cares about (*BT* 191-94, 418-21). Dasein is "ahead-of-itself-already-being-in (a world) as Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world)" (*BT* 375). This means that when Dasein asks about the meaning of Being, Dasein is essentially asking about something that belongs to itself, something it puts in place ahead of itself, something it projects (*BT* 193-94). The fact that Dasein projects meaning into the world shows it already has an unarticulated understanding of it, of itself, and of its own possibilities. This makes the existential analysis of Dasein the only entry-point to the question of Being (*BT* 362). Heidegger *accepts* that his analysis is circular, but not because it is flawed, but because *Dasein's understanding is itself structured as a circle*: Dasein interprets things and articulates these interpretations only on the basis that it has already structured the world according to the unarticulated understanding it possesses (*BT* 194-95, 362).

Heidegger treats the issue of circularity in detail because he anticipates the accusation that he "'presupposed' the idea of existence and of Being in general, and that Dasein gets interpreted 'accordingly', so that the idea of Being may be obtained from it" (*BT* 362). He responds by claiming that those who problematize circularity "on principle" are too caught up in the inauthentic common sense of *das Man* (*BT* 363). He argues that "common sense misunderstands understanding. And *therefore,* common sense must necessarily pass off as 'violent' anything that lies beyond the reach of its understanding, or any attempt to go out so far" (*BT* 363). Ultimately, Heidegger sees no alternatives to circularity. If we investigate the constitution of the kinds of being

that we are without a circle, without projecting something of ourselves and without making presuppositions based on our pre-conceptions, we would be portraying ourselves as objects, and our subjectivity as worldless. Heidegger argues that attempting to do this would not presuppose "too much, but *too little*" (*BT* 363). The interpretation of the constitution of Dasein proposed in *Being and Time* is one in which "that which is to be interpreted *put itself into words for the very first time, so that it may decide of its own accord whether, as the entity which it is, it has that state of Being for which it has been disclosed in the projection with regard to its formal aspects*" (*BT* 362). In other words, circularity is the only way in which an entity may "put itself into words with regard to its Being" (*BT* 363). The implication is that the proof of Heidegger's analysis lies not in its obedience to rules of common sense (or even, formal logic and epistemology), but in our capacity to individually (authentically) follow his work and to relate to what he says. This would be done by repeating his phenomenology of existence in our own contexts, engaging with our experience hermeneutically. This is possible because we ourselves are Dasein, we ourselves are "that which is to be interpreted," "the entity which it is," which can "decide of its own accord." Ultimately, *Being and Time* is a hermeneutics of existence that invites its reader to engage with its circularity by entering it, participating in it, and repeating it in their own context, actively but above all critically, in order to recognize the fundamental structures of their own constitution and articulate them into words. This invitation opens up a relationship where the reader can relate to *BT* similarly to how Heidegger relates to what he calls the history of philosophy: To get past it in order to reach towards the fundamental experience that originates it, without getting caught in its surface.

Chapter II   Deconstruction, *Différance*, and the Trace

Outline of Derridean Deconstruction

Derrida's work and its relationship to the tradition is not a simple repetition of Heideggerian *Destruktion*, but it is contextualized by it. Bennington explains that initially "deconstruction" was a label mostly attributed to Derrida's work by others, and at least by the time of *Derridabase*, it had not been something he presented as a traditional theory or method that stands on its own (DDB 252). Nonetheless, Bennington points to *De La Grammatologie* to explain how Derrida is a "perfected Heidegger" who deconstructs what the German thinker did not (DDB 252-53). My interpretation in this chapter and the next follows this clue. In *DLG*, Derrida tells his reader that in

order to arrive at the level of analysis he is conducting in that book,[19] one must "*passer par* la question de l'être" (*DLG* 36),[20] making direct reference to Heidegger. Two paragraphs later, he provides some helpful qualifications: "Les mouvements de déconstruction ne sollicitent pas les structures du dehors… Opérant nécessairement de l'intérieur, empruntant à la structure ancienne toutes les ressources stratégiques et économiques de la subversion, les lui empruntant structurellement, c'est-à-dire sans pouvoir en isoler des éléments et des atomes, l'entreprise de déconstruction est toujours d'une certaine manière emportée par son propre travail" (*DLG* 37-38).[21] In other words, deconstruction is something that happens in a discourse as a function of its own structure, an extension of its inner logic operating to its limits, to the point of subversion, without making recourse to concepts that are "outside." Of course, he famously goes on to argue in the same text that "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (*DLG* 220),[22] which means that a given text or discourse never escapes textuality or discursivity by reaching into a "real world" that is not already discursively mediated. The insistence that deconstruction happens "inside" is what Bennington calls an avoidance of meta-linguistic or meta-contextual claims, referring to how Derrida does not propose new sets of concepts that are supposed to supplant other sets and work in a closed system, as is customary in philosophy (DDB 248).[23] This is why I do not use words like *khora*, *messianic*, *différance*, *archi-écriture*, *trace*, *pharmakon*, and so on, as insulated concepts that have explicative value on their own. Derrida is always a reader of others (DDB 82), and these words cannot be accurately dissociated from the textual contexts that originated them. They function similarly to inside jokes, which are closely dependent not only on a shared context but also on a shared process of interpretation and sense-making. The meanings of Derrida's famous quasi-concepts are only transferrable by transferring the whole structure of their production.

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[19] To identify what he calls *archi-écriture*: a writing that comes before writing, or how the structure of the way writing is defined in a logocentric tradition can also be applied to how speech is defined, making both writing and speech actualizations of the same structure: the trace. This is clarified later in this same section.

[20] "P*ass by/through* the question of Being."

[21] "The movements of deconstruction do not solicit the structures of/from the outside… Operating necessarily from the inside, lending from the ancient structure all the strategic and economic resources of subversion, lending them structurally, that is to say, without being able to isolate elements and atoms from it, the endeavor/enterprise of deconstruction is always somehow carried by its own work."

[22] "There is no outside-text," also understood as "there is no outside-the-text." The construction "outside-text" is evocative of other constructions like con-text, pre-text, sub-text, and so on., which represent textual dynamics spatially.

[23] For example, ontological and ontic, transcendental and empirical, form and matter, all indicate philosophical terminologies that technically belong to separate closed systems, but their history is defined by as much continuity as discontinuity between them.

The main target of Derridean deconstruction is "presence," that is, the assumption that being, or anything, is ever simply present in a way that is pure, contained, simple, static, and given, that is, ready and open for the understanding of subjects such as us. Deconstruction is an operation that seeks to indicate how this is never the case. Words like being, concepts, and ideas always presuppose something else and are therefore impure, complex, differentiated, dynamic, and generated (Lawlor 2014, 122). Derrida explained deconstruction differently throughout his career, but a few common points remain. First, one identifies a structure. Traditionally, concepts emerge within discourses that are structured in a hierarchy of binaries, implicitly or explicitly making one side of the binary primary and the other secondary. For example, in Plato's *Phaedrus*, speech authentically expresses the soul, while text simply copies or represents speech, and is therefore judged lifeless and untrustworthy (274c-276a). Derridean deconstruction happens when, having identified this binary, one notes that in the structure of the discourse that holds and promotes it, the primary concept is necessitated and guaranteed by the same traits as the secondary concept (Lawlor 2014, 123–24). In *La Pharmacie de Platon* (1972), Derrida points out that the *Phaedrus* calls the knowledge that is inside the soul a writing, with speech being the representation of it (277e-278b). This sets up a working contradiction that somehow holds the discourse together, constituting an aporia of thought (Lawlor 2014, 124–25). Speech is what makes writing possible because writing is a representation of it; simultaneously, speech makes writing impossible because writing always has the potential of misrepresenting the author in its absence; text is unable to re-present, to make the author present, while during speech the speaker is necessarily present (LPP 86-87). Yet, speech is also a representation of memory and knowledge, which are called a writing in the soul. It can also potentially misrepresent the speaker, who may need to correct or rephrase themselves (LPP 119-24). Knowledge, accessible through memory, is the condition of possibility for speech, but the difference between knowledge and actual speech (the sound of words produced with the mouth and structured in meaningful sentences) is also the condition of impossibility for "true" speech. The sophists, for example, are able to recite discourses they do not understand, to represent words without truth (LPP 120-23). As Leonard Lawlor puts it, the condition of possibility of the binary is the differentiated same as the condition of its impossibility (Lawlor 2014, 126).

Deconstruction shows how discourses are often built on limit concepts that escape their own claims of pure rationality. It leads to the experience of aporias, of undecidability, and of the "impossible" (Lawlor 2014, 124–26; Derrida and Caputo 2021, 32). These aporias reveal that the

concepts built on them are not atomized, self-contained wholes given in themselves. Rather, concepts function in discourses as the result of decisions and negotiations that overdetermine the meaning of limit-concepts towards one possibility or another. These decisions are demonstrably unjustifiable in purely logical terms (which is why they are aporetic). They are always grounded on something else (which is why the discourse still functions). For example, the LPP shows how the Platonic opposition between writing and speech is built on a series of metaphors and referents, such as patriarchal control and filial duty, poisons and remedies, and murderous expiation rituals. These oppositions exceed a simple analysis of concepts. What they reveal are political and existential concerns with purity and unmixing (LPP 146-53). Philosophy is never insulated from every other form of discourse (DDB 221). As a practice, vocation, and even social class, philosophy emerges from a culture and society that predates it. Its tools and objects are words. Philosophers may be responsible for and have control over many of these words (Derrida calls them philosophemes[24]), but they cannot help but depend on words they have not created and cannot control (non-philosophemes) (LPP 80). The overdetermination of these words betrays the existential and political desire to establish a control that cannot be had.

By outlining the limits of a discourse, deconstruction reveals that discourse's motivations—the desires that determine it. This process also elicits a desire for something new, for a radical possibility that is nonetheless impossible, at least in the current structure. For example, in *DLG* Derrida expresses a desire for the possibility of an *archi-écriture*,[25] the understanding that writing is a better model for our understanding of language than speech is, and that linguistics[26] could be taken over by a science called grammatology[27] (*DLG* 18, 33-34). At a simple historical level, this desired alternative is impossible because, as far as we know, speech did, indeed, originate before writing. At the level of the discourse, however, a gesture in that direction can be made through Derrida's articulation of the trace, which I outline below. By drawing the limits of a discourse or system of thought, deconstruction simultaneously closes and opens its circle, drawing its

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[24] To my knowledge, Derrida made up this word. It is associated with the words "phoneme" and "grapheme," the first being a unit of voice and the second a unit of text. The idea of a "philosopheme," then, has to do with a unit of philosophy, a word-concept.

[25] "Arch-writing," "arch-scripture," with "arch" carrying the sense of original, first, primal, or even primitive.

[26] The root of this word comes from the Latin word for "tongue."

[27] The etymology of the root of this word is discussed later.

boundaries but also showing that they are not fixed and that the discourse itself is built on a desire for something that goes beyond it.

The deconstructed state of a discourse, where its hierarchies collapse and meaning becomes undecidable, is traditionally not desired. To identify the source or *telos* of that desire is unnecessary, but its effects can be recognized in the maintenance of the discursive hierarchy, which continually subjugates and negates the secondary in order to maintain a system built on the primacy of the primary. The objects of Derrida's deconstructive readings often betray a desire for purity, a desire to assert the primary concept in such a way that the secondary concept is annihilated and no trace of it can be found in the primary concept (DDB 200-201, 211). In Bennington's words, "tout système exclut ou expulse quelque chose qui ne se laisse pas penser dans les termes du système, et se laisse fasciner, aimanter et contrôler par cet exclu, transcendantal de son transcendantal" (DDB 262).[28] This desire seeks to erase or annihilate the contradictions (the impossible, the aporetic) embodied in the secondary concept, but it cannot, because the secondary holds the system together. The only alternative is to control any exposure of the lingering of the secondary since it embodies the threat (or hope) of total collapse (DDB 211). Even in their most coherent forms, a trace of the contradiction at the heart of binaries always remains, and the binary always continues, against all efforts to control it, demonstrably interdependent and aporetic (DDB 131-133). To reiterate, deconstruction never introduces such an aporia from the outside. It works always and already from the inside of the discourse, requiring only exposure. The system deconstructs itself.

Différance

The dissolution of binary hierarchies operated by deconstruction allows for a new understanding of language and thought. This is better understood through the quasi-concepts of *différance* and the trace.

When Derrida writes the grapheme *"différance,"* this gesture has several meanings. One of them emerges from Derrida's engagement with the questions of space and time, inherent in the genealogy outlined above. He questions what lies prior to the division of the two. If both time and space are primarily thought of in terms of presence, that is, the spatial presence of the temporal

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[28] "Every system excludes or expels something which does not let itself be thought within the terms of the system, and lets itself be fascinated, magnetized, and controlled by this excluded term, its transcendental's transcendental." (DDBe 283-84).

present, what is the condition of the possibility of their *presentation*? The way we speak of time and space suggests that there is a pre-temporal or pre-spatial present, but this concept is impossible. Any such presence would be structurally and necessarily never present. This impossible concept of that which cannot be present but is the condition of possibility of presentation is one of the meanings *différance* carries (*Marges,* 6; see Gutting 2014, 75 and Lawlor 2014, 123). It is not something that can be coherently presented or re-presented, it is a paradoxical conception that cannot be called a concept, a thing, an object, not even a structure or anything properly nameable. The grapheme itself is a construction that substitutes an "a" for the "e" in the word "*différence*," a transgression of orthography that attempts to unite both "*différer*" and "*différent*" into a constant process akin to "*résonance*" and "*mouvance*" (*Marges,* 8-9; Gutting 2014, 77–78).[29] This written gesture inscribes a difference in the word for difference that can only be identified through reading (the "a" instead of "e," which are homophones[30] in French). This indicates an inaudible difference between phonemes which, according to Saussure, is the condition of possibility of meaning in language (*Marges,* 5; Gutting 2014, 74). I will return to this below.

Another meaning designated by the word[31] *différance* relates to the economy of desire as outlined by Freud. When the instinct of self-preservation and the pleasure principle are in conflict, pleasure is postponed (deferred, "*différé*") for the sake of reality (*Marges,* 20). In other words, we sometimes deprive ourselves of what we want in order to have it. However, this economy of desire, this experience of self-denial, is also the experience of potential irreparable loss because we may never actually get that which we renounce in order to have. It is an experience of the impossibility of having what we want, an experience of desire that escapes calculation and certainty, which exposes any decision to the radical possibility of the unexpected (*Marges*, 21). This meaning also

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[29] The translations for the French words in this sentence are, in sequence: "difference," "defer," "different," "resonance," and "movement," although the last one might also be translated as "mobility," "business," and "restlessness" ("mouvance" does not have any direct English equivalent, and it is neither quite active nor passive).

[30] It has been my experience among English speakers to hear *différance* pronounced with an emphasis on the "a," or sometimes with a French pronunciation that serves to mark its difference from the English pronunciation of the word difference. This trans-linguistic reception points to an interesting excess in translation efforts that escapes pure conceptuality. In my understanding, an attempt to control this reception would be contradictory to Derrida's reflections on the freedom and autonomy of texts. I am content with pointing out its original context without deriving rules from it.

[31] In *la différance* (1968), Derrida repeatedly calls *différance* a word and a concept, with the qualification that these are necessary provisory terms for something that is neither word nor concept (and not "something," either), but which cannot be spoken of otherwise (*Marges*, 3). Thinking about *différance* elicits an experience of contradiction that Derrida sought to preserve rather than resolve. My use of these terms and of the related terms "meaning," "designation," "sense," and so on, follows the same principle.

approximates *différance*, structurally, to the properly understood unconscious of psychoanalysis, that is, not a presence somehow hidden behind our conscious experience, but rather a temporality that exceeds our experience of time. For example, the traces of a past that never happened and never will, and a future that cannot be produced (*Marges*, 22-23). *Différance* also designates what Derrida identifies as a continuation of Nietzsche's critique of philosophy, namely, the historical indifference of the tradition towards difference, which insists on asserting a sameness built on oppositions, reducing everything and every concept to the "one" (*Marges*, 18). This reduction is precisely what Derrida refuses to iterate when providing all these different senses for *différance*. Rather than a coherent, unified, and rational word-concept, *différance* is a grapheme that elicits a multiplicity of meanings that can only be coherently represented through contradiction, unable to be mastered. Derrida compares the attempt to bring together this multiplicity to the act of tying together a bundle or sheaf (*Marges*, 3).[32] It requires the temporal process of saying one thing, contradicting it, and then saying another, rather than representing it through a perfected definition that can be comprehended in a single instant.

The Trace and Temporality

As Michael Naas (2014, 113–14) points out, Derrida's famous works have always expressed a concern with the thought of death and with mourning, and this is made the most explicit in his treatment of the trace. I now turn to an outline of Derrida's notion of the trace, followed by its relationship to mourning. This prepares the way for an interpretation of *Circonfession* that answers my thesis question. Here, the genealogical relationship of Derrida's thought and the philosophical heritage outlined in the previous chapter is made explicit. This relationship is marked by constant tensions of continuity and discontinuity.

The word "trace" in French is a common word. It refers to any marks, vestiges, and indications that something was present and is now absent: footprints, skid marks, broken twigs, breadcrumbs, etc. However, it is also any mark or impression made by something on something else, as in the verb "tracer," which is to draw (a line or figure) or outline. In Derrida's use, the word trace is intimately linked to "*graphie*," from the Greek "*graphos,*" from which we get words like orthography, photography, pornography, graphic, and so on. It also implies its variant "*gramma,*" from which we get words like grammar and gram (*DLG* 65). These Greek words refer to the act

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[32] The word he uses is "faisceau."

of scratching, carving, or cutting into something, which were the earliest techniques of writing. According to Saussure, words and letters are only identifiable through their difference. *Différance*, underscores that this difference itself is not identifiable through any sound or sign. Derrida radicalizes Saussure's structuralist insight to apply to any identification, differentiation, and representation. To him, anything that is identified is only identified through its differentiation from everything else, but this differentiation is itself not identifiable (DDB 73-74). The trace becomes a post-structuralist radicalization of phenomenology that opens up a new way to approach the structure of experience, time, space, and thought in general. Simultaneously, it is also a contemplation of death and a kind of mourning. These insights are well articulated in *De La Grammatologie.* My interpretation of the trace in this chapter and the next builds on a close reading of pages 91 to 103, where Derrida explains some of these key notions in detail while also showing their entanglement with religious themes.

Traditionally, the meaning of speech is thought to be grounded on the correspondence of a sound heard through the senses to the mental image of that sound, which is mentally attached to a referent. Saussure revolutionized linguistics by drawing attention to how this attachment is done arbitrarily. Another revolutionary insight was that the identity of a given word depends on its distinction—its difference—from all the other words and referents within a given linguistic system and context. That is, the recognition of a word does not depend on the inner properties of the object or the sound. In *DLG*, Derrida pushes this insight by questioning the difference between writing and speech. Traditionally, phonetic writing—which, according to Derrida's examples in *DLG*, is understood in the West as the most developed, efficient, best kind of writing—is seen as a visual image that corresponds to a sound. The sound then corresponds to its mental image, and then to the referent. This system of correspondence depends on a strict differentiation of mental images and sensory experience, namely, the difference between what is internal and external.

The difference between the internal and the external has been problematized by Husserl's theory of intentionality, which finds some parallel in Heidegger's Being-in-the-world, which argues that the experience of an object and the subject's experience of itself are mutually constitutive, or even, a single experience. Derrida joins this insight to Saussure's, radicalizing them into the trace. For instance, I established above that the recognition of meaning that happens in the contrast between different words (such as "bat" and "cat"), which presupposes a relative

knowledge of the totality of a linguistic system, is built on the difference between these words and not on their inner properties. In other words, it is the negative space[33] between bat and cat that helps us differentiate these two words, and not any particular property of either the signs (as if the "b" in "bat" is particularly meaningful compared to the "c" in "cat") or the referents (as if the two animals are in any way connected to these two English words and not their Portuguese or French equivalents). Similarly, Derrida argues that the difference between "l'apparaissant et l'apparaître (entre le 'monde' et le 'vécu') est la condition de toutes les autres différences" (*DLG* 91).[34] What is key to our process of interpreting the world and our experience of it is not the inner properties of our experience or what we call the world, but rather the difference between them. The negative space between the inside and the outside, which is simultaneously neither and both, is what allows for relations of meaning to exist between them. Derrida calls this difference a trace and says that it is the condition of all other traces (*DLG* 91). That is, it is the transcendental condition of possibility for our experience of footprints, skid marks, broken twigs, breadcrumbs, writing, speech, and meaningful imprints—for any and all signs and symbols that indicate presence through absence. A consequence of this is that the trace is "en effet l'origine absolue du sens en général. Ce qui revient à dire, encore une fois, qu'il n'y a pas d'origine absolue du sens en général. **La trace est la différance** qui ouvre l'apparaître et la signification" (*DLG* 91, emphasis added).[35] What Derrida calls the trace is the *condition of the possibility of meaning*.

The trace, here, is the graphic, the imprint, the scratch, the drawing, the marking, that happens between inner and outer experience. It expresses how referential relations are imprinted on sounds, images, patterns, and so on, turning them into universal repeatable idealities (mental representations) that remain nonetheless always singular in each case, necessarily and structurally impossible to rip off from the weave of experience as a whole. This imprinting in general is what Derrida calls *archi-écriture*, the writing before writing, or the trace before the trace. Writing is a

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[33] Negative space is a term used in the visual arts. I use this visual analogy to communicate a sense that Derrida emphasizes by discussing the trace through terms like "espacement," "brisure," and "creux," which translate to "spacing," "breakage," and "cavity" or "hollow" (e.g., DLG 97). These terms evoke the image of the empty space that is shaped by the act of carving, scratching, or cutting, which were the first methods of writing. Such an empty space is named negative space.

[34] "The appearing [that which appears] and the appearance [the act of appearing] (between the 'world' and 'lived experience') is the condition of all other differences."

[35] "In effect the absolute origin of meaning [sense] in general. Which is the same as to say, once again, that there is no absolute origin to meaning [sense] in general. **The trace is the *différance*** that opens appearance and signification."

later historical development than speech, but this does not mean that writing is somehow a lesser form of language to be put in a subordinate hierarchical place in relation to speech. In fact, language in general is structured by traces, by the imprinting that grounds meaning, and this imprinting, which is the structural condition of possibility of writing, happens to also be the structural condition of possibility of speech (*DLG* 91-92). Both have the same origin—although this origin is not a thing, not anything in particular, but simply a trace, something we only ever encounter as an effect (*DLG* 91).

Derrida proceeds to consider the Kantian understanding of time and space (the structures of inner and outer intuition, respectively), pointing out that it is the structure of the trace that allows for the difference between these two to be articulated and to appear differentiated in experience (*DLG* 92). Derrida underscores that "difference is articulation" (*DLG* 92), and that to Saussure, this capacity to articulate and to attach each articulation to distinct significations is the fundamental capacity that is at the foundation of human language. Temporality, by organizing experience into linear chains with identifiable links (yesterday, today, tomorrow), functions thanks to this capacity to articulate discrete links and to imprint them with signification (*DLG* 92-93). However, our phenomenological experience of this process is such that we experience it as if the imprints were "always-already-there" (*DLG* 93),[36] which tempts us to find the origins of these imprints in the past, but there is no origin to be found. The trace is structured with reference to an "absolute past," an orientation towards the past that is simply part of the structure of the trace and not tied to a particular moment of experience. Because of this structure, the experience of the present is always experienced as a trace of a past, both the actual experienced past and the absolute past which has never been a present. Another word for this past-orientation is retention, which Derrida contrasts with protention, the orientation towards the future (*DLG* 93). This is important because the trace is also structured in relation to an absolute future, that is, the present is always constituted as an anticipation, and our experience of traces always give a sense of direction and continuity.

The experience of temporality, through memory, recollection, hopes and anticipation, is far more complex than the traditional understanding of a linear and homogeneous succession of discrete present moments (*DLG* 93-94). Integrating insights from Freudian psychoanalysis,

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[36] "Toujours-déjà-là," a direct reference to Heidegger's repeated "immer schon" throughout *BT*.

Derrida considers a succession of moments A, B, and C. Sometimes we have the experience that a moment X takes the place of a moment A or B, transgressing an objective linearity. I can provide a general outline of what this kind of event looks like without entering the minutia of Freudian theory or Derrida's reading of it, thanks to the work of Andrea Hurst (2008). Hurst explains that Freud was conflicted by how the mind can have a "virgin" experience of sensory perception while also being permanently altered by different experiences, which is the condition of the possibility for memory (2008, 122). Speculating on the neuroscientific knowledge of his period, Freud determines that these two operations are done by different kinds of neurons. The ones that are permanently impacted by experience are the ones that operate the economy of excitement in the organism, registering the intensity of inputs (Hurst 2008, 122–23). They interpret high excitation and tension as unpleasure and offer resistance to it in order to bring relief, which is registered as pleasure. The process through which excitation interacts with and eventually overcomes resistance literally forges traces in the structure of the neuron, creating pathways which serve, for future experiences, as paths of least resistance (Hurst 2008, 123–24). What this means is that new experiences are never simply new. The integration of experiences into the mind, and the process through which they become memory, is always already conditioned by the set of traces that preceded them. Some experiences might be, indeed, intense and particular enough that they carve a whole new pathway, but that pathway is itself inserted in a system of other pathways and therefore conditioned by it. Other experiences, which are relatively similar to previous experiences, follow the paths of least resistance. Connecting this to the issue of linear temporality, one can understand that a new event X might not simply come after W and before Y. X might also reactivate and reinscribe A, simultaneously adding itself to A and adding A to the sequence W-X(A)-Y.[37] In other words, the experience of temporality as traces of absolute past and absolute future is not homogeneous (*DLG* 93-94). Inside that structure, each singular event inscribes and

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[37] An extreme example one can consider are the kinds of flashbacks experienced by people with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. A more mundane but nonetheless salient example is what we metaphorically call a "baggage" carried between relationships. Someone who has learned a set of behaviors and expectations from one relationship, whether good or bad, likely replicates these behaviors and expectations in new relationships. This is true of family and romantic partnerships, but also friendships, professional partnerships, and so on. We rarely, if ever, engage with new situations as if they are wholly new. An even more mundane example would be how we do not usually stop and consider, with awe and confusion, what the large and loud metal objects moving down the street are: We recognize a car, despite their different models, shapes, colors, and so on, because we perceive each of them as the same as something we have seen before, that is, a "car." We move through time by constantly reactivating a past that fits our present, and we expect the present to be the same as the past.

re-inscribes complicated systems of continuities, discontinuities, and repetition, which are not accurately represented by traditional linearity. The bounds of the structure itself, absolutes past and future, are not actual events and therefore not actual bounds, either. Temporality as a whole is nothing but the complex system of traces.

Weaving together insights from linguistics, psychoanalysis, and the philosophical heritage outlined in the previous chapter, Derrida shows that phenomenology cannot yield hyper-objective results (access to the "things themselves"). Instead, phenomenology reveals the trace, which opens up a legitimate questioning of the relationships between objective time, the transcendental structure of temporality, and our understanding of the complicated ways actual humans live their subjective experiences (*DLG* 94).

The Trace and Death

The thought of the trace in *DLG* emerges from an attempt to articulate a phenomenology of writing. This attempt leads to the deconstruction of the traditional representation of time as a succession of present moments, which represents the past as a succession of past presents and the future as a succession of future presents. When we use these words (past, present, future) to mean concise and identifiable units which are identified somehow by their own properties, we are misunderstanding both words and time. Like with words in language, temporality ought not to be understood as defined by the properties of discrete units, but rather by the difference of the negative spaces—negative times—between them. The unspeakable difference between cat and bat implicitly demands a relative knowledge of the English language in general. Analogously, our experience of time is somehow marked by a difference between yesterday, today, and tomorrow, by the difference between my experience of time and the time of the world, and by a sense of future that never arrives and of a past that never was. We do not experience these differences in themselves, we simply experience their trace: time as always-already-differentiated. The condition of possibility for this is what Derrida calls *différance*, which cannot be ever understood as a discrete unit of its own, but rather as the condition of possibility of any distinction (*DLG* 93). The trace is the trace of *différance*, it is *différance*, and it is therefore not something (*DLG* 91, 93). The answer to the thesis question begins to emerge as I consider what it means for the trace to be *différance*, that is, what it means for the condition of possibility of meaning to be the condition of possibility of presentation. However, the word trace has a literality to it that perhaps is not best encapsulated by the word "meaning." What Derrida is articulating is that *the condition of*

possibility of representation (engraving, marking, writing, symbol- and sign- making, reference-making) *is also the condition of possibility of presentation*.

The articulation of the trace could stop here, but Derrida continues to elaborate it by connecting it with both God and death. He defines the act of writing as necessarily the "devenir-absent et le devenir inconscient du sujet" (*DLG* 96).[38] He characterizes this movement as a "spacing," a "dérive" (drift), not quite passive and not quite active, which moves through space and time. He also affirms that the trace "marque le temps mort dans la présence du présent vivant, dans la forme générale de toute présence. Le temps mort est à l'oeuvre" (*DLG* 95).[39] This "dead time" is the equivalent of negative space, it is the negativity that shapes the positivity of temporality. If the presence of the present is understood as "lived experience" (the "vécu"), then the negative space of temporality is dead time, a time that is not alive, the time that never becomes present but makes the present possible. It is another word for *différance*. This contrast between living and dead time allows for Derrida to then articulate the mournful character of writing by saying that "tout graphème est d'essence testamentaire" (*DLG* 96).[40] He also adds that in the movement of the trace—in the drift of spacing—there is "l'économie de la mort,"[41] an economic negotiation of desire in view of death. What does it all mean?

When I write this sentence, two things happen at once. First, the sentence is set free ("emancipated") from my conscious control and becomes independent of it (*DLG* 96). I could have a heart attack and die suddenly, I could be hit by a car between writing sessions, or any number of things could happen to me between the time I wrote it and the time you, reader, reads it. Who knows, perhaps I live a long life, die of old age, and somehow this text is found and read by someone I could never have expected. Regardless of how my death comes, the temporal structure of the act of writing is such that what I write is always free to survive me. The possibility of my death is more constitutive of writing than its actuality, that is, to the reader it does not change much whether I am still alive or not. In that sense, a phenomenology of writing is always a contemplation of death because writing is always meant to survive the author. It invokes the possibility that the

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[38] "Becoming-absent and the becoming unconscious of the subject."
[39] "Marks the dead time in the presence of the living present, in the general form of all presence. The dead time is at work."
[40] "Every grapheme is in essence testamentary."
[41] "The economy of death."

text may be found while I might have been forgotten, leaving the reader without any points of reference through which to understand me. Not just understand the text but *me*. This aspect is important because of the second thing that happens when I write this sentence, namely, that through it, I am affirming something of myself in the world, I am seeking recognition, and even my perpetuation. I want to live forever, surviving through my words which survive me in the memory of others. I want my reader to survive me so I can survive *in their remembrance of me*.[42] I want my words to re-present me in a future that cannot become present to me. In my reading, this relationship to death is in conversation with Heidegger's notion of it but is more radical than his. In Derrida's view, the economy of death that operates in writing—and in the trace generally—is not a matter that depends on a subject that chooses to face it, or even a subject that is passively dragged by it or attempts to avoid it. It is not a moment of vision that individuates the individual away from the collective, allowing for authenticity to emerge. Rather, it is "la constitution même de la subjectivité" which is evident "à tous les niveaux d'organisation de la vie" (*DLG* 96).[43] The testamentary trace is the very constitution of subjectivity, that which makes temporality and any effort for communication both possible and impossible.

Derrida pushes the thought of the trace beyond subjectivity, invoking radical implications to both semiology and epistemology. He argues that the structure of the trace is more than the structure of becoming-absent and becoming-unconscious of an author, that is, of a subject who wrote something. It is also the becoming-absent and becoming-unconscious of the thing or the referent (*DLG* 96). In other words, both subjects and objects are experienced by us as traces. Again, whatever the trace is, it is the condition of the possibility of representation, which is the same as the one for presentation. The trace is a limit-concept that seeks to articulate an explanation—not quite an answer—to the mystery of how is it that we encounter the world as if it has meaning, which precedes any question of whether it actually does or not. How is it that scientific discourse interprets nature as if ruled by laws, which imply a lawgiver (*DLG* 26)? How is it that modern biology's best model for explaining the configuration of proteins in a DNA strand is that of a code, a message, and a language (*LVLM* 166-67, 177)? How is it that we find ourselves judging the

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[42] My gesture at the Christian eucharistic tradition is intentional. It is elicited by Derrida's thoughts on a posthumous work by Louis Marin that deals with the themes of Christian traditions of representation and what they communicate about death, grief, power, presence, and resurrection (CFUFM 191-203).

[43] "The very constitution of subjectivity," "at all levels of organization of life."

legitimacy[44] of practices, beliefs, norms, and identities, based on their proximity to what is original and authentic, filled with a nostalgia towards a mythical time that never existed where we could draw a division between nature, culture, and technique (*DLG* 207, 209-14, 274; *Marges*, 28-29; *LVLM* 331; *VP* 65-67; etc.)? How is it that we encounter the world as if it was ordered by a *logos*? To Derrida, there has been a demonstrable trend in how these questions have been answered throughout the history of Western thought. The structure of this answer, which Derrida calls the metaphysics of presence, is *theological*. Better put, it is onto-theo-teleological. Although we might be distanced from its fully theological expressions and narratives, we continue to carry some of its basic assumptions. In the context of *DLG*, Derrida's main argument is that the modern science of linguistics perpetuates this trend, showing that it has not broken away from theological thought (102). On the other hand, he also acknowledges that the alternative of a new science, something like a grammatology which would break away completely from the old mode of thinking, is itself also impossible. The exit from the system is not its abandonment in favor of an existing alternative (there is none) but rather its deconstruction from the inside, a deconstruction that was already at work from the beginning of its historical articulations (*DLG* 102-103).

What is the constitution of this onto-theo-teleological system? The concept of "ontotheology," the study of God as Being through pure concepts, was first named by Kant (*CPR* A632/B660). It was then and problematized as the basic characterization of Western metaphysics by Heidegger (Heidegger 2002; Halteman 2016). In Derrida's view, it is a mythical logic inherent to the metaphysics of presence that privileges religion as a particularly useful lens through which to understand the history of Western thought because it ties epistemology, metaphysics, theology, and political ideologies into a knot (*DLG* 113). Directly or indirectly, it poses an infinite spirit (God) who creates or maintains the world through the *logos* (*DLG* 100, 102). God and its creation are separated by the fact that one is infinite spirit, while the other is finite. God, as infinite and eternal spirit, is perpetually present to itself, immediately available to itself. The divine *logos* is God's re-presentation: God's thought, reason, language, words, and so on. When God thinks a tree, for example, it is fully present and known to God. For the sake of simplicity, I call this notion of a fully present knowledge of the tree articulated in the mind (of God) *perfect*. It is the perfect, final,

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[44] The etymology of the words "judgement" and "legitimacy" themselves evoke the idea and logic of law, operating according to a metaphor of court proceedings.

or absolute concept, idea, or form of the tree, depending on the particular philosophical context in which this trend is articulated. Each existent tree in creation somehow conforms to that concept, idea, or form, which exists as an accurate universal representation. To Derrida, the scientific and philosophical ideal of achieving perfect understanding of something by formulating a final concept that serves as an accurate universal representation of it replicates this theological picture (DLG 24-26, 101-103). Another important layer of this mytho-theological discourse is how it articulates the relationship between humanity and God in temporal terms by consistently representing the end as a replication of the origin. Things were made according to a perfect concept, and we will achieve that perfect concept; we come from God, and we will return to God (*DLG* 99-100, 102; see also DLG 23-24, 386-388, 398). Both the beginning and the end of history are thought of in terms of a fullness of presence that is immediate within the logos, a parousia, or a "vie sans différance,"[45] that is, life without differentiation and without deferral, eternal life without the possibility of corruption, derivation, or deviation (*DLG* 99). In other words, this theology is both an ontology and a teleology because it shapes the conception of both Being and history in ways that make all three aspects indissociable.

Consider again the example of trees. The word "tree" is a signifier that points to a signified, the articulation of the perfect concept of tree by the divine logos, which, in the mind of God, is not a trace but rather an immediate relation to the perfect idea or concept of tree (*DLG* 102). The opening for deconstruction in this whole structure is that even for the divine mind, somehow, the perfect knowledge of the tree is articulated by a *logos*, which means that it is itself a signifier and not exactly the immediate signified (*DLG* 103). Theologically, there is no necessity as to why God would break the eternal silence of immediate self-knowledge and represent itself to itself through the *logos*. The *logos* is a supplement. The negative space and time between God and the *logos* is impossible to conceive but essential for the theological structure that holds the metaphysics of presence together. In other words, the historical mytho-theological discourse was always already imprinted with the possibility of the thought of the trace, even if the tradition has historically not paid attention to it. Deconstruction was already at work. Derrida argues that the concept of the *logos* as a mental representation that is present, available, and known to the subject—spirit, whether finite or infinite—has been inherited largely uncritically throughout the tradition, from

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[45] "Life without *différance*"

Plato to Hegel (*DLG* 100). This divine *logos* poses the possibility of grounding truth—correspondence between object and concept—on an *immediate* relationship between object and concept that happens in the mind, which spares us from having to resort to the myriad of singular objects in experience, the mesh of traces with its endless reference and deference of signifiers (*DLG* 100). Derrida considers this to be more than a theological bias that can be shaken off. It is a theological structure of thought that permeates Western linguistics, metaphysics, philosophy of science, phenomenology, and even technique, for example with the linearity with which we understand time and language (*DLG* 100-101).

I have stated above that Derrida is attempting to explain, through the thought of the trace as a limit-concept, how it is that we encounter the world as if it has always had meaning. Although onto-theo-teleology provides an answer, deconstruction challenges it and radically redefines its terms: "C'est donc en un certain sens inouï que la parole est dans le monde… Que le logos soit d'abord empreinte et que cette empreinte soit la ressource scripturale du langage, cela signifie, certes, que le logos n'est pas une activité créatrice, l'élément continu et plein de la parole divine, etc." (*DLG* 94-95).[46] We find the *logos* in the world (a formulation that Christians will easily associate with the prologue of the Gospel of John) because our experience of the world is always already structured according to the same principle that structures language itself, but that principle is not a principle, not a *principium*. Derrida specifies that this is not simply another iteration of attempting to solve or restate the question of the "death of God"[47] or a "return to finitude."[48] These formulations—understood in their specific contexts—"appartiennent à l'onto-théologie qu'elles contestent. La différance est aussi autre chose que la finitude" (*DLG* 95).[49] *Différance* and *archi-écriture* are not anything that is ever given, not anything that has ever been or can ever be present. It is not the creative kenosis of a pleroma at the beginning of time to which all things return in *exitus-reditus* fashion. It is not an unarticulated understanding that was covered and forgotten but

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[46] "It is then in a certain unheard-of sense that the word is in the world… That the logos is imprint and that this imprint is the scriptural source of language, it means, certainly, that the logos is not a creative activity, the continuous and whole element of the divine word, etc."

[47] Here, Derrida is referencing trends in 20th century theologies that attempted to rethink Christian faith while integrating, among other things, Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead." In this trend, the works of William Hamilton, Paul Van Buren, and Thomas J. J. Altizer are noteworthy. Unfortunately, a more detailed review of these trends is beyond the scope of this work.

[48] Here, Derrida is referencing the important role of Death in Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian thought.

[49] "Belong to the onto-theology that they contest/challenge. *Différance* is also something other than finitude."

somehow always present. They are just words acting as limit-concepts to attempt to represent something that necessarily cannot ever be (re-)presented. We never experience *différance* as a presence, only traces. *Différance* traces itself (*Marges*, 24-25). It is the impossible and inconceivable structural condition of possibility for identity and difference, for presentation and representation, for our very capacity to imagine discrete units, to think (articulate) metaphysically, and to conceive a divine creativity.

The consequences for traditional Western thought are potentially disastrous. I have hinted at the important onto-theo-teleological metaphor of creation as a book, wherein God is the author of creation, imagined as the book of nature with all its laws (*DLG* 26). According to this metaphor, the world is ruled by laws which correspond to their perfect—fully present and known—articulation by the divine logos. Humans concerned with objective knowledge—whether they are philosophers, scientists, judges, or legislators—have as their mission to read the book of creation carefully and come to understand its text with an understanding that matches the intention of the author. Accordingly, human authors are an analogy of God because they write according to an intention which determines the correct way of reading their texts. Derrida argues that Western ideas of truth as correspondence, representation, linearity, and continuity, resonate with this traditional view.

The thought of the trace attempts to conceive of writing differently, working through the insides of phenomenology and structuralist linguistics while deconstructing them: Instead of perfect concepts and intentions, all we have is the text: "*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*" (*DLG* 220). It is a kind of radical phenomenology that takes Husserl's procedure of bracketing to its limits without attempting to draw the kind of phenomenal structure of a universal transcendental consciousness the way he does. It also integrates Saussure's insight that using a language depends on a distinction between words within a given linguistic system, not on their inner content and not on any point of contact with the "real world." Simultaneously, it challenges the view that the meaning assigned to words through sound is in any way a purer form of language than writing, because both are arbitrary imprints—in a word, both are traces. However, even if these traces are traces of mental imprints, that is, they result from an intention, we have no recourse to any original or foundational moment where we can ground language as a whole. No single individual has

invented language. It is always received from others, always taught, even if later appropriated and changed.

This radicalization of phenomenology through the trace also radicalizes the Heideggerian phenomenology of Death. The human *logos* is never like the divine *logos* because the divine *logos* is eternally present to itself and unchanging, while the human *logos* always uses language in the peculiarity of its historical situation. Finitude pervades writing not only because authors usually have a factually shorter lifespan than their texts, but also because texts are structurally constituted to survive their authors. Writing is always testamentary (*DLG* 96). But this death is not the Heideggerian cut off point of an authentic mortal Dasein from an undying inauthentic representation of it received from *das Man*, which allows for the articulation of an innate self-understanding that had been concealed or forgotten. To Derrida, there is no hidden self-understanding that precedes articulation. There is nothing outside the text, nothing outside the arbitrary imprint of meaning-making and its articulations. There is no point of contact between the world of traces and a supposed world of self-presence and divine or authentic silence. The empirical does not lead us to the purely transcendent, the ontic does not lead us to the purely ontological, and matter does not lead us to pure form. We encounter the kinds of being that we are as a trace of something we call "Being itself," but the trace only leads us to the horizontality of other traces. In the words of Bennington, "toute trace est trace de trace" (DDB 74).[50]

In my reading, the trace becomes a name for the boundaries of experience outlined by Kant: phenomena, "text" in Derrida, is all that we experience. Without any outside to make recourse to, we only understand it in the experience of reading (more). That there is no "outside-text" does not prevent us from imagining objects and ideas, like God or the author's intention, to help us make it all cohere. Indeed, we need to make it cohere precisely because the traces are traces, they are marks of something else, for lack of a better term, inextricably implicit in every appearance, imprinted with the sense that they are related to something "outside" themselves. Instead of present-presences and contained wholes, each trace is always understood in its differential relation to a relative whole. The thought of the trace draws a circle of experience that simultaneously encloses us in it and reaches "outside." However, this hyper-Kantian reflection does not bind Derrida with

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[50] "Every trace is the trace of a trace" (DDBe 75).

any commitment to Kant's transcendental idealism. In fact, it deconstructs it. Bennington explains that the trace deconstructs the whole system of transcendentality because it depends on the hierarchical difference between the transcendental (structural conditions of possibility of experience) and the empirical or immanent. This happens because the trace raises the immanent to the level of being the condition of possibility of the transcendental (a transcendental of the transcendental), making it an ultra-transcendental that contradicts the system and collapses (DDB 248-50). In other words, it is not the ideas and mental objects that make experience cohere. Instead, we only conjure these ideas and mental objects because experience is given to us as a mesh of traces. Furthermore, because traces are always traces of something else (spatially and temporally) without any point of contact that serves to eternally ground their "truth," and because the relationship between traces is never quite linear and never already decided for us (they are encountered as meaningful, but their interpretation is not pre-determined), there is no essential difference in the logic of immanence and transcendence. What this means is that God, the world, freedom, and the self, are names and words **within** the articulation of experience, and not anything external to it. God is not a *regulative* idea, something that belongs "outside" a closed system and that has a claim to govern it from above like a sovereign.[51] Rather, God is a name within the horizontal mesh of traces. God is also a trace of a trace, a word open to interpretation.

Chapter III   God and the Economy of Death

Phenomenology began a dedifferentiation between objectivity and subjectivity by outlining how the experience of objects is always *someone's* experience of an object, that is, objectivity and subjectivity are intrinsically entangled. Deconstruction and the thought of the trace radicalize phenomenology by allowing us to look at the full range of human experience that is normally overlooked by the philosophical and scientific focus on objectivity. It shows how the traditional outlines of the boundaries of experience often depend on the reification an impersonal, undying, ahistorical universal subject that is not anyone (e.g., *VP* 63-64). It makes little sense that in

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[51] I am gesturing at the implied metaphor in Kant's use of the word "regulative" (e.g., *Proleg.* 4:350). The German word he uses, like its English translation, is rooted in the Latin word for government. Kant consistently uses metaphors of state and court to describe the constitution of reason (see Møller 2020; Bennington 2017). Kant lived in the Kingdom of Prussia and had a complicated stance towards the French Revolution and the rise of democracy (see Meckstroth 2015). If the tradition (Kant included) identifies experience with the institutional state, regulations, a sovereign, and discrete boundaries, one can perhaps see the trace as metaphorically reminding us that the diversity and plurivocity of a people is never reduced to official institutions. Derrida engages with the metaphor of the mind and institutions explicitly in a few places, for example in *LVLM* 26-41 and 82-87.

historical attempts to understand the human condition certain kinds of experience have been privileged over others, the treatment of language being a clear example. This is why it is part of deconstruction to destabilize the traditional hierarchy of theoretical and propositional language over against poetry, literature, rhetoric, myths, and even puns and jokes (e.g., LPP 71-72, 76). The trace as the structure of experience does not foreclose but rather makes way for emotions, desires, dreams, hopes, and even religion. This openness to human affectivity allows Derrida to articulate a theme that is central to this investigation: The economy of death. I argue that this economy is motivated by a desire for life, it is the expression of a single operation wherein life constitutes itself through its own condition of impossibility. The constitutive role of death in the experience of life through the trace makes the trace always also an opportunity for *mourning*.

In the text selected from *De la Grammatologie*, Derrida writes that "la subordination de la trace à la présence pleine résumée dans le logos, l'abaissement de l'écriture au-dessous d'une parole rêvant sa plénitude, tels sont les gestes requis par une onto-théologie déterminant le sens archéologique et eschatologique de l'être comme présence, comme parousie, comme vie sans différance: autre nom de la mort, historiale métonymie où le nom de Dieu tient la mort en respect" (*DLG* 99).[52] The name of God is a metonymy of death. A metonymy is a figure of speech where one refers to a thing by using a word usually associated to that thing. A good example is using the word "crown" to refer to the king, queen, or the monarchy (King and King 2002, 105). In effect, Derrida is saying that when the word "God" is used its referent is death. At the same time, the name of God keeps death at bay, which is to say, the word or name "God" is used to name what is desired not to be named: death. Derrida is communicating something more than the Heideggerian or even Kierkegaardian[53] insight that we find creative ways to escape the unbearable anxiety affixed to mortality. What Derrida is pointing out, which is key to this investigation, is that this metonymy is an expression of a dream, the dream "d'une parole rêvant sa plénitude."[54] For present purposes, I pragmatically treat the word dream as a synonym of the word desire, with the caveat

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[52] "The subordination of the trace to the plenitude of presence/whole presence resumed in the logos, the lowering of writing under a word dreaming of its plenitude, these are the gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archaeological sense/meaning of being as presence, as parousia, as life without *différance*: another name of death, a historical metonymy where the name of God keeps the name of death at bay [literally, 'keeps the name of death in respect']".

[53] See, for example, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works *The Concept of Anxiety* (1844) and *The Sickness unto Death* (1849).

[54] "Of a word dreaming its plenitude."

that it is not to be understood as a fully conscious, completely identifiable, mastered desire. Rather, it is a desire that is found only in its expression. Dream is the experience of a desire structured as a trace.

Derrida is deconstructing onto-theo-teleology from its inside, showing us something fundamental about it. Specifically, that onto-theo-teleology expresses an economy of death and that it is motivated. Onto-theo-teleology is a trace of something else, it points to its own conditions of possibility. Everything I have reviewed thus far serves as a rejection of such metaphysics of presence inasmuch as *différance* and the trace do not allow for onto-theo-teleology to have what it wants. But what does it want? Onto-theo-teleology wants to guarantee for itself a principle that organizes and regulates the whole system of truth, knowledge, and history. It wants completeness and total self-transparency: absolute knowledge. It attempts to attain it through the immediacy between creation and the plenitude of presence in the mind of God through the divine logos. Derrida is clear that he has no interest in positive and negative theologies which only perpetuate this system. They fail to escape the structural hierarchy that places the name of God as the regulator of truth and meaning, ordering the rest of experience in a linear or pyramidal fashion. To him, this name of God—that is, the use of the name "God" that perpetuates onto-theo-teleology and its grip on philosophy, science, phenomenology, and so on—is also the name of *indifference*, the name through which hierarchical systems squash any possibility of difference, diversity, or variation (*DLG* 100). This theological name expresses itself in Western thought through political, historical, economical, scientific, and even linguistic forms of hierarchy and domination that flattens the singular and the historical in favor of what is called universal and transcendental. This onto-theo-teleology is what motivates the traditional philosophical rejection of metaphor, of writing, and of representation in general as always suspicious, as always potential usurpations and corruptions of a supposed pure or true original thing (*DLG* 99).

The infinite, immediate, self-contained, and available presence of the present of the divine *logos* is called a "présent vivant" (*DLG* 99).[55] It is life, eternal life, without division, without corruption, without confusion and without end. The same theme is raised in *La Voix et le Phénomène*, where Derrida characterizes phenomenology as a philosophy of *life* because of its

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[55] "Living present."

focus on the living presence of the present, which always treats death and absence as accidental (*VP* 9). It perpetuates the onto-theological metaphysics of presence despite its disavowals of theology (*VP* 119). The deconstruction of these metaphysics, as I have outlined, shows that absence, difference, and deferral are the conditions of possibility of presence inasmuch as they are necessary for "presentation," and also that what is presented always points to a relative totality beyond it that is indefinite but experienced as infinite. This means that the present is never fully present because it always depends on what is not. In other words, "l'apparaître de la différance infinie est lui-même fini. Dès lors, la différance qui n'est rien hors de ce rapport, devient la finitude de la vie comme rapport essentiel à soi comme à sa mort. La différance infinie est finie. On ne peut donc plus penser dans l'opposition de la finité et de l'infinité, de l'absence et de la présence, de la négation et de l'affirmation" (*VP* 120).[56] Here, too, *différance* is connected to a desire because "la 'présentation' est une représentation de la représentation qui s'y désire comme sa naissance ou sa mort" (*VP* 122).[57]

The previous quotations associate *différance* not only with death but also with life and birth. This correspondence between the problem of representation and the constitution of life can be clarified by the observations Derrida makes about the biological concept of life in his seminar *La Vie la Mort*. Life is biologically defined as the capacity of auto-reproduction (*LVLM* 133). He points out that this definition is problematic because auto-reproduction is defined by attaching a redundant "auto-" and a "re-" to "production" without defining what production means (*LVLM* 133-35). Derrida says this redundancy serves to compensate for a lack of definition as scientific discourse attempts to move away from the concept of "creation" (*LVLM* 135-37). The word-concept auto-reproduction indicates a closed and defined identity that produces itself, that repeats itself, but what is observed in nature is that this "itself," the living organism, is never finished and remains open to its environment (*LVLM* 174-75). What is produced? Is it the same as what produces? How do we guarantee the sameness of the same? Or is it an Other? How do the two relate? The problem of auto-reproduction regards not just progeny, but also survival. The perpetuation of a living organism demands the careful reproduction and replacement of its cells.

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[56] "The appearance of infinite *différance* is itself finite. Since then, *différance*, which is nothing outside this relation, becomes the finitude of life as an essential relation to itself as to its death. Infinite *différance* is finite. We can no longer think in the opposition of finitude and infinitude, of absence and presence, of negation and affirmation."
[57] "The 'presentation' is a representation of representation that desires itself in it as its birth or its death."

Biological discourse represents each cell as having an internal kind of predetermination of the extent of its life, a limit that determines its "natural" death through age and exhaustion, which is understood differently than a contingent or accidental death that comes from the "outside" (*LVLM* 147-48). Through a close analysis of how scientific discourse negotiates and redefines the categories of life and death, Derrida proposes that the paradigm of binary oppositions is insufficient to represent what is being studied. In his words, "je ne veux pas en conclure qu'il y a toujours déjà eu de la sexualité ou de la mort ou, selon le simple renversement, qu'il n'y en aura jamais eu encore, mais que si la 'science' ou la 'philosophie' doivent parler de la sexualité ou de la mort, les oppositions (positif/négatif, plus/moins, dedans/dehors), la logique du ou/ou, du et ou du est n'y suffisent plus" (LVLM 153).[58]

To Derrida, life and death are not opposites, but rather they are life/death, a careful economical process where the organism seeks to extend and produce itself (auto-re-production) through constant self-delimitation (*LVLM* 147-49, 152-53, 280-81, 292-93). By connecting these ideas to the previous quotations about the trace and *différance*, we can say that the metaphysics of presence are a historical representation (a discourse) that expresses the desire to present ourselves as complete and finalized, to produce a discrete same that is fully available and mastered (like what we call God). Derrida says this is an auto-affection, a desire to hear oneself speak and then represent that voice as an eternal, self-assured and contained presence of absolute knowledge (*VP* 119). To ground one's presence on one's birth and origin, or at one's death and end, is to ground oneself on the moments of origin and completion, the boundaries of life and death where the extent of life is demarcated and its totality is made discrete. However, at the boundary, one is also not quite fully living. The logic of the economy of death is best articulated by Bennington: "Life as either complete self-enclosure or as complete exposure is just death. So life begins by *dying a little* so as not to just *die immediately*. Some kind or some measure of death protects life from life itself, i.e. from death… [The economy of death is] an originary death constituting life as life in its essential finitude. Metaphysical life/death *mutates* into deconstructive life-death" (2010, 58).

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[58] "I don't want to conclude from this that there has always been sexuality or death or, according to a simple inversion, that there will never have been any [such thing], but that if 'science' or 'philosophy' want to talk about sexuality and death, the oppositions (negative/positive, more/less, inside/outside), the logic of the either/or, of the and or the is no longer suffice."

Derrida clarifies to his readers that deconstruction is not another iteration of the death of God discourse (DLG 95). As debatable as the interpretation of Nietzsche's madman's proclamation is, based on everything so far, we can affirm with some certainty that Derrida does not see God or onto-theo-teleology as something that had a discrete beginning and then a discrete end. Deconstruction challenges precisely the logic of discrete identities and linear temporality. Nonetheless, the theological discourse depends on something that is problematized, if not frustrated, by deconstruction. The onto-theo-teleological metaphysics of presence perpetuate themselves because language is moved by the desire for presence, but deconstruction shows that such presence is necessarily elusive (*DLG* 197-98). We cannot have the kind of presence that onto-theo-teleology dreams of. This allows us to raise the question that follows the madman's proclamation: "How shall we comfort ourselves…?" (Nietzsche 1974, 181). How can we cope with deconstruction, *différance*, and the trace? How do we mourn when death is constitutive of life and there is no life without an economy of death?

The ideal mourning, which is considered successful and healthy by Freud, is one where the logic of auto-reproduction and perpetuation is iterated to completion. In it, the ego integrates the Other that has been lost by nullifying the threat of painful memories to the point of finally forgetting them and moving on, fully assured in the continuity of the same (Bennington 2010, xi–xii; Krell 2000, 14–15). It swallows back the investment it had poured into relationships that can no longer be continued. Deconstruction problematizes successful mourning by bringing its constitutive aporia to the surface and opening the space to question its desirability. To Derrida, mourning becomes an impossible task because the sense of self of the Self is constituted by the Other, the experience of the Other is constituted by the Self, and each memory is a trace of both. The attempt to separate one from the other as if the Self is more original than the Other does not correspond to how memories function. Furthermore, this attempt is an incredible violence to the love and fidelity that constituted the relationship (Krell 2000, 19). A "successful" mourning is no longer mourning because it erases the loss, it becomes a killing, a dysregulation of the economy of death that ends in a deathly excess. Deconstructed mourning,[59] on the other hand, is the

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[59] The secondary literature (e.g., Bennington 2010; Krell 2000) refers to this deconstructed mourning as "half-mourning" ("demi-deuil"), referencing *La Carte Postale* (1979). One mention of it also occurs in *Circon.* 159. Interestingly, the name "demi-deuil" colloquially refers to the *Melanargia galathea* butterflies, known in English as

perpetual work of life/death. It is survival of both the Self and the painful memories of the Other that have defined it. It is the continuous constitution of life through death (*CFUFM* 218; Bennington 2010, xi–xii).

Deconstruction elicits an understanding of mourning as an experience of the impossible that subverts linear temporality. It begins at the moment that love and friendship begin, recalling that inasmuch as we are mortals, we love one another with the awareness that one of us will survive the other (*CFUFM* 197-98). Whenever we affirm that love, we affirm a promise and a debt to mourn the other (*CFUFM* 198). Mourning as a deconstructed affirmation of life as life/death is a work that refuses to end, that refuses to have completed its work and to move on (*CFUFM* 177-79). It does not look for alternatives, even if it desires the end; it continues what it has always done from the beginning, from the inside. It understands that mourning the death of the Other is also mourning one's own death, refusing to assert one's autonomy as an absolute individual that cuts oneself off from the Other permanently (*CFUFM* 199-200).

Much more could be said, but "nous n'aurons jamais le temps" (*CFUFM* 203).[60] To conclude, Derrida's deconstruction of onto-theo-ontology shows how the aporetic, or the impossible, which is another name for death and for God, is constitutive of possibility. This means that the work of deconstruction is like the work of mourning: It is the explicit articulation of the economy of death that constitutes life, the resilient affirmation of how finitude—our own and that of others— constitutes the life that we have even if it deprives us of the life that we desire. These chapters were determined from their beginning to correlate the exposition therein to Derrida's treatment of his religious identity and his relationship with his mother in *Circonfession*. His engagement with religious themes and theology throughout his career is sometimes critical, sometimes favorable, and always deconstructive. I argue that understanding Derrida as attacking religion or attempting to move on, as if trying to kill God or to get over its death, is misdirected. Instead, particularly through *Circonfession*, I understand his work as *mourning God* and *mourning religion*. Due to the entanglement of theology with our systems of thought at large, *Circonfession*'s deconstruction of

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marbled whites. It refers to the insect's black and white coloration. In this thesis, I make the opposite gesture. The mournful Derrida of *CFUFM* and *Circonfession* does treat his deconstructed mourning as something essentially different from mourning as is commonly understood. What is different, unsettling, and problematic, is the Freudian notion of "successful" mourning. Therefore, I only use special language to refer to the problematic notion.
[60] "We will never have the time."

the logics of confession and circumcision exceed the category of the "religious." It enacts a mourning of authenticity (which includes the desire for absolute knowledge) and belonging (which includes the desire for exclusivity and exceptionality that marks distinct communities).

Part Two: *Circonfession* as a Work of Mourning

In the next chapters, my goal is to give examples of how religious identity undergoes deconstruction in *Circonfession*. I begin by introducing the text and my use of the thought of the trace as its hermeneutical key. Next, I connect the question of self-knowledge and authenticity that belong to Heideggerian *Destruktion,* outlined above, to a prevalent theme in the text: the trope of the circle. Afterwards, I weave the question of religious identity with the two main religious references in *Circonfession,* circumcision and confession. These practices correspond, although not exclusively, to Judaism and Christianity. My treatment of the theme of confession builds on Johanna Schumm's productive comparison between Augustine's *Confessiones* and my primary text (2015). I argue that the impossibility of confession articulates the impossibility to have absolute knowledge of oneself and to communicate it to another. As for circumcision, I turn to the work of Sarah Hammerschlag (2010, 202–60). I argue that circumcision expresses a desire for complete and total belonging, for self-mastery and preservation, which is also shown to be ultimately impossible. In *Circonfession*, circumcision becomes another word for the trace. Together, circumcision and the trace show the impossibility of both writing and reading, as the desire for recognition is structurally denied by the trace even as it is constituted by it.

Chapter IV   How to read *Circonfession*: an introduction to the text

In 1990, Bennington and Derrida made an agreement. Bennington would write a systematic and accessible summary of Derrida's philosophy and thought. He would then send this text to Derrida, who would read it and write a response. As per their agreement, Bennington would not be allowed to change his text after reading the response (Bennington and Derrida 1991, 3; 1999, 1). In 1991, both texts were published together in a single volume, titled "Jacques Derrida," in French. An English translation by Bennington himself was published in 1999. The title of Bennington's text is *Derridabase*, and it occupies two thirds of each page of the main section of the volume. *Derridabase* is a portmanteau between Derrida and database. It is structured in an almost encyclopedic fashion, organized by topics that seek to emulate the non-linearity of navigating computer programs. The information is meant to be interconnected but sufficiently segmented into clear, neat sections. The title of Derrida's response is "*CIRCONFESSION, cinquante-neuf périodes et périphrases* écrites dans une sorte de marge intérieure, entre le livre de Geoffrey Bennington et un ouvrage en préparation (janvier 1989-avril 1990)" (Bennington and

Derrida 1991, 5).[61] It is positioned at the bottom third of the pages of the same section that *Derridabase* occupies, as it were, marginalized. The second, last section of the volume is called "*Actes (La loi du genre).*"[62] It is composed of a brief introduction written by Bennington, a list of important events of Derrida's life called "*Curriculum Vitae,*" a selection of pictures, and a bibliography.

Allow me to establish a few points regarding the composition and self-definition of *Circonfession*. Briefly running through the pages of the first part, one notices that it is written in a grey box at the bottom of each page, where the contrast with the white paper is lower, slightly hampering its readability. The presentation of the volume suggests that Bennington's text is the central piece while *Circonfession* is *marginal*. The physical position of *Circonfession* serves the purpose of locating it in the same place where deconstruction operates, namely, the borders, boundaries, limits, and frontiers that constitute discourse. The title of the text is important, and I will discuss it at a later point. The subtitle indicates that there are 59 sections to *Circonfession*. The number 59 appears to correlate to what the text later says is Derrida's age at the time (Circon. 131). These 59 sections are called "periods and periphrases." According to the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française,*[63] a "*périphrase*" is a rhetorical figure of speech that describes when a person attempts to designate something by talking *around* it, by denoting it with other words that evoke it but never explicitly. The sense of this term is very close to the English expression "beating around the bush." The term is rooted in the Greek "*peri,*" which means "around," and "*phrazein,*" which means "to explain" (Académie française 1980b). A "*période,*" on the other hand, is a word used in rhetoric to denote a complex phrase that gives the sense that this phrase is unitary and balanced. This specialized meaning in rhetoric is linked to the primary meaning of the word, which indicates a determinate interval of time (Académie française 1980a).

The idiosyncrasy of *Circonfession* is hard to overstate. To properly address its composition and style, and also to justify my choice to use only the French text, I permit myself a long quotation followed by the official English translation. This is how the text begins:

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[61] "Fifty-nine periods and periphrases *written in a kind of internal margin, between the book of Geoffrey Bennington and a work in preparation* (January 1989 - April 1990)"

[62] "Acts (the law of genre/gender)"

[63] This is the most authoritative dictionary of the French language in France.

Le vocable cru, lui disputer ainsi le cru, comme si d'abord j'aimais à le relancer, et le mot de "relance," le coup de poker n'appartient qu'à ma mère, comme si je tenais à lui pour lui chercher querelle quant à ce que parler cru veut dire, comme si jusqu'au sang je m'acharnais à lui rappeler, car il le sait, *cur confitemur Deo scienti**, ce qui nous est par le cru demandé, le faisant ainsi dans ma langue, l'autre, celle qui depuis toujours me court après, tournant en rond autour de moi, une circonférence qui me lèche d'une flamme et que j'essaie à mon tour de circonvenir, n'ayant jamais aimé que l'impossible, le cru auquel je ne crois pas, et le mot cru laisse affluer en lui par le canal de l'oreille, une veine encore, la foi, la profession de foi ou de la confession, la croyance, la crédulité, comme si je tenais à lui pour lui chercher dispute en opposant un écrit naïf, crédule, qui par quelque transfusion immédiate en appelle à la croyance du lecteur autant qu'à la mienne, depuis ce rêve en moi depuis toujours d'une autre langue, d'une langue toute crue, d'un nom à demi fluide aussi, là, comme le sang, et j'entends ricaner, pauvre vieux, t'en prends pas le chemin, c'est pas demain la veille, tu sauras jamais, la surabondance d'une crue après le passage de laquelle une digue devient belle comme la ruine qu'elle aura toujours au fond d'elle-même emmurée, la cruauté surtout, encore le sang, *cruor*, *Confiteor*, ce que le sang aura été pour moi…
(Circon. 7-8)

The crude word, fight with him in this way over what's crude, as though first of all I liked to raise the stakes, and the expression "raise the stakes" belongs only to my mother, as though I were attached to him so as to look for a fight over what talking crude means, as though I were trying relentlessly, to the point of bloodshed, to remind him, for he knows it, *cur confitemur Deo scienti**, of what is demanded of us by what's crude, doing so thus in my tongue, the other one, the one that has always been running after me, turning in circles around me, a circumference licking me with a flame and that I try in turn to circumvent, having never loved anything but the impossible, the crudeness I don't believe in, and the crude word lets flow into him through the channel of the ear, another vein, faith, profession of faith or confession, belief, credulity, as though I were attached to him just to look for a quarrel by opposing a naïve, credulous piece of writing which by some immediate transfusion calls on the reader's belief as much as my own, from this dream in me, since always, of another language, an entirely crude language, of a half-fluid name too, there, like blood, and I hear them snigger, poor old man, doesn't look likely, not going to happen tomorrow, you'll never know, superabundance of a flood after which a dike becomes beautiful like the ruin it will always have walled up inside it, cruelty above all, blood again, *cuor*, *Confiteor*, what blood will have been for me… (Circum. 3-6).

The bilingual reader will have noticed that Derrida uses the word "cru" several times. "*Cru*" can have two meanings. The first is "raw," in the sense of uncooked, which is how Bennington translates it: crude. The other meaning is a past participle form of "*croire*," the French verb "to believe." In other words, "le cru" means "the raw" but it also means "the believed." By using this word, Derrida is putting in tension, from the very start of *Circonfession*, the undecidability of whether what he is writing serves simply to confirm expectations and reinforce what is believed about him, or, instead, to offer some "real thing," something "raw." It is the problem of auto-reproduction and representation outlined in the previous chapter, the problem of

how to negotiate the difference and the deferral between the re- and -presentation or -production. How to decide that a representation or reproduction is successful, accurate, or faithful? The French text proceeds to use the word "crue," which sounds the same and evokes the other two meanings, but which Bennington translates—correctly—as "flood." It communicates an excess. The word cru, its cognates and homophones are also evoked when Derrida uses the word "cruauté," "croyance," "crédule" and "credulité," which Bennington translates as "cruelty," "belief," "credulous" and "credulity." Bennington's translation is correct. However, it contains two insurmountable problems, which my nearly exclusive use of the French version seeks to remedy. First, it severely hampers the reading experience that the text is seeking to elicit by making decisions on behalf of the reader, such as deciding when "cru" means "crude" as opposed to "believed," denying the reader that choice. It prevents the reader from having the experience of undecidability which the text seeks to provoke. Second, it eclipses the experience of connection and continuities of meaning and imagery which are developed throughout the text, and also of their consequent interruption and lack of containment. It does so by using words like "belief" that has no close cognate or homophone to "crude" the way that "cru" and "croyance" sound so close to a French speaker. By missing on some of the phonetic and semantic clues between words, the translation is unable to indicate to the reader the ways that Derrida is playing with meaning.

The translation is also hurt by not always paying close attention to Derrida's care for etymology, which is often the material of his wordplays and semantic chains. The first phrase calls "cru" a "vocable," which is a word that also exists in English but is not common. Its dictionary meaning is not particularly different than "word," which is Bennington's choice. While the meaning between vocable and word are not very different, etymologically—and to the attentive French reader, this is evident—the word "vocable" is linked to the Latin "*vox*," to "*vocare*," from which English gets "voice" and French gets "voix." Considering that the 1967 books all deal with the relationship between voice and writing, and that it continued to be a theme throughout Derrida's career, it is surprising that Bennington would not translate "Le vocable cru" (the first words of *Circonfession*!) in a way that communicates the radically different meanings it can have, namely, the raw/uncooked vocable/voice, or the vocable/voice/word that is believed. The whole section goes on to discuss the author's dilemma, after reading *Derridabase* and its pretension to have fully systematized his thought, to have to formulate a response that escapes this systematization while knowing, paradoxically, that this surprise is expected, programmed, and prepared for, and that it

fundamentally builds on the system instead of breaking from it. Does the author have anything raw, uncooked, and real, to offer? Or are they fated to only confirm what is already believed? The word "vocable" opens *Circonfession* by evoking the complexity of the deconstruction of the relationship between voice and writing in his previous works, and this deconstruction complicates claims of authorship, as I discuss soon. One must also note that it is not only this first phrase that has such depth, but most of *Circonfession* is written to provoke a constant feeling of undecidability, even of anxiety, in the reader who finds themselves with many different interpretations to the different phrases and the relationships between each of them. In my interpretation, this issue of decidability is an expression of the thought of the trace, which encloses the possibilities of interpretation by denying closure, constantly pointing to other texts while reminding the reader that there is no "outside-text." It is in order to keep all of this salient, and out of respect for the text's own demand for the reader to experience undecidability, that I avoid Bennington's translation and, whenever possible, outline the different polysemic possibilities and etymological associations myself.[64]

The reader will doubtless have noted that *Circonfession* reads much like stream of consciousness writing. Each section[65] is composed of sentences that are extremely longwinded, hardly ever punctuated by a period mark, except at the end of the section. Some sections, such as the first, are one long sentence that spans about four pages. The sentences constantly change voice, moving from the first person to the second, to the third, sometimes singular, sometimes plural. It is difficult to pinpoint singular topics in each section, as they seem to change, sometimes suddenly. It is even more difficult to identify a clear continuity between one section and the next. Nonetheless, by continuing to read, one finds the same places revisited, and specific narratives and themes continued, but without any easily identifiable pattern. Sometimes simply correlating the different phrases within a single section into anything coherent is a challenge. This is usually not because it is non-sense (I doubt there is any non-sense in it), but rather because the possibilities

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[64] *Circonfession* allows us to interpret Bennington's translation as an example that texts take a life of their own and that translation is itself authorship. The English version constitutes something new which is no longer what Derrida wrote between 1990 and 1991, even if it is the same text. Therefore, it contains its own interesting possibilities that can be studied in a separate work. The aporetic relationship between translation and original is yet another iteration of the problem of representation and reproduction thematized by Derrida. The discontinuities I underscored between Derrida and Bennington are not a fault on Bennington's part, but a testament to Derrida's literary skill in producing a text that makes this aporia tangible and vivid.

[65] Throughout this thesis I refer to each of the 59 periphrases and periods as sections, for the sake of brevity.

are overwhelming. The only way the reader is able to move forward through this experience of undecidability is to make decisions for the text. For example, the reader sees words and phrases written without sufficient punctuation to make doubtlessly clear what the subject, verb, direct and indirect objects of a given sentence are, or whether this or that phrase are subordinate to another. There are too many of each of these syntactical elements, so the reader can only make sense of this insufficiently organized textuality by mentally imposing a given syntactical possibility to structure the words and phrases into something meaningful. When personal, possessive, and relative pronouns are used, the reader must choose among a few of the possibilities of what or whom each pronoun applies to. In other words, *Circonfession* elicits an experience of both semantic and syntactical undecidability, both of which are accompanied by a demand for decisions. I say "demand" because these decisions are necessary for the text to be read at all, even if the reader is aware that decisions are functional and not final. In other words, they are necessary for the reader to move from one phrase to the next with the feeling of having made some sense of what is being read. As we move forward, the reader will note that as my analysis attempts to make some of these possibilities evident, it also, in turn, makes my own decisions explicit. Perhaps the reader will note possibilities that I did not or be surprised by the ones I did. *Circonfession* is written in such a way that elicits the experience of a shift in the power dynamic between author and reader. The author forces the readers' hand to decide what is written, but the reader is nonetheless bound by the possibilities of the text itself. My choice to depict this process as forceful, even violent, is based on the text's thematization of circumcision, which I discuss later.

The play of continuity, discontinuity, and undecidability is also enacted through the text's use of quotations, most of which can be categorized into two kinds: The first are quotations in Latin; they are marked by asterisks (*) with a corresponding French translation at the end of the section. These Latin quotations are all from Saint Augustine's *Confessiones*, which I discuss later. The second kind of quotations are marked by quotation marks. When the first of these quotations is used, in section 14, we are told that they pertain to a notebook (Circon. 70). A brief mention at the end of section 13 indicates that the notebook may have begun to be written on December 27, 1976 (Circon. 69). Each subsequent quotation of this kind is also followed by a date. The content of these notebooks seems to fluctuate between journaling—often with very intimate thoughts—and research notes about the practice of circumcision and its historical representations. Above all, these

notes seem to deal with the author's plan, desire, or ambition, to write a book about the name Élie (Elijah) (e.g., Circon. 85): the *Livre d'Élie.*[66]

The *Livre d'Élie* was never published, nor was the notebook. This is important because one recurring theme in *Circonfession* is the question of telling lies, and how the author is lying at the same time as he confesses (e.g., Circon. 108-109, 166). He stresses that a confession is an act of "faire la verité," of making truth, doing truth, which somehow exceeds the traditional notion of truth as the communication of information and the correspondence between words and facts (e.g., Circon. 130, 178, 217). The author writes that they are incapable of not lying (Circon. 166) and reminds us that in order for something to be believed, it must be forged (Circon. 63-64). Although a picture of the supposed notebook—or the first of a number of them, as page 69 suggests—is included in the volume (Circon. 87), the text's continued implication that the author is lying or forging makes it possible for us to consider that the notebook never existed, that it is a forgery of the author, even if that forgery is made to express something "true." By denying the reader any access to the supposed "thing itself," these notebook quotations exemplify the trace and *différance*. They stand as traces that express the fundamental cut between re- and -presentation, inciting the historical distrust towards representation that Derrida problematizes throughout his works.

Derridabase explains that quotations are always a practice of re-writing a text with a new intention in a new context, never a simple repetition (p. 84-85). With this in mind, I have *decided* to read the author's citation/appropriation/forgery of other texts as a part of the text of *Circonfession*. They are a set of traces that are demarcated as belonging to a different temporality, perhaps a different set of desires, intentions, and positions which belong to the multiplicity of different traces the author is confronted with when attempting to write about his identity. Their format indicates that he simultaneously identifies with and dissociates from them. I leave the question of their historicity to others.

The quotations from the notebooks make interesting suggestions regarding the self-definition of the text that connect with what I have described as forcing the reader's hand[67] in making

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[66] "Book of Élie," or "Book of Elijah," if one prefers to highlight the name of the biblical prophet over Derrida's French Jewish name.

[67] I am assuming that the reader is fluent in French and able to read the French edition, which is necessary to have this experience of undecidability that nonetheless demands decisions.

interpretive decisions. Sections 51 and 52, respectively, give what appear to be Derrida's plans for the composition of the *Livre d'Élie*: the notebook says he would write it *"à 4 niveaux de discours… il faudrait sans doute ne pas en rendre la distinction apparente sous une forme typo- ou topographique, d'une phrase à l'autre du même tissue apparemment continu mais selon des critères internes stricts, les 4 souffles devant se passer le relais"* (Circon. 254).[68] That is, the book would be written from different levels of discourse, different perspectives, weaved together in one cloth[69] without clearly apparent distinctions. Previous books by Derrida had principles of selection through which the readers could make sense of the different perspectives and voices in it. Reflecting on this, the notebook says this new book's principle will be *"la circoncision comme retranchement, marque, détermination, exclusion,"*[70] and that this makes the book impossible to write because it is "infinitely late," and it demands a reflection that never ends (Circon. 255). However, as soon as that quotation ends, the author of *Circonfession* affirms: "et je ne m'intéresse, je ne suis intéressé à la sélection ou à l'élection de moi,"[71] as it were, dismissing the plan that has just been quoted. With these passages in mind, I determine—or decide, since there are no guaranteed proofs—a few things about *Circonfession*: (1) *Circonfession* is not the *Livre d' Élie*, but (2) *Circonfession* is written with the *Livre d'Élie* in mind. Therefore, (3) *Circonfession* has shifting breaths, and perhaps there is some system to identifying them, but (4) Derrida did not bother systematizing them. The effort to attempt to establish a system nonetheless would require a luxury of space that eludes us. Therefore, I omit a discussion of it.

Despite the apparent disavowal outlined above, my reading does not abandon the idea that Derrida wrote this text by having in mind that **circumcision** would be the principle through which one would interpret it. The quotations above identify circumcision with the trace by calling it a kind of mark and determination, but it emphasizes the semantic aspect of a cut, an incision, that separates different things. I later elaborate on how the text closely associates the ritual of circumcision with the thought of the trace. Currently, I simply assume the metaphor: the text of *Circonfession*, as it is presented to us, is uncircumcised. It asks the reader to draw lines (make

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[68] "In 4 levels of discourse… it would be necessary without a doubt to not render the distinction apparent in a typo- or topographic form, from one sentence to the other from the same cloth apparently continuous but according to strict internal criteria, the 4 breaths must be passing each other the baton."

[69] The metaphor of texts and cloths from LPP 71-72 seems to be at work.

[70] "Circumcision as (re-)slicing, mark, determination, exclusion."

[71] "And I do not interest myself, I am not interested in the selection or the election of me."

traces) on it, and to cut it, so it can become what it is understood to have always been. Cutting phrases and sentences up in order to decide what *Circonfession* says is the only way to say or write anything coherent about it. This means the intended reading must be "incisive" but also that it will inevitably leave behind a trace. The only way to do this, of course, is to make precise cuts, coherent in themselves, forming a clean circle that allows for the recognition of an identity, the identification of the meaning of what the text is trying to convey about who its author is. These hermeneutics exemplify how *Circonfession* performs the philosophical idea that identity is something that is always a function of a tense and potentially dangerous negotiation, which involves different parties, interests, and decisions. I elaborate on this in the chapter about circumcision.

Circonfession is written from a perspective that follows the deconstruction of the concept of authorship. I do not always equate its "voice" or "author" with Jacques Derrida here. Already noted, the text constantly shifts perspective, making it difficult to identify who the first, second, or even third person are in each section. My attention to this is in response to something Derrida said to John D. Caputo during an interview. In 1994, at a roundtable at Villanova University, Caputo cited a passage from *Circonfession* to ask Derrida about the relationship between his Jewishness and his engagement with both the biblical text and with Augustine's *Confessiones* (Derrida and Caputo 2021, 20). In the passage in question, the text says "je passe à juste titre pour athée" (Circon. 146).[72] Answering Caputo, Derrida asserts that he has "no stable position" with regards to the biblical text, although he can be provoked by it as much as he is by "Plato and others" (Derrida and Caputo 2021, 21). He goes on to affirm that he does not think there is such a thing as "religion," only a series of "tensions, heterogeneity, disruptive volcanos, sometimes texts… which cannot be reduced to an institution, to a corpus, to a system" (Derrida and Caputo 2021, 21). He follows this by speaking of a universal disposition of faith that is implied in every act of human communication, and also of a universal kind of messianic structure that is implied in Abrahamic eschatologies, in revolutionary hopes, and in the human expectation of death (Derrida and Caputo 2021, 21–24). In this framework, he asserts that he is not sure if the events of religious revelation, with Moses, Jesus, Mohammed, and so on, were "absolute events" which might have "revealed these universal possibilities" or if these events of revelation emerged from these universal

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[72] "I rightly pass for an atheist," or "I pass at a just title for an atheist," implying that "atheist" is a "title" and that it is "just."

structures that are, ultimately, "the structure of experience" (Derrida and Caputo 2021, 23–24). In other words, he cannot tell whether something miraculous, special, and ultimately singular happened or happens in religion, or if religions are simply singular but not special expressions of something universal about human experience.

Eight years later, at the 2002 conference "Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments" (Sherwood and Hart 2005a), Caputo once again interviewed Derrida. There, he cites the same passage from *Circonfession* and asks Derrida to clarify what he meant by claiming to be an atheist who prays (Sherwood and Hart 2005b, 28). Derrida answers that, to him, prayer must leave undecided who is being addressed by it if it is to avoid being reduced to an order or command (Sherwood and Hart 2005b, 30–31). Later, Caputo insists on the question of atheism, once again quoting *Circonfession*, and asks Derrida whether "[he] has some doubts about whether [he] really [is] an atheist?", to which Derrida replies, referring to the same quotation, "I am not simply the one who says 'I'" (Sherwood and Hart 2005b, 46). This response is a significant precision, and it is key to my interpretation, because it addresses the composition of the text directly. On a more personal note, he adds:

> Although I confirm that it is right to say that I am an atheist, I can't say, myself, "I am an atheist." It's not a position. I cannot say, "I know what I am: I am this and nothing else." I wouldn't say, "I am an atheist" and I wouldn't say, "I am a believer" either. I find the statement absolutely ridiculous. Who can say, "I am a believer?" Who knows that? Who can affirm and confirm that he or she is a believer? And who can say, "I am an atheist?" (Sherwood and Hart 2005b, 47)

This last quotation exceeds the issue of belief and atheism and raises the problem of self-knowledge. In order to confess atheism, one must first know oneself, but who can claim to do it? This follows closely with his answer about prayer. Derrida affirms that for prayer to be authentic, one needs to not know too surely to whom it is one prays.

I take seriously that *Circonfession* is not written in such a way that one ought to simply square the "I" of the text with the identity of Jacques Derrida. However, during these same interviews, Derrida discusses the content narrated or disclaimed in the book, such as mourning his mother, or the fact she never asked him whether he still believes in God, as if he is the author (which, we know, or at least trust, that he is). What is at stake here is not his authorship, but how his writing performs the deconstruction of our expectations about personal identity, self-knowledge, and authorship. This performativity is the reason why the text constantly shifts perspective, both from

the perspective of the speaker and the addressee. Many of the passages discuss the significance of the act of saying "I" (e.g., Circon. 14-16, 122, 176, 178), which is also a major theme of *La Voix et le Phénomène*. *VP* points out that the word "je" encapsulates the impossibility of the desire for presence in two ways. One way is that while it serves to indicate the speaker, it does it by using a representation (the word itself) that can technically apply to anyone (*VP* 109-111). The second way is that, due to the testamentary structure of writing, when the word "je" is written it can always be read as "je suis mort,"[73] which is itself a sentence literally impossible to write truthfully (*VP* 112-13). It evokes the impossible distance between the speaker who wants to be present and the representation that is supposed to iterate their presence. *Circonfession* exemplifies this complete departure of the author from the text particularly well in the phrase "ici je ne suis, périphérique et de passage, que la série des 59 veuves ou contre-exemplarités de moi"[74] (Circon. 236-37). This phrase can be interpreted as a direct identification of the "je" of the text with *the text itself*, as opposed to its absent author. It is a performance that reminds us that all the trace can give us is the trace itself.

The answer Derrida gave to the question posed by Caputo is a performative act of his philosophy. In *La Pharmacie de Platon*, Derrida criticized and deconstructed the traditional Western conceptual hierarchy that determines the truth of a text, and its value, based on its capacity to represent the conscious intention of the author (LPP 126). Through a filial analogy in Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates decried writing because it cannot answer for itself, and he praised the voice for being the better son of the soul, which can let its father answer for himself (275e-276a). My interpretation of *Circonfession,* and what it suggests about Derrida's career, is that his thoughts about identity are far more than a comment or critique of Western metaphysics or phenomenology, but rather, it is an ethically and politically minded operation that seeks to unveil and address discourses of power that were closely tied to his lived experience. The Platonic discourse portrays the existence of a son that cannot be controlled by his father as an existential threat of parricide (LPP 86-87, 102-103, 168). It negotiates that threat through a mythological logic of purity and contamination that decides what is a legitimate expression of identity and what must be cleansed, a logic that was also applied to real people who were considered undesirable (LPP 148-53). By

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[73] "I," and "I am dead," respectively.
[74] "Here I am not, peripheric and in passing, except the series of 59 widows and counter-exemplarities of me."

writing in undecidable ways, and by refusing to speak on behalf of his text during an interview, one can interpret Derrida to be performing an existential, ethical, and political position that refuses to perpetuate that kind of domination. Instead, Derrida acts as a parent who trusts the freedom and autonomy of their child when he gives Caputo a reply that refers him back to the text: "I am not simply the one who says 'I'" (Sherwood and Hart 2005b, 46). It is in order to honour this that I decided, throughout this thesis, to refer to the "I" in *Circonfession*—and there are likely many different "I"s—sometimes as its "author," sometimes as the text itself (as if prescribing it agency, such as "*Circonfession* states…" or "the text tells us"), or as the "I" or "je" of the text. These performative gestures are made to avoid a strict identity with "Jacques Derrida."

With this overview of the text's form, structure, and self-definition, I proceed towards an exposition of how *Circonfession* exemplifies testamentary writing in its deconstruction of religious identity. I proceed with the awareness of the inherent limitation of my efforts as they attempt to follow a reader and interpreter who himself provided readings of texts, and examples, that often seemed impossible to justify (e.g., *DLG* 141, 222-23, 225).

Chapter V   The Trope of the Circle

The roots *circon-* and *peri-*, present in the title and subtitle of the primary text, are from the Latin and Greek equivalents, respectively, for "around." From the first page, *Circonfession* plays with these terms, forming a trope that can be encountered throughout the whole work: "cur confitemur Deo scienti*, ce qui nous est par le cru demandé, le faisant ainsi dans ma langue, l'autre, celle qui depuis toujours me court après, **tournant en rond autour** de moi, une **circonférence** qui me lèche d'une flamme et que j'essaie à mon tour de **circonvenir**, n'ayant jamais aimé que l'impossible"[75] (Circon. 7, emphasis added). And then soon after,

> je me cherche dans une phrase, oui, je, et depuis une période **circonrévolue** au bout de laquelle je dise je et qui ait la forme enfin, ma langue, une autre, de ce **autour de quoi j'ai tourné**, d'une **périphrase** à l'autre, dont je sais que cela eut lieu mais jamais, selon l'étrange **tournure** de l'événement de rien, le **contournable** ou non qui se rappelle à moi sans avoir eu lieu, je l'appelle **circoncision**, voyez le sang mais aussi ce qui vient, cautérisation, coagulation ou pas, strictement **contenir** l'épanchement de la **circoncision**, l'une, la mienne, la seule, plutôt que **circumnavigation** ou

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[75] "Cur confitemur Deo scienti* [why do we confess what God knows], that which is demanded/asked of us by the '*cru*' [raw, crude, believed], doing it as such in my tongue/language, the other, that which since forever chases me [runs after me], **turning in circles around me**, a **circumference** that licks me of one flame and which I try in my turn to **circumvent**, having never loved but the impossible"

circonférence, bien que l'inoubliable **circoncision** m'ait porté là où j'ai dû me rendre, et *Circonfession* si je veux dire et faire quelque chose d'un aveu sans vérité qui **tourne autour de lui-même**, d'un aveu sans 'hymne' (hymnologie) et sans 'vertu' (arétalogie), **sans arriver à se fermer** sur sa possibilité, descellant délaissant **le cercle ouvert**, errant à la **périphérie**, prégnant le pouls d'une **phrase contournante**, la pulsion du **paragraphe qui ne se circomplète jamais**, aussi longtemps que le sang, ce que j'appelle ainsi et qu'ainsi j'appelle, continue de venir en sa veine (Circon. 14-17, emphasis added).[76] The first passage is the same that I quoted earlier, which opens the book and wherein the idea of the *cru* is presented. Derrida has been confronted with the challenge of answering Geoffrey Bennington. What is the question? The title of the volume they share is "Jacques Derrida." Bennington's work is "*Derridabase*," a database of a systematization of Derrida's thought. What the collective work is trying to assert, precisely, is an answer to the question of who is Jacques Derrida, and what is his thought? Bennington's answer reads like secondary literature about Derrida's thought, framed in between collections of pictures and a quasi-biography, called *Curriculum Vitae*, that summarizes some important points about his life. It is noteworthy that the first point of *Curriculum Vitae* refers to the marriage certificate of Derrida's parents, Aimé Derrida and Georgette Safar, asserting that their Jewish family was in Algeria prior to 1830, which legitimized them as indigenous Jews from Algeria for the purposes of French citizenship (granted in 1875, revoked during the Vichy years, then granted again) (Bennington and Derrida 1991, 299; 1999, 325). Bennington is indicating that Derrida's "life" begins far earlier than his birth. Can Derrida outdo

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[76] "I search me/myself in a phrase, yes, I, and after a **circonrevoluted** period at the end of which I say I and which finally has the form, my tongue/language, an other, of this **around of which I turned**, from a **periphrasis** to the other, about which I know that it had place [/it happened] but never, according to the strange '*tournure*' [as when things 'turn out' a certain way] of the event/happening of nothing, the **contournable** [bypassable, outlinable, sketchable] or not which recalls itself to me without having had place [happening], I call it **circumcision**, see the blood but also what comes, cauterization, coagulation or not ['pas', also meaning 'step'], strictly **contain** the effusion of the **circumcision**, the one, the mine, the only, more so than **circumnavigation** or **circumference**, albeit the unforgettable **circumcision** has carried me there where I ought to arrive/surrender myself, and **circumfession** if I want to say and do something of an avowal without truth that **turns around itself**, of an avowal without 'hymn' (hymnology) and without 'virtue' (arétalogie), **without arriving [managing] to close itself** over its possibility, unsealing leaving-be **the circle open**, erring to the **periphery**, taking the pulse of a **contourning** [bypassing/outlining] **phrase**, the pulsion/drive of **the paragraph which never circompletes itself**, as long as [as much of a long time as] the blood, that which I call as such and which as such I call, continues to come in its vein."

Bennington's answer? Can he show mastery over his own history and his own thoughts, over against this scholar?

I have previously established that the "cru" is simultaneously and undecidedly what is raw and what is believed. What does it mean to be raw? It implies being uncooked, untouched, unaltered—pure, the thing itself. On the other hand, it also means "that which is believed," evoking a layer of alienation or suspicion—It is believed, but is it true? By inscribing this word at the very first phrase, *Circonfession* frames Derrida's answer about himself as a fundamental epistemological problem: What is the difference between the thing itself and what is believed about it? But more importantly, does one know oneself, and can one make oneself known to another? In the tradition of the metaphysics of presence, the ideal form of access to knowledge is immediate or at least linear, like a needle. The text considers this option by attaching the word cru to *cruor*, the Latin for blood (Circon. 8). It goes on to narrate an event where, supposedly, Derrida went for a medical exam, and he had to do a blood test. The imagery of the French is more forceful: "prise de sang," the taking of blood (Circon. 10). In order to take blood, the syringe needs to find the vein. The text describes the syringe as an instrument that ensures access to an invisible passage through which the blood can flow without interruption, as if it was itself the same thing as the vein, as if the needle piercing the vein was not itself an interruption or an intervention on its regular flow. Once the needle is drawn out, a mark of this interruption is left on the arm and an excess of blood continues to flow, if only for a moment (Circon. 10-11). A few phrases later, the procedure of drawing blood and medical examinations in general are depicted as forms of *expression*, that is, they expose the inside, life itself (Circon. 12-13). The text then compares syringes with plumes, the respective instruments of drawing blood and of writing. The text tells us of a dream (a desire) where the plume could work like the syringe, a tool that has direct access to the vein (where blood, life, the raw, the thing itself is) and to which the blood delivers itself without effort (Circon. 13). Is this dream possible? How can we communicate that which we are, unaltered and immediately, to another? In the context of the exchange between Derrida and Bennington, *Circonfession* asks, has Bennington found the vein? (Circon. 14).

After establishing the dream of the perfect syringes which, here, are semantically also plumes, *Circonfession* goes on to deconstruct it. The problem with the syringe is that as soon as the blood is outside of the vein, outside of the body, it dies (Circon. 14). What is extracted is no longer part

of the system that constitutes what is called a living organism. If the *cru* has the ambiguity of the difference between the thing itself and our beliefs, the blood has the ambiguity of life and death. It is life when out of sight, it is death as soon as it becomes visible. Extraction interrupts the economy of death that keeps life *living*. As for the dream, it remains an unattainable desire because the tools of writing are simply not syringes that *extract* the living substance. Rather, writing works through inscriptions, incisions, choices, calculations, imprinting and tapping on a keyboard (Circon. 13). Writing is an invasive process wherein one marks a body, wherein one makes cuts, scratches, or insertions of ink. Even typing on a computer, which is technically only a play of electricity and light, is designed to emulate the process of imprinting or stamping by using buttons which one presses. However, again, not even the syringe is a syringe. Syringes are instruments made to efface themselves by allowing an uninterrupted flow of blood as if they were never there, but this is never the case. There is always an excess. *A trace of the incision is always left behind.*

This reflection on writing and syringes allows for the portrayal of Derrida as Bennington's patient. The latter is attempting to draw blood, to find the vein, and have a look at the inside of the former: To see its life, the raw thing itself, in such a way that it remains pure and unaffected. *Circonfession* is affirming that this process is fundamentally unstable. Bennington might find the vein, but the blood is no longer life the moment it leaves the body; he might find it, but his incision on the body will leave a mark, it will create an excess and it will not be a neat procedure. Or perhaps he may not find it because writing is not extractive and all Bennington is able to do is leave his own imprints on Derrida, cutting him up, dividing him into parts which can be reorganized and calculated. Such would be more a product of Bennington's actions than the raw thing itself of Derrida.[77] The metaphor of the medical exam, meant to save a life, quickly develops into the image of an autopsy where Bennington does with a living body what one can only do with the dead.

The trope of the circle, evident in the passages quoted above, characterizes Derrida's attempt to reply to Bennington and do what Bennington cannot. My example is from the first few sections, but the language of circularity goes on throughout the whole work, as indicated by the title ("*Circon-*"). How can Derrida access himself, the thing itself, any better than Bennington can? Is

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[77] I must add that this is also the only way this thesis is possible, and therefore, impossible.

there a way to avoid the scalpel or syringe, to give an account of oneself that is not invasive and potentially murderous? Can an identity be given without obstruction? Can the inside be revealed without a cut? It is my reading that the structure of the text, characterized by the long quotation above, represents Derrida choosing to answer Bennington through an engagement in circularity. In other words, I draw a connection between the existential hermeneutical circle from Heidegger's *Being and Time* and the circularity constantly evoked in *Circonfession*. The stream of consciousness type of writing in *Circonfession* represents the experience of thoughts, writings, notes, memories, and so on, as they surface during a writing session. Each of these come as traces, and rather than programmatically organizing them, the writer simply lays them out, or at least makes it seem like it. I do not go as far as to claim that the text is not edited, not controlled, and not ruled by some form of intention. This tension itself is constantly raised as the text attests to the impossibility of writing in a way that escapes law and syntax (e.g., Circon. 30, 33-34, 98-99, 122-23, 161, 229). Nonetheless, the style of writing reflects the lack of linearity in the mind and memory, the emergence of contradictory thoughts, the undecided multiplicity of possible connections and associations, and the active negotiation of what it means to answer a question about one's own identity. By refusing to selectively organize it all and construct one coherent answer, *Circonfession* offers us a de-constructed phenomenology of subjective experience.

My reading allows *Circonfession* to stand as an indirect response to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, an attempt to follow the proposal of engagement with the circular hermeneutics of existence. In other words, the trope of circularity enacts Derrida's attempt to engage with his own experience, which, as I have outlined above, Heidegger said is the only kind of proof available to his work. In this schema, *Derridabase* stands as the tradition which Derrida must destroy in order to uncover his own authenticity, and maybe finally resolutely affirm that Bennington was right or wrong. As outlined in the first chapter, the way to do this is to proceed phenomenologically through one's experience and face finitude. The hope or desire is that by having the moment of vision before death[78], the articulation of existence provided by *das Man/*Bennington will be reduced to nothing

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[78] I do not capitalize "Death" here in order to indicate that, while Heidegger wants to preserve a strict boundary between the event of death as a metaphor and "Death" as an important concept in his phenomenology, Derrida makes no effort to preserve that boundary when discussing finitude, mortality, and events of death. In other words, while it might be disputed that Heidegger and Derrida are at all talking about the same thing, it is coherent with Derrida's reading strategies to assume that Derrida is talking about what Heidegger is talking about while also

and everything will appear as uncanny. Derrida would finally have access to his innate, pre-articulated understanding of Being that Dasein shares, which was covered by the tradition. He would get past mediation and enter the immediacy of his own Being-there, finally able to give an authentic answer to the question of who he is.

The key to authenticity, once again, is to face death. There are a few direct and indirect ways in which *Circonfession* portrays the author facing death. The first, and most immediate, is the terminal state and impending death of Derrida's mother, Georgette (Circon. 27). This mourning is chronologically disjointed because she is still alive, but what I have established about both Heideggerian Death and Derrida's own thoughts on death makes this irrelevant. After all, Death is about the experience of the possibility of impossibility, of finitude, and not a discrete event. As we outlined before, Heidegger insists that death is always "mine." This is why *Circonfession* portrays its author as writing "depuis deux imminences apparemment contradictoires, celle de l'écrivain qui craint de mourir avant la fin d'une longue phrase, un point c'est tout, sans signer le contre-exemple, et celle du fils qui, redoutant de la voir mourir avant la fin de l'aveu, pour cette confession promise à la mort, tremble donc aussi de partir avant sa mère" (Circon. 52).[79] To the reader, the author of Circonfession—at least, one of its voices—makes his mother's death about himself (again, as per Heidegger, death is always "mine"). This author is both the writer who is afraid of dying before finishing his long sentence, and the son who is not sure if he will finish his confession before her death, and who is therefore also afraid of dying before her (also on Circon. 102-103). This double anticipation of death is the second explicit facing of death. However, against Heidegger, the author's facing of his own death does not completely individuate him.

Death in *Circonfession* does not reveal one's own presence to be accessed immediately and apart from others. Instead, it shows that self-knowledge is always mediated by traces, and the traces always lead to other traces. The gap between presentation and re-presentation is insurmountable. It also shows that the encounter with death is not one where the self is cut off from others, but rather where the self's relationship to the other is shown to be inextricable from

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making no commitments to the ways Heidegger chooses to talk about it. Derrida takes the metaphors in Heidegger's concepts seriously. This does not subtract meaning from them but rather opens them to new possibilities.

[79] "After two imminences apparently contradictory, that of the writer who is afraid of dying before a long phrase, a point [period ('.')] is everything, without signing the counter-example, and that of the son who, doubting seeing her die before the avowal, for this confession promised for death, trembles therefore also from departing before his mother"

self-understanding. For example, in the same section as above, the author goes on to reflect on how his experience of grief is entangled with that of his mother. He is marked by (there is a trace of) the experience of loss his mother experienced around his birth, when she lost one son, Paul Moïse, one year before Jacques' birth, and then another son, Norbert Pinhas, who was two years old when Jacques was ten (Circon. 52-53). The memory of her grief for his brothers was formative of his own experience of grief, but also of selfhood. In between two lost sons, he always felt like a substitute or a twin of the one who died before he was born (Circon. 131, 256-57) and guilty for the one who died after (Circon. 230, 274). From an early age he felt his life carried the trace of those who were gone. One way this was felt particularly was seeing the amount of distress his mother showed whenever he was sick, as if the memory of their loss left a trace that was reactivated whenever she faced the possibility of his death (Circon. 113). This was so formative that, near the end of the text, we read a reminiscence that suggests young Jacques would often pretend to be sick as a child because this would guarantee he could spend time with his mother (Circon. 250). His own present experience of grief is defined by the trace her grief left on him. He learned to fear his own death because she feared his, to the point that the text says her fear was *his* (Circon. 53, 196-97). Thinking the experience of grief through the trace shows that individuation and authenticity depends on a claim of "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*), of property, that is not in fact necessarily part of the experience of grief or death. Against Heidegger,[80] *Circonfession* portrays the experience of death as one that is shared and precludes the decision of what belongs to the Self or to the Other.

One way that death is also faced in *Circonfession* is through writing. The testamentary structure of writing is radicalized and imprinted with religious overtones as the author writes "J'aurai toujours été eschatologique, si on peut le dire, à l'extrême, je suis le dernier des eschatologistes" (Circon. 74).[81] Eschatology gets clarified as keeping the end in mind but also as the mark or symbol of the author's "genealogy," which has to do with birth and beginnings (Circon. 74). "J'aurai… été" is *futur antérieur*. This verb tense speaks about the future from the perspective of a further future from which the first future is already past. It evokes the testamentary or even posthumous

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[80] This suggests a possible continuity between Immanuel Levinas's famous critique of Heidegger and Derrida's, which is best left for another occasion.

[81] "I will always have been eschatological, if we can say so, to the extreme, I am the last of the eschatologists."

orientation of the author. It connotes the perspective of the readers who will judge him, as we do now, after his death. Later one reads the following:

> et le dernier des Juifs que je suis encore ne fait rien d'autre ici que détruire le monde sous prétexte de faire la vérité, mais aussi bien l'intense rapport à la survivance qu'est l'écriture n'est pas tendu par le désir que quelque chose reste après moi, puisque je ne serai plus là pour en jouir un mot, là où il s'agit plutôt, en produisant ces restes et donc les témoins de mon absence radicale, de vivre aujourd'hui, ici maintenant, cette mort de moi, par exemple, le contre-exemple même qui me révèle enfin la vérité du monde tel qu'il est, lui-même, c'est-à-dire sans moi, et de jouir d'autant plus intensément de cette lumière que je fais par l'expérimentation présente de ma survie possible, c'est-à-dire de la mort absolue (Circon. 178-79).[82]

This extract establishes important links to my interpretation. It gives an explicit account of facing death, which evokes the Heideggerian paradigm, but here this is done indirectly through the experience of writing. The author acknowledges that writing might be done for the desire of survival, but in this case, it is done for the desire of his own death or radical absence. Importantly, this desire is for this radical absence and absolute death to be *lived*, today. The experience of death is itself impossible, but the experience of facing death is constitutive of life. To him, texts are like witnesses of a "moi," a self, which are also the condition of possibility of the complete absence of this "moi." Like any witness, their reliability can always be in question. In his current state of anticipation of his mother's death, his "survival" is, paradoxically, an "absolute death."

The language of absolute death and eschatology echoes what Derrida wrote many years later in the introduction to the collection *Chaque Fois Unique, La Fin du Monde*: "la mort de l'autre, non seulement mais surtout si on l'aime, n'annonce pas une absence, une disparition, la fin de telle ou telle vie, à savoir la possibilité pour un monde (toujours unique) d'apparaître à *tel* vivant. La mort déclare chaque fois *la fin du monde en totalité*, la fin de tout monde possible, et *chaque fois la fin du monde comme totalité unique, donc irremplaçable et donc infinie*" (*CFUFM* 9).[83] This

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[82] "And the last of the Jews that I am still does not do anything here other than destroy the world under the pretext of doing the truth, but also just as well the intense relation to 'survivance' [in the sense of a middle-passive kind of survival, or survival as a process] which is writing is not held by the desire of having something that will remain after me, since I will no longer be there to enjoy a word of it, there where the matter is rather, in producing these remains and therefore these witnesses of my radical absence, of living today, here now, this death of me, for example, the counter-example which reveals to me finally the truth of the world as it is, itself, that is without me, and to enjoy finally even more of this light that I make by the present experimentation of my survival possible, that is of absolute death"

[83] "The death of the other, not only but above all if we love them, does not announce an absence, a disappearance, the end of this or that life, that is, the possibility for a world (always unique) to appear to *this* [or *such*] living being.

quotation elucidates the notion of eschatological writing, and the claim that *Circonfession* enacts a desire to destroy the world: Death is the end of the world. The death that Derrida keeps in sight is not only his possible death, and the world that ends with death is not only his world. Rather, if the word "world" refers to the mesh of traces which, as I have outlined, are always singular but meaningful through their difference in relation to a relative totality, and if the trace precludes the negotiation and decision of what is mine or another's, then each erasure, each loss, each forgetting, each death, is an irreparable change to the whole world.

I have argued that Derrida's attempt to answer the question of his identity—we might add, the identification of his thought with his person—attempts to follow the Heideggerian path of authenticity, but this path is deconstructed by the thought of the trace. Rather than knowing himself through an immediate relation to himself as finite, *Circonfession* portrays its author's experience of thoughts, memories, feelings, and so on, as a complex weave of traces that are open to a multiplicity of possible determinations undecided beforehand. Among these determinations is that of property, the decision of whether a life and a death belong to the Self or to the Other. To Derrida, affectively and structurally, each death is the end of the whole world. The universal is never left unaffected by singularity as if it were simply accidental. As I turn to the more explicit treatments of religion, I would like to emphasize that in the quotations above the author characterizes himself as the "last of the Jews," and that this parallels "the last of the eschatologists." He does this as he "makes truth," the text of *Circonfession* itself, a kind of "confession," which he is afraid of not finishing before his mother dies. These points are elaborated in the next sections, where we interpret the issue of confession and circumcision.

Chapter VI   Confession: Self-Knowledge and Augustine's *Confessiones*

There are two usual meanings for the word "confession" in Christian thought, both of which are thought of primarily as *speech acts*.[84] The first is synonymous with "creed," for example, as in the expression "confession of faith," or in the categorization of institutions and practices as "confessional." It indicates a proclaimed allegiance to an identifiable set of beliefs, tradition, or practice. The second meaning of confession is the act that is institutionalized as a sacrament in the

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Death declares each time *the end of the world in [its] totality*, the end of every possible world, and *each time the end of the world as unique totality, therefore irreplaceable and therefore infinite*."

[84] Johanna Schumm uses this language. I point this out only to underscore that the discourse about confession associates it with the voice and with speech, not with writing. I return to this later.

Catholic church but also practiced in more or less formal ways in different Christian traditions: verbalizing one's sins, privately or in public, to someone who will hear you and then pronounce you forgiven. Whether the addressee is the injured party, a priest, or God directly in private prayer, the Christian assumption behind the practice is that God is always the ultimate witness. In *Circonfession*, confession is also a reference to Augustine's *Confessiones*, which are quoted extensively. Augustine's text weaves the two meanings of confession together by giving accounts of his sins while narrating the story of his conversion, that is, his emotional and intellectual process of adopting the Christian creed. Derrida's mournful deconstruction of religious identity is evident, among other things, in his treatment of both the form and content of Augustine's text. To show this, I make recourse to the analysis by Johanna Schumm (2015).[85]

Circonfession draws many points in common between Derrida and Augustine (Schumm 2015, 730). Both were born in what is now Algeria, under the rule of a foreign empire, where they eventually moved to and had a successful career. Derrida was born on street "Saint Augustin," in Algiers (Circon. 123-24, 256-57), and he remembers passing by a street with the same name in Paris (Circon. 123-24). Both texts depict their authors mourning their respective mothers, Monica and Georgette. Many parts of *Circonfession* were written in, or close to, Santa Monica, the American city named after Augustine's mother (Circon. 21, 216, 241, 255-56, 286). Both their mothers moved to the colonizer's country, modern Italy and France, respectively, to die far from home but close to their sons (Circon. 21, 102-103, 150-52, 241). Finally, both mothers are invested in the religious identity of their sons (Circon. 145-46; *Confessiones* IX, ix, 19-22). These commonalities allow for a tense identification between the two thinkers.

Many of the commonalities between Derrida and Augustine seem arbitrary and coincidental, however, hermeneutically they allow for a meaningful contrast to emerge: "non que j'ose lier ce qu'il [Augustin] dit de la confession avec la mort de nos mères respectives, je n'écris pas sur sainte Georgette, le nom de ma mère, que son frère appelait parfois Geo, ni sur sainte Esther, son nom sacré, l'inusable… car ma mère ne fut pas une sainte, pas catholique en tout cas, mais ce que ces deux femmes eurent en commun, c'est que Santa Monica, le nom du lieu californien près duquel j'écris, finit aussi ses jours, comme le fera ma mère, de l'autre côté de la Méditerranée, loin de sa

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[85] This 2015 article follows her 2013 book on the same topic, available only in German.

terre"[86] (Circon. 20). Georgette is not Christian, not Catholic, but Jewish. The association between the two mothers (and therefore between the two sons) serves to underscore their differences. Schumm interprets this as "a dedifferentiation of the Jewish and the Christian [which] emphasizes the fluency of their historic and systematic borders" (2015, 732). My analysis reads the relationship between the two as more complicated than "dedifferentiation" might imply. The thought of the trace and deconstruction do not allow for either discrete and atomized essences to be identified (Christian and Jewish as separate things) nor for a total flattening of differences that affirms some fundamental or basic identity. Each point of connection is singular, but they are all meaningfully connected by their differences. In the quotation above, what ties the two mothers together is their imminent death away from their homeland. The connection to land is subtly underscored in the text as it tells us that Georgette is also called Geo (earth, in Greek) and as it names Augustine's mother Santa Monica, the English name of an American place, instead of her French name *Monique*. The geographical references throughout the text quietly tell the story of two sons who mourn death and distance from their mothers. The contrast between the two texts allows for the sharp differences between a mourning structured by onto-theology and a mourning structured by the deconstruction of onto-theology to emerge, while nonetheless showing that mourning itself is an "inside" through which deconstruction happens in theological discourse.

Both texts are literary productions that emulate the practice of confession as a speech act that addresses someone. *Confessiones* is written as a prayer that explicitly addresses God while reflecting back on the author and his memories. However, considering that Augustine was a master of rhetoric and not a naïve writer, one must interpret this supposedly private exchange between himself and God as something intentionally public, something open for readers to read, learn from, and imitate (Schumm 2015, 733). *Circonfession* uses the same rhetorical device, including quotations from Augustine, but it deconstructs the performed certainty that the addressee is the Christian God by replacing it with the undecidability of a diversity of different addressees

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[86] "Not that I dare to connect what he [Augustine] says of confession with the death of our respective mothers, I do not write about/on/over saint Georgette, the name of my mother, whom her brother called sometimes Geo, neither about/on/over saint Esther, her sacred name, the unusable… because my mother was not a saint, not catholic in any way ['not catholic' is a French expression to denote deviance and disrespect for norms], but what these two women would have had in common, is that Santa Monica, the name of the Californian place close to which I am writing, also ended her days, as my mother will, on the other side of the Mediterranean, away from her land."

(Schumm 2015, 733). Whenever the author refers to "vous"[87] or "tu,"[88] the reader is free to associate those words with different referents. One such referent is Geoffrey Bennington. As I outlined above, the express purpose of *Derridabase* is to systematize Derrida's thought, to formalize knowledge of it and thereby show mastery over it.[89] In this immediate context, it is reasonable to assume the addressee of *Circonfession* to be Bennington, sometimes addressed as "Geoff," but mostly as "G." However, as Schumm notes, the references to Bennington are usually in the third person, while the second person is more often directed at "an unspecific "vous" with which the reader can easily identify" (2015, 733). This is a reversal from Augustine's writing, who prioritizes God.

In the first part of this thesis, I have explained that the deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence deprioritizes the word-concept "God," demoting it from its role at the top of the conceptual hierarchy and inscribing it in the endless chain of referrals of the trace. Derrida plays with this de-prioritization by ironically identifying Geoffrey Bennington with God when he writes "G. qui a toujours raison, comme Dieu"[90] (Circon 187; Schumm 2015, 733). This inscribes *Derridabase* in the tradition of onto-theology.[91] It associates the quest for a systematization of thought that would be *complete* and then *recognized* and *authorized* by Jacques Derrida as its *original source*, with the notion of God as *absolute knowledge*. The entanglement between knowledge, self-knowledge, and theology, is explicit in Augustine's work. *Confessiones* is a profoundly intense meditation on the nature of subjectivity, on the reliability of memory, and on the limits of language and sensible experience. Augustine is deeply troubled by these issues because, to him, human existence is ruled by a desire for God. He asks God, "you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you… But who calls upon you when he does not know you?" (*Confessiones* I.i.1; Augustine 2008, 3). He is driven by an inescapable desire, a desire directed towards something he does not know. In a way, it is a desire to know that which is desired.[92] In his discourse, this desire is intrinsically directed towards death: "What are you to me?

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[87] "You" in the plural form, but also used to address a single person while demonstrating deference.
[88] "You" in the singular form. It is the word used to address God in the translation Derrida uses for *Confessiones*.
[89] This is also the intent of a master's thesis, albeit with a far more limited scope.
[90] "G. who always has reason, like God." To "have reason," in French, is equivalent to "being right."
[91] I am not making a claim about *Derridabase* itself, but rather about how *Circonfession* treats it.
[92] The tension between desire for God and lack of knowledge of him becomes the basis for an aporia of desire in book X: "[Augustine considers] different possible models of things that we are able to search for, because they are in

Have mercy so that I may find words… Do not hide your face from me (cf. Ps. 26:9). Lest I die, let me die so that I may see it" (*Confessiones* I.v.5; Augustine 2008, 5). Henry Chadwick points out that this evocation of death is probably an implicit reference to Exodus 33:20, where God tells Moses that no one can see God's face and live (2008, 5). The economy of death is at work. The heart desires to see God, but it does not know what God is and does not have words to express this desire; not seeing God would be death, and seeing God would also be death.

Despite the supposed lack of words to articulate it, or that the vision of God is death or that the soul cannot comprehend God, the whole premise of *Confessiones* is that Augustine found or was found by God. At the climax of the book, he recognizes that God was inside him all along, and also inside all of the things he always admired but was unable to recognize until his conversion (*Confessiones*, X.xxvii.38). This lack of recognition is possible because there is an insurmountable gap between spatio-temporal sensible experience and transcendental eternity, as it becomes clear in his summary of a conversation he had with his mother during her last hours:

> Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved beyond them so as to attain the region of inexhaustible abundance where… life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being, both things which were and which will be… In this wisdom there is no past and future, but only being, since it is eternal. [After this brief moment of touching eternity through a] total concentration of the heart, [the two of us fell back] to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending. But what is to be compared with your word, Lord of our lives? It dwells in you without growing old and gives renewal to all things (*Confessiones* IX.x.24; Augustine 2008, 171).

Augustine held to a strict dualism between spirit and matter, with spirit being the original and superior while matter is accidental and subordinate.[93] To him, sensible experience is a shadow of spiritual things, which are true and not illusory. The soul and God are spirit, but knowledge of the two is only possible through the mediation of sensible experience. When he realizes that God is inside him, it is as if the structure of the mediation between soul, sensible world, and God is folded.

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one way or another present in our memory, and then shows how all of these models break down when applied to the case of God" (Menn 2014, 86).

[93] It is important to note that Augustine's dualism rejected the aspect of Platonic dualism that moralized the difference between spirit and matter. Augustine's many works insist that matter, and all being, are essentially good. For example, see *Confessiones* XII.iv.6-ix.11 and *Civitate Dei Contra Paganos* XII.6-7, 11, 13.

At that moment, he experiences creation as a kind of mirror that shows the all-knowing God is inside the soul who is searching, making itself available to it by being inside it immediately.[94]

In *Circonfession,* the author refers to Augustine as sA: Saint-Augustine. He also plays with that acronym by turning it into "Savoir Absolu": Absolute Knowledge (Circon. 54). This absolute knowledge refers to the immediacy of God's knowledge of his creation and of himself, the total presence and availability to itself that has historically been part of the concept of God and the divine *logos* in Western thought since antiquity but particularly in Christianity. This absolute knowledge is also how *Circonfession* characterizes *Derridabase*, calling it a "théologiciel capable du savoir absolu d'une série non-finie d'événements" (Circon. 30).[95] In other words, sA is saint Augustine but also savoir Absolu which is *Derridabase*. By calling saint Augustine savoir Absolu, *Circonfession* is pointing out the implication that if Augustine was able to recognize God as being inside him all along, he is in some way or another claiming to be in the epistemological position where this recognition was possible. To Augustine, knowledge of God is also the condition of possibility of self-knowledge, as he attests that he has no certain knowledge of himself and of his own intentions, but he trusts that God, who is inside him, is closer to him and has more knowledge of him than he himself has (*Confessiones* X.xxxvii.62). He believes, of course, that conversion is a miracle, operated through the mysterious and boundless power of God. Nonetheless, this miracle gives Augustine the access to know God, Absolute Knowledge. Logically, this means Augustine has Absolute Knowledge himself. However, Augustine cannot make this claim since it is dissonant with the insurmountable gap between the spatio-temporal and the eternal. By making it in his place,

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[94] There is an important parallel here between Augustine's moment of vision and the Heideggerian moment of vision. Both serve as ways in which one gets past mediation into an immediacy of self-knowledge, which to Augustine enables a right relationship with God, while to Heidegger it enables an authentic understanding of one's being and therefore of Being, which he knew is another historical name for God. For a detailed treatment of Heidegger's engagement with Augustinian theology, see Coyne (2015).

[95] The word "théologiciel" is a difficult noun to translate. I shall use the neologism "theologicial," approaching it to the word "logician" but structured like "material" (both a noun and an adjective, like the French "materiel"). "Logiciel" is the French equivalent for "software," used to refer to computer programs. It is derived from "logic" and refers to a set of data and instructions that can execute specific tasks. By making it a "théologiciel," Derrida is tying together the word theology—the study of God—with "logiciel," making it a set of data and instructions that can operate a specific task that is either divine, about God, or from God. The whole sentence reads "theologicial capable of absolute knowledge of a non-finite series of events." Does it mean that G. is in the position of God, writing laws that contain the totality of knowledge? Is *Derridabase* itself divine knowledge? Is *Derridabase* the perfection of theology, telling us something about God even if the history of theology and religion is not over? Or is Derrida God, and *Derridabase* gives us the perfected knowledge of him? These possibilities are left open.

Circonfession underscores how the Augustinian question of self-knowledge through God constitutes an aporia.

To Augustine, the aporia is avoided[96] through a complex operation. God and his soul are infinitely apart, but Augustine becomes able to gain knowledge of God and knowledge of himself thanks to the perfect mediation of Jesus, who is the incarnation of the divine *logos*, immediately God and man, able to relate to both (*Confessiones*, X.xlii.67). The divine logos becomes the site of the immediacy of presence where absolute knowledge is possible, and it serves as the ground of meaning for all of creation. This is an explicit articulation of the fundamental assumptions of the onto-theo-teleology previously outlined in Christian terms. Despite his close identification with the most influential Christian theologian of the Western tradition, Derrida's text is not a confession of Christianity. Deconstruction reminds us that the immediacy of God as the condition of the possibility of knowledge of God is inevitably also what makes knowledge of God impossible to prove, if not to have. Furthermore, Augustine's debasement of spatio-temporality and language raises an inevitable problem. We are to believe in Augustine's incapacity to know God, to know himself, and to articulate it accurately, while also trusting Augustine's account about God and his claim that God has the power to make himself known. As Augustine tells us, language is temporal while eternity is not, yet he nonetheless trusts that his reader will trust his language when he writes about eternity. This sets the reader at a similar position towards *Confessiones* as towards *Being and Time*, wherein the only kind of proof is to engage in circularity. I can believe what Augustine says about God if fundamentally, somehow, I already agree with him and know what he says. The only proof of immediate access is by having immediate access. Augustine's aporetic use of language exemplifies what John Caputo's says about negative theology: Despite all its disavowals about the insufficiency of language and unknowability of God, it will still fundamentally assert the canons of orthodoxy when pressed by the inquisition (1997, 10–11). "Way down deep, negative theologians know what they are talking about" (1997, 11).

I have argued above that deconstruction cannot be reduced to a negation. It is an affirmation of both the limits and the desires directed at those limits. This becomes evident in how

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[96] This avoidance is not necessarily successful at a logical level since it substitutes the problem of knowing God with the problem of knowing Christ, and recognizing Christ as Christ, which once again demands divine knowledge. However, theologically, this move is sufficient for Augustine and for the Christian tradition inasmuch as an aporia can be called a mystery.

Circonfession's deconstructive writing circumvents the commitments of Augustine's theology while nonetheless making use of the structure of his search for authentic knowledge of both himself and the Other. The Self seeks knowledge of itself through an Other who already has it, and this Other elicits the experience of being fully known and accepted to the Self, which the Self desires but cannot comprehend. In Augustine's words, "[m]ay I know you, who know me. May I 'know as I also am known'" (*Confessiones* X.i.1; Augustine 2008, 179). This is the structure that allows the chain Saint Augustine-Savoir Absolu-*Derridabase* to open to the next link: Georgette. After all, Georgette is also a "G.", "qui a toujours raison, comme Dieu" (Circon. 187).[97] This link is further emphasized as "savoir absolu" is defined as a "figure théologicielle ou maternelle" (Circon. 47),[98] and also as the author asks "pourquoi je m'adresse à elle comme à lui, mon Dieu" (Circon. 57).[99] Depending on how one interprets the comma in this last phrase, "lui"[100] may or may not be God ("mon Dieu"), or perhaps Bennington, Augustine, someone else completely, or even anyone with absolute knowledge. "Elle," however, is most likely his mother.

Georgette is perhaps the central locus of the author's desire to know and to be known, but also of the impossibility of it. This is articulated in *Circonfession* in numerous ways, for example, the author laments the fact that she no longer recognizes him or remembers his name (Circon. 23), although at times she seems to inexplicably come back to herself, as if she were immortal (Circon. 54). Sometimes she talks to him and he feels that she does not understand who she is speaking to, as if the "tu" that she says could apply to anyone (Circon. 121-122). At some point, he reads through his fathers' obituary while holding her hand; he calls this a "liturgie de mort vivante,"[101] which would be a moment of deep meaning and bonding, but it is undercut by his uncertainty that she had any presence of consciousness (Circon. 130-31). Later, we read that the author is less and less sure of what it is she tries to communicate when she utters sounds, and that he is similarly unsure about whether she recognizes anything of him, including what she recognizes without recognizing that she does. In a similar vein, he is also unsure whether we, the readers, recognize (with or without recognizing) anything of him (Circon. 264). Attempting to verify whether she

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[97] "Who always has reason, like God." To "have reason," in French, is equivalent to "being right."
[98] "Theologicial or maternal figure."
[99] Literally, "why do I address myself to her as to him, my God."
[100] "Him."
[101] "Liturgy of living death."

knows who he is, he asks her several times "qui je suis, moi?", but the only answer he gets is an empty gaze and a smile (Circon. 169-70).

The relationship with Georgette is deeply entangled with the author's experience of God and religion. I have mentioned above that he learned to fear for his own life out of seeing his mother's distress whenever he was sick. The text also says that it was in this memory that he first encountered the name of God, seeing her weep in prayer asking for him to recover (Circon. 113). These experiences entangled the name of God to the experience of tears, which to him were always his mother's tears (Circon. 113-14). This identification between him and his mother through their tears is marked by the structure of the trace, a non-linear play of presence and absence that is never organized into a complete and coherent whole. Despite having wept so much that his tears are always hers, the text also says she could not weep for him, because she could only weep for the one for whom he was a substitute (Circon. 53). Later we also read that his presence was always an absence to her (Circon. 170). In both cases, his presence is defined by the absence of his brother who died. Additionally, despite the fact that he identifies his tears with hers, this identification is undercut by the fact that her tears are also identified as not her own. She tells him "j'ai mal à ma mère,"[102] a phrase with a strange construction that implies either that her pain is her mother's, or that she is speaking from his own perspective, associating with him but dissociating from herself (Circon. 24). Both their tears and prayers are deeply interweaved, but *Circonfession* does not trace them to any point of origin that could be defined as pure and authentic.

In section 30 we read the text that led to Caputo's request for Derrida to *confess* whether he is really an atheist. The text begins by writing in the *futur antérieur*, which I have characterized as posthumous. After citing an extract from his notebooks that discusses circumcision and describes himself as the "last of the Jews," the author ponders about what his readers would not have known of him despite recognizing his style of using commas like breaths that mark both continuity and discontinuity (Circon. 145-46). The author goes on to consider that perhaps as time passes, the worse the readings of his texts will be, and he complains that nobody understands what he writes (Circon. 146). Nobody understands it, "comme ma religion à laquelle personne ne comprend rien,

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[102] Literally, "I have bad/evil on my mother," or "My mother hurts," but better translated as "I feel bad for my mother." The construction is similar to when someone complains of pain on one's own body parts, like "j'ai mal à la tête" (my head hurts).

ni ma mère qui demandait il y a peu à des tiers, n'osant m'en parler, si je croyais encore en Dieu…
mais elle devait savoir que la constance de Dieu dans ma vie s'appelle d'autres noms, si bien que
je passe à juste titre pour athée, l'omniprésence à moi de ce que j'appelle Dieu dans mon langage
absous, absolument privé… le secret dont je suis exclu, quand le secret consiste en ceci que vous
êtes tenu au secret par ceux qui savent votre secret" (Circon. 146-47).[103] Here the author's
frustrated desire of being understood by his readership is directly associated with a frustrated desire
of being understood by his mother and her community. It is as if the trace of misunderstanding
from one activates the other, and *Circonfession* seeks to address it. Indeed, we learn at the start
that, as much as the text is addressed to Bennington and to Derrida's readership, it is also addressed
to his mother, to whom he is writing as if she were dead (Circon. 27).

    The characterization of God's name as a secret evokes a previous passage, which aids my
purposes here. Earlier, the text describes the author's interiority as a theater where an "effusion
ritualisée"[104] is enacted in secret in front of a crowd of ghosts (Circon. 39-40). This secret ritual
begins with prayer and tears, which "ceux qui me lisent de là-haut" are perhaps unable to see
because they do not know "l'enfant dont on disait 'il pleure pour rien'" (Circon. 40).[105] These
readers do not know that "ma vie ne fut qu'une longue histoire des prières."[106] An effusion is a
medical term that describes an escape of fluid from body vessels, but also a literary term that
describes the use of words to express feelings without restraint. Both communicate an undue or
uncontrolled evasion from the inside to the outside. The ritualized effusion the author describes is
a constant imagined performance of suicide, provoked by the repetition of the phrase "j'ai envie
de me tuer,"[107] which he heard very clearly from his mother despite her deteriorated ability to
speak (Circon. 38). This sentence is something that *Derridabase*, a "matrice" "invulnerable,"[108]
cannot make known to the reader (Circon. 38). He claims this performance manifests in all his
writings, although not quite legibly (Circon. 39). As we continue to read, we realize that what the

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[103] "Like my religion about which nobody understands anything, not even my mother who was asking recently to
third parties, not daring to talk to me about it, if I still believed in God… but she should know that the constancy of
God in my life calls itself by other names, albeit I pass by just title as an atheist, the omnipresence to me of that
which I call God in my absolved language, absolutely private… the secret from which I am excluded, when the
secret consists in this that you are held in secret by those who know your secret…"
[104] "Ritualized effusion."
[105] "Those who read me from high above" … "the child about whom it was said 'he cries for nothing.'"
[106] "My life was but a long history of prayers."
[107] "I want to kill myself," or more literally, "I have the desire/envy of killing myself."
[108] "Invulnerable" … "matrix."

text is describing is the economy of death. The author explains that this suicidal repetition communicates "moins le désir de mettre fin à ma vie qu'une sorte de compulsion à doubler chaque seconde… 'je me vois vivre' traduit 'je me vois mourir', je me vois mort coupé de vous en vos mémoires que j'aime et je pleure comme mes propres enfants au bord de ma tombe, je pleure non seulement mes enfants mais tous mes enfants, pourquoi vous seuls, mes enfants?" (Circon. 40-41).[109] What is this desire to double the present that is simultaneously a desire for life and death? It is the desire to add a re- to presentation, the desire for representation which is also the desire for auto-reproduction, for memory, for replication, recognition, and understanding, which connect his relationship to his mother, to his readership, and to his own writing, all together in the testamentary structure of the trace. The desire to be remembered by others, the desire to be read, to be understood, to be known, is a desire that enacts a kind of suicide inasmuch as it wants the memory of the Other to survive the passing of the Self.

In my interpretation of the passages above, the uncontrolled expression of a desire for survival that inevitably evokes death is the *prayer* which marks all of Derrida's career. It permeates his writings with a blind petition towards what *Circonfession* calls the "grand pardon" (Circon. 49-50, 56, 155-56, 192, 225, 227-28, 286, 291), the absolution that follows a confession and pronounces that the relationship between both parties is now just, that they can live together, love and accept one another, without any further settling of accounts (Circon. 86, 161-62; *CFUFM* 228-30).[110] However, like any expression of love between parties, it implicates the commitment for one to survive the other, it is the "grand deuil" (Circon. 145, 155-56; *CFUFM* 197-98).[111] Mourning is at work since this desire is always encountered through the testamentary trace. Each prayer is structurally faced with the impossibility of guaranteeing that which is desired. *Circonfession* allows us to read Derrida's career, which is remembered by its deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, that is, of onto-theo-teleology, as one marked by mourning the impossible desire for

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[109] "Less de desire to put an end to my life than a kind of compulsion to double each second… 'I see myself live' translates 'I see myself die', I see myself dead cut from you [plural] in your memories that I love and I weep like my own children at the edge of my tomb, I weep not only my children but all my children, why you alone/only you, my children?"

[110] *Circonfession* portrays the "grand pardon" as a desire that is structurally impossible inasmuch as it depends on the assumption that both parties can ever be fully present to each other. It has the logic of "happily ever after," which arguably corresponds to the Christian beatific vision.

[111] "Great grief" or "grand mourning," which refers to the French customs that differentiated how women ought to dress through different periods of mourning depending on their social status and the significance of the death (see (Barrière 2008).

presence and survival that manifests throughout the tradition and with which Derrida sympathizes. It articulates the name of God as a trace for the desire for immediate perfect presence, for total self-availability, for eternal life, and for absolute knowledge, which finds expression in our relationships with others, with ourselves, and with the world. It portrays its author as perhaps feeling like others really have access to what they call God, that God is a secret they keep from him. At the same time, others are excluded from the author's own secret, which is that God is another name for death.

The occasion of his mother's illness gives him the perfect opportunity to articulate this concern that motivates his works but which nobody seems to understand, Bennington included. It shows that what happens "outside the text," the events in the life of the author such as the death of his mother, expected but always unexpected, was operating "inside the text" all along. It was simultaneously *a fortiori* and *a priori* inside all of his works through the strange temporality of the trace (Circon. 115, 118-19, 192-93). It is simultaneously irreducibly singular and somehow exemplary and therefore universal (which means that it is not quite either). As she passes away, not dead yet but also no longer the person full of energy that he knew, he mourns the fact that there is no clear understanding between them. He understands that she mourns, too. She would like him to believe in God, but she sees that he most likely does not, and she does not dare ask him. Her desire for him as her child, as the product of her auto-reproduction, is not actualized, just as his desire for his words as his own "children"[112] escapes his control. Once again, to write is to mourn.

As Johanna Schumm puts it, confessions are supposed to communicate an "authentic and immediate relation to oneself" (2015, 740). Instead of that, both Augustine and Derrida write their confessions as a relation to an Other that communicates a limit to their own self-availability, that self-knowledge can only be attained through the Other (Schumm 2015, 744–45). *Circonfession*'s style radicalizes this limitation through the play of *différance*, which "calls for a process of continuous positive displacement, in which the relations between signifiers (e.g., due to phonetic similarities) are at least equally important as the production of meaning between signifier and signified" (Schumm 2015, 738). Self, Other, mother, God, death, Bennington, readership, and so on, all these terms are tied through the structure of the trace, which *Circonfession* enacts in each

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[112] This analogy functions thanks to the Platonic filial metaphor of writing, outlined above.

phrase. Wherever he searches, especially in the face of death, the "I" of *Circonfession* is unable to find a way to know himself authentically since authenticity demands immediacy and no relation to the Other. As Derrida engages in circularity, using Augustine's words that refer to the Christian God to talk about his atheism, he deconstructs the very logic of Christian confession. Rather than playing, so to speak, the game of religious creeds, attempting an authentic "yes" or "no" to the question of whether he believes in God—Christian or Jewish—Derrida circumvents the question by showing that confession expresses an unattainable desire. One cannot "authentically" say yes or no to a creed, and one cannot encounter someone who is fully present and who holds the absolute knowledge necessary to pronounce one forgiven and accepted, without theological premises. Accordingly, the text also does not portray this deconstruction of the Christian logic of confession as something that he, Jacques Derrida, has authentically, individually, and autonomously achieved. Instead, it is all a function of his blood, his history, and his circumcision.

Chapter VII Circumcision

Sarah Hammerschlag's book "The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought" (2010) devotes a chapter to Derrida's view of Jewish identity. She explains that he thematizes circumcision in many of his works, and that his first explicit engagement with the theme happens in *Glas* (1974), responding to Hegel's *The Spirit of Christianity* (1798):

> Le Juif opère (sur) lui-même un simulacre de castration pour marquer son propre, sa propriété, son nom, fonder la loi qu'il subira pour l'imposer aux autres et se constituer en esclave favori de la puissance infinie. En entamant son gland, il se défend d'avance contre la menace infinie, châtre à son tour l'ennemi, élabore une sorte d'apotropaïque sans mesure. Il exhibe sa castration comme une érection qui met l'autre au défi (*Glas*, 55-56).[113]

Derrida's later texts continue to portray circumcision as a bodily cut done according to a paradoxical apotropaic logic. Through it, one commits violence to oneself by cutting oneself in order to avoid a greater violence from being committed against oneself. This violence constitutes a simulacrum of castration that effectively "castrates" the Other, in the sense that it takes away the power of the Other to assimilate, define, or erase the Self. This is done with the intent to establish

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[113] "The Jew effects (on) himself a simulacrum of castration in order to mark his own-ness, his proper-ness, his property, his name; to found the law he will suffer in order to impose it on others and to constitute himself as the favorite slave of the infinite power. By first incising his glans, he defends himself in advance against the infinite threat, castrates in his turn the enemy, elaborates a kind of apotropaic without measure. He exhibits his castration as an erection that defies the order." (1990 English edition of *Glas*, 45-46; Cited in (Hammerschlag 2010, 207).

its own law[114] against a power that is described as infinite. In my interpretation, Derrida's formulation is ultimately defeatist: to deprive infinite power of *some* power still leaves it with infinite power; there is no guarantee of avoiding the greater violence. Circumcision is defined as a violent attempt, without guarantee, to define the Self before the Other has a chance to do it.

Historically, circumcision is a particular mark of Jewishness that seeks to resist assimilation into other groups (Hammerschlag 2010, 207). Derrida often refers to it as a "cut"[115] and *Circonfession* gives us many stories about how Derrida was "cut" off from specific groups, excluded from them, while also being irreversibly marked as Jewish (Hammerschlag 2010, 207–10). Attentive to the wording from *Glas* but also *Circonfession*, Hammerschlag reads circumcision as being about the *proper*, which is property in the sense of proper names, signatures, belonging, ownership, and so on, but also cleanliness and purity as the French "*propre*" communicates (2010, 206; Circon. 146). Many of Derrida's insights on Jewish identity come from debates answering questions about Freud's own complicated relationship with his Jewishness.[116] Through deconstruction, Derrida shows how circumcision is not fundamentally different from every sign that serves to inscribe someone within a community (and thereby, outside other communities). All of them only accomplish their purpose by being recalled by others, recognized and validated, as if reinscribing them even after their death (2010, 210–16). In this way, Derrida draws a structural analogy between the logic behind the Freudian notion of the trace, Jewish circumcision, and all inscriptions of signs that serve the purpose of delineating the "parameters of a community, a community that is recalled each and every time one of us performs a gesture that includes some and excludes others" (Hammerschlag 2010, 216). It is in this sense that circumcision has the same structure as the "proper," alongside proper names, signatures, and even language in general. These are systems of signs which people inherit and find themselves always already being a part of, defined by, and participating in, demarcating them as a group different from others. Simultaneously, like all traces, they have no meaning or power on their own without an interpretation by the Other.

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[114] Etymologically, to become *auto-nomous*.
[115] Etymologically, "-cision" is a cut, and "circumcision" is to cut around.
[116] Derrida, Jacques. 1995. *Mal d'archive: une impression freudienne*. Incises. Paris: Galilée.

Hammerschlag notes that Derrida's texts on Jewish identity usually address the problem that other contemporary Jewish thinkers sought to define Judaism based on either its universality or its particularity and exclusivity over and against other identities (Hammerschlag 2010, 205–6). When Derrida uses the word circumcision, it serves to "disrupt the distinction between the particular and the universal" (2010, 208). On the one hand, it refers to the universal structure of cuts and inscriptions that serve to set apart and distinguish, and therefore to define and to identify the "proper" by establishing a relationship of ownership over an identity. On the other hand, it is the irreducibly material and historical singular experience of his actual body in its context (Hammerschlag 2010, 208–9). The singularity of the cut on his own body cannot be reduced to the universal structure of all cuts that serve to demarcate identities, nor to the inscription of all signs on all bodies. His circumcision is the reason why he, like others but not like all, was expelled from school and his family lost their French citizenship during the years of Vichy France (Circon. 57, 164, 196, 230, etc.). This experience happened in the particularity of French Algeria. According to *Circonfession*, the causes for this event cannot be reduced to German National Socialism alone because this political decision was made "sans l'intervention d'aucun nazi" (Circon. 266).[117] Circumcision cut him off from French and Algerian culture, but also included[118] him in his family's Jewish community and in his Jewish school, called "Alliance," where he had to study for his bar mitzva. This inclusion, however, was not voluntary. Derrida hated studying Hebrew and did not retain much of it (Circon. 164, 266).

The common structure between circumcision and language is best depicted in *Circonfession* through the mention that the Hebrew word for "circumcision" is also the Hebrew word for "word" or "sign": *milah* (Circon. 85-86, 222-23, 241, 247-48). This connection allows the reading of several passages that refer to milah, M/L, "le mot,"[119] or even to "inscription" or "lettre"[120] to be interpreted as referring to circumcision but also to language (e.g., Circon. 64, 71, 91, 252, 275), open to the reader's decision. One can understand this interpretive decision—and also the many interpretive decisions that *Circonfession* demands, such as how to read the "cru"—as the kind of recalling, re-presentation and re-inscription that is a function of signs marked by the structure of

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[117] "Without the intervention of any nazi."
[118] Hammerschlag uses the word "inscription" (2010, 209)
[119] "The word."
[120] "Letter." The French has the same double sense as in the English, meaning both the alphabetical unit and mail.

the "proper," as outlined above. In other words, whenever "milah," "word," "circumcision" and related words emerge, the reader is left to discern, or decide, whether words on the page refer to semiotics, Derrida's experience of circumcision, the relationship between the two, all of these options, or something else completely. These moments of decision in the experience of reading *Circonfession*—which its style demands in every sentence—are acts of negotiating the traces we encounter, making claims about their meaning. It is an excision and a re-inscription of the text— in other words, a circumcision. This is how I have interpreted pages 254-255, and why I claim the text is presented to us as "uncircumcised."

Derrida's deconstruction of the relationship between the universal and the particular through the inscription of circumcision is something that can be explained, in Hammerschlag's analysis, as a response to an ethical and political problem inherent in some discourses of Jewish self-definition. This problem is the relationship between exceptionality and exemplarity: If Jews are defined as a group of people that has been elected and called (by God) for the mission of being an example of morality for the rest of humankind, they are simultaneously an example (which can be universalized) and an exception (which cannot). Their purpose is to promote the human potential for good, but this is only guaranteed by their special calling. A further problem is that the structure of this discourse is not exclusively Jewish. It finds parallels in many nationalisms, including the German (Hammerschlag 2010, 231–33). Derrida was disturbed by how these similarities in the structure of identitarian discourses were reproduced, for example, in discourses about the state of Israel. As Hammerschlag summarizes, "a community's claim to exemplarity [can] become violent when it translates into the necessity of defending the position of privilege that exemplarity entails" (2010, 235). One can interpret his preoccupation with the logic of circumcision as a concern with how discourses legitimize violence by constituting identity through a logic of purity that is attained through a cut.

Hammerschlag outlines two primary strategies that Derrida found to defuse this dangerous discourse. The first is his philosophy of messianicity, and the second is his characterization of his own identity as a Marrano. There is no explicit mention of the messiah or messianicity in *Circonfession*, as Derrida's articulation of this thought was developed after it. However, messianicity expresses an affective and ethical disposition that can be regarded (or inscribed) as a structuring principle of the primary text. To put it simply, messianicity is Derrida's name for a

relationship to temporality that looks forward to the Other and to the future unknown as the possibility of some form of liberation, salvation, or redemption. This relationship to temporality exceeds the depository of Christian and Jewish terminology, indicating a general attitude of expectation of eventual justice (Hammerschlag 2010, 227–28; Kanaris 2023, 84–85). One fundamental problem of historical movements characterized by messianicity (which include, for example, the revolutionary movements of the 20th century), is the desire, tendency, or attempt, to anticipate the future in such a way that reproduces the present, preventing the arrival of something new, or different, by imposing the same, what is known and familiar. Derrida's desire for a just and democratic future society demands an attitude of keeping one's "hands off" from the future. One must expect it without trying to peek ahead and decide, for the future and in the name of the future, how that future is going to look like (Caputo 1997, 136–43; Hammerschlag 2010, 235–36).

The closest related word-concepts in *Circonfession* that refers to the structure of messianicity are the surprise and the "grand pardon." *Derridabase* was written to systematize the totality of Derrida's thought, or at least draw the fundamental principles that determine its coherence. *Circonfession* is his answer, which is supposed to escape that attempt and surprise Bennington. This agreement constitutes an aporia, because the authenticity or inauthenticity of the surprise is put in question from the moment that the surprise is already declared to be expected, and thereby programmed (Bennington and Derrida 1991, 3; 1999, 1). This aporetic relationship towards the Other and the future has the same structure as historical movements characterized by messianicity, namely, Bennington's expectation of Derrida's validation or invalidation of his own efforts; Derrida's expectation of Bennington's validation or invalidation of his own success at surprising Bennington and escaping systematization; the Jewish expectation of the messiah; the international workers' expectation of the revolution; the Christian expectation of the Kingdom of God; the German expectation of the Thousand-Year Reich, and so on.

Sets of expectations towards the Other and the future, which are historically tied to complex worldviews, institutions, and apparatuses of power, are represented in *Circonfession* by the "program," which is further associated with the "law"[121] and even with "grammar" and "syntax" (Circon. 30, 33-35, 53-54, 64, 98-99, 129, 131, 161, 229, 253). These are all sets of rules and

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[121] In the context of Judaism, Derrida's writing about "law" always connotes the Torah and the complexities of the notion of revelation in Jewish Thought.

expectations that govern behaviors, operations, and production, such as writing or speech as linguistic productions. They govern the trace before the trace.[122] These sets of expectations are further tied to the economy of death as the text ties all of the elements in this semantic chain to the word "matrice": A "matrix," which is etymologically derived from the Latin words for "womb" and "mother" (Circon. 33-35, 38, 46, 142). The surprise expected by *Derridabase* (also called a matrix in those same passages), and the "grand pardon" expected between mother and son, and between an author and his audience, are all entangled. One can read here a deeply ambivalent disposition in relation to all these words. They are all relatable expressions of a desire for justice, life, presence, purity, safety, continuity, and so on. However, somewhere between the re- and presentation or production, as one attempts to welcome the new or repeat the same, there is always the possibility that things escape expectations. The temporal experience of desire always evokes the possibility of its impossibility. Accordingly, deconstruction is not an attack on institutions (law and the family), on science (absolute knowledge), or on religion (confession and circumcision). Deconstruction engages with the discourses that represent ideas about these things in such a way that reveals their inevitable limitations and invites mourning.

The other way Derrida attempts to defuse the danger of the discourse of Jewish exceptional exemplarity is by identifying closely with the trope of the *Marrano* (Circon. 160-61, 231). In order to interpret it, I turn to its history, where I draw important connections that I later weave into my interpretation of *Circonfession*:

The term Marrano, which in Spanish means "pig" or "hog," refers to the context of Jews in the Iberic Peninsula (modern Spain and Portugal) between the 14th and 17th centuries. Jews had flourished in that region for many centuries, both under Muslim and Christian rule. However, they were also occasional targets of persecution, depending on the levels of religious extremism from either side as they competed for control (Brenner 2021, 85–93). When Christian forces conquered the region and forced the Muslims to retreat to North Africa, the Christian monarchy established segregation laws between the Christian and Jewish populations, and it authorized conversion campaigns that led to the baptism of thousands of Jews under threat of violence (Brenner 2021,

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[122] Thinking etymologically, one can see the connection between the notion of a "program" and the strange temporality it communicates: to write (gram) before (pro), to trace before it is traced. It evokes the theological characterization of prophecy (to speak before) or providence (to see before) as that which "is written."

119). These Jews were called "conversos,"[123] and since their conversion was not considered *authentic* enough (they converted, after all, under threat of violence and segregation), suspicion was raised that many of them practiced Judaism in secret. This was the context of the foundation of the Spanish Inquisition.

The Inquisition did not have jurisdiction over Jews, only over Christians who were charged with heresy. This meant that Christians who seemed to systematically wear clean clothes on Saturdays, or who did not eat pork, could be accused of "judaizing" (Brenner 2021, 119–20). This term reinscribes a polemic found in the texts of the New Testament into the context of Renaissance Spain. The letters from the apostle Paul—himself, like all first Christians, a Jew—attest to a dispute with "Judaizer" Christians over whether the new Gentile converts needed to be circumcised or not. The letter to the Galatians gives us his emphatic position:

> I, Paul, am telling you that, if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be reckoned as righteous by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness [justice]. For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love. You were running well; who prevented you from obeying the truth? Such persuasion does not come from the one who calls you. A little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough. I am confident about you in the Lord that you will not think otherwise. But whoever it is that is confusing you will pay the penalty. But my brothers and sisters, why am I still being persecuted if I am still preaching circumcision? In that case the offense of the cross has been removed. I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves! (Gal. 5:2-12 NRSVUE)

This excerpt addresses the complicated issue of early Christian self-definition, and perhaps marks the "event" of the "cut" between Judaism and what became Christianity, using much of the same language that Derrida thematizes and problematizes in his works. It shows a clear concern with identity, and it negotiates continuity and discontinuity by making use of a violent language of castration and of contamination (yeast and leaven). It opposes an identity defined by adherence to a law to an identity defined by the "spirit" and by "faith," which in the history of existential philosophy are closely tied to the notion of authenticity.[124] All of this is done in the name of a hope

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123 Spanish for "converts."
124 This connection is the clearest in the work and influence of Kierkegaard, whose concern with "faith" was fundamentally a concern with coming to terms with what one is, that is, to be oneself authentically. For example,

for justice[125] that seeks to settle accounts, to justify and make sense of a violence that has already been suffered, which in this case are the cross of Christ, and early Christian martyrdoms.

The Inquisition punished many of those judged guilty of being "Judaizers" with violent spectacles like stake burnings. Michael Brenner attests that within the first year, three hundred of the "conversos" were killed in Seville, and thousands more were killed in the Spanish and Portuguese territories up until the nineteenth century (2021, 120). Although the Inquisition had no legal jurisdiction over Jews, they were still considered a threat. Their coexistence with the new converts was understood as a kind of temptation for their eventual backsliding. As the pressure grew in those first years, almost two thousand Jews fled Spain, and many of them went to Portugal (Brenner 2021, 120–21). In 1496 the Portuguese king made them choose between expulsion or baptism, but fearing for his economy, he ensured that most of them remained by converting them by force (Brenner 2021, 121). As time passed, most of the Jewish population began to practice Christianity, except for a minority which, confirming Christian suspicions, continued to preserve their Jewish customs more or less in secret. Those were the ones whom their Christian neighbors called by the derogatory name "Marranos." Within a few years, Portugal began to follow the Spanish model and survey whether the new converts were authentically Christian or secretly "Judaizers." In order to keep the threat of secret Jews from holding positions of power, Christian authenticity was measured by the requirement of a proof of non-Jewish (or Muslim) lineage. This practice was documented as "limpieza de sangre," the first racial laws in recorded Western history (Brenner 2021, 122).[126]

I now return to *Circonfession*:

Hammerschlag connects the description of the author as "le dernier des Juifs" (Circon. 145, 178),[127] with the claim that he is "une sorte de marrane de la culture catholique française" (Circon. 160).[128] As stated above, she reads Derrida's thoughts on Judaism as responses to Hegel's *Spirit of*

The Sickness unto Death concludes with: "In relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula in turn, as has been frequently pointed out, is the definition of faith" (Kierkegaard [1849] 1998, 131).

[125] The Greek word that is translated as "righteousness" in English is translated as "justice" in French (LSG) and "iustitiae" in the Vulgate.

[126] "Blood purity," but more literally, "blood cleanliness" or "cleaning of blood."

[127] "The last of the Jews."

[128] "A kind of Marrano of the Catholic French culture."

Christianity, wherein the latter describes Judaism as the religion of self-alienation (2010, 240). In other words, in the Hegelian iteration of the Christian perspective, there is nothing more paradigmatically Jewish than inauthenticity. To her, Derrida's apparent disavowals of Judaism in *Circonfession* are ironic plays of a Marrano who emulates rabbinic literature by suggesting that he is "simultaneously… something like the worst Jew, and perhaps the only remaining Jew, and, thus, the best Jew" (Hammerschlag 2010, 243). Her reading is in many ways supported by the text and by Derrida's philosophy at large. It shows that if Hegel is right, then the logic of Jewish exceptional exemplarity is short-circuited by an aporia: "If the political claim to exemplarity is a claim to instantiate the universal, how can the logic of exemplarity accommodate the claim that what is truest of said people is that there is nothing proper to them?... How can one claim to be the one called if one's calling is not to make claims?" (2010, 241). Hammerschlag's Derrida is telling a joke (2010, 244), writing a *perver-formative Circonfession* that affirms his Jewish identity by radicalizing its definition of self-betrayal and alienation, and thereby deconstructing the structure of exceptional exemplarity that legitimizes identitarian violence (2010, 258–60).

My reading of *Circonfession* explores a different possibility which nonetheless includes Hammerschlag's. *Circonfession* shows how circumcision is a name for how identity is always encountered by the Self as a trace of the Other. In other words, it is a trace the Other imposes on the Self, which the Self is forced to respond to and account for inasmuch as it is in relationship with the Other. This dynamic has a similar structure to what Hammerschlag described as Derrida's comments on the question of Freud's own Jewishness, that is, the trace of circumcision on his body ultimately does not interpret or validate itself. We can recognize the trace, but the reason the debate of whether Freud is a "real" Jew depends on whether Freud himself re-traced the trace, whether he re-inscribed Jewishness on himself, whether he *confessed his circumcision*. It also depends on whether we recognize and accept this confession, and whether later generations will do the same with us, authenticating our recognition as legitimate. Circumcision, which is supposed to maintain the community of belonging, is ultimately what needs to be maintained by the community. In light of this predicament where circumcision is not a sufficient guarantee of Jewish *propriety* and *property*, that is, not a sufficient guarantee of belonging to the community, and that it necessitates some sort of repetition by the Self and by the Other, I read the Derrida of *Circonfession* through a more tragic lens. He might be ironically removed when responding to the Hegelian Inquisitor, but

the fact this response is even *necessary* is cause for mourning. This tragic tone explains why the text of *Circonfession* betrays a great deal of intimacy and vulnerability.

My reading is made possible by making sense of how the three reference points in the title—confession, circumcision, circle—are weaved together. The volume "Jacques Derrida" confronts him with the question of his identity, with the demand for something raw, the original and pure thing-in-itself, which he is supposed to have an authentic immediate access to and with which he is expected to surprise the limited view of the Other who does not know him from the inside. Even if this is a game, a bet between friends who have set up a play or performance together, we know that Derrida takes games seriously, that he wants to win and not simply pretend that losing on purpose is the real victory (Circon. 44-45, 76; *DLG* 142-141; LPP 71-72). This means that he must, to the best of his ability, follow the rules of the game. He must give his best account of himself that makes his philosophy and works coherent, even if this work is precisely deconstruction, the business of articulating the profound incoherences upon which systems of coherence build themselves. He does this the best way available to him philosophically, which is by writing in a way that emulates a deconstructed engagement with the circularity of his own experience through the thought of the trace that, as Hammerschlag characterizes it, is *perver-formative*. He must represent each thought, feeling, memory, dream, and idea that comes to him as the series of traces that require an active negotiation between text and reader to stipulate the moments of continuity and discontinuity.

I have outlined in the previous sections that the thought of the trace enacts a deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence that lie at the basis of Christian confession and of the philosophical discourse of authenticity. I underscore that confession is Christian, and that the notion of authenticity is continuous with it, because I believe this is important to understand what the text is trying to accomplish. We know, and Derrida knows, that he is Jewish. What we do not know is what it means to be Jewish, or whether he is a *real* Jew, or whether his works can be reduced to a Jewish science or philosophy, stuck forever in the paradigm of the particular that cannot be universalized (Hammerschlag 2010, 216). Traditionally, one would expect this answer to come from an honest, authentic avowal of his interiority. What we encounter in *Circonfession* is that the deconstructed hyper-phenomenological traces of the author's experience of being Jewish do not allow him to reach any immediate knowledge of it. In the passage where he identifies as a Marrano,

one finds that it is all mediated and there is no core of presence and certainty available to him: "si je suis une sorte de marrane de la culture catholique française, et j'ai aussi mon corps chrétien, hérité de sA en ligne plus ou moins tordue, condiebar eius sale*, je suis de ces marranes qui ne se disent même pas juifs dans le secret de leur coeur, non pour être des marranes authentifiés de part ou d'autre de la frontière publique, mais parce qu'il doutent de tout, jamais ne se confessent ni ne renoncent aux lumières, quoi qu'il en coûte, prêts à se faire brûler" (Circon. 160).[129]

This quotation opens up an articulation of the author's aporetic position within the history of the two religions, which we can tie to the whole of deconstruction. It tells us that its author's body, his life, his sense of identity and even what it means to confess an identity are inherited from a Christian culture, represented here through the letters "sA" that signify simultaneously saint Augustine and the *savoir Absolu*, the onto-theo-teleological notion of a perfection of knowledge and presence. This passage builds on another where the author attempts to reach into his interiority to address God in prayer and to an authentic encounter with the inner Other. There, he finds himself asking why it is that he speaks to God in "chrétien latin français" (Circon. 57),[130] acknowledging that his subjectivity is already shaped by the historical continuities and complicities between French culture, Christianity, and the heritage of Roman imperialism through the Latin language.[131] He has no authentic and pure Jewish language, culture, conceptuality, or worldview, through which to articulate something like a prayer towards something like a God that he can *claim* as his own without a trace of Christianity. The very terms of the question of his identity, he finds, are Christian terms (confession and authenticity) that he cannot claim but which are nonetheless all that he has.

The experience of a lack of a *pure* Jewish way of thinking or being, this lack of Jewish *property* and *propriety*, is not a product of the author's authentic preferences, such as his distaste for learning Hebrew or studying for his bar mitzva, as if he had an alternative (Circon. 266). Instead,

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[129] "If I am a kind of Marrano of the Catholic French culture, and I also have my Christian body, inherited from sA in a more or less crooked line, condiebar eius sale* [they salted me with their salt], I am of those Marranos that do not even tell themselves that they are Jews in the secret of their hearts, not to be authenticated on one side or another of the public border/frontier, but because they doubt everything, never confessing themselves/making confessions nor renouncing themselves to the lights ['lumières' is also the French word for the Enlightenment], whatever it may cost, ready to be burned."

[130] "Christian Latin French."

[131] This complex entanglement, which I am calling "complicities," was later addressed by Derrida by the term "mondialatinization," which he associates particularly with the Latin word "religio." For more on the topic, see (Vessey 2010).

Circonfession portrays the traces of Judaism that he received from his community as having been already defined by the Christian hegemonic culture of colonial French Algeria (We are told more than once that they referred to circumcision with the word "baptism" and to *bar mitzwa* by the word "communion" [Circon. 72, 164, 266-67]). The only heritage available for him to claim is that which is "trop marrane" and "trop 'catholique'" (Circon. 231).[132] The text directly connects this heritage to the history of the Inquisition I outlined above. We read, for example, that the author's family descended from Portugal in the early 18th century (Circon. 232-34). We also read traces of the Inquisition in an intriguing Latin phrase that is not attributed to Augustine. It follows the observation that he quotes Augustine in Latin, a language he is very good at (as opposed to Hebrew), and that now, late in his life, he finally returns to "ce qui mêle au sang la prière et les larmes, *salus non erat in sanguine*" (Circon. 22).[133] This means that the prayers and tears I have discussed above, which have permeated all his works and which he is not sure whether they belong to him or to his mother, are mixed with blood—which is also another word for the *cru* in the medical metaphor between him and Bennington. The Latin phrase reads "salvation was not in blood," and it is somewhat repeated later, "*salus in sanguine*" (Circon. 208). The Latin idea of salvation being in the blood can be read as a direct reference to the discourses that grounded the Inquisitions' policy of blood purity that excluded Marranos from positions of power (see Burk 2010; Tritle 2023). Through these small gestures, *Circonfession* portrays the experience of attempting to account for the author's Jewish identity as reactivating traces of religious and ethnic violence that predated German National Socialism by centuries.

My reading of *Circonfession* correlates the many hierarchical binaries targeted by deconstruction throughout Derrida's career with a certain historical discourse of Christian self-definition in relation to Judaism that systematically subordinates Judaism. Confession, I stated above, is usually understood as a *speech act*. Circumcision is a cut in the flesh that serves as an inscription, therefore it is a kind of *writing*. The binary of speech and writing, which corresponds to the binary of presence and representation, finds expression in the Christian historical discourse of the dead letter of the law versus the living spirit (e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:6), which in the Christian

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[132] "Too Marrano" and "too 'Catholic.'" In the context of France at the time, saying something is too Catholic or not Catholic is usually intended to communicate a conformity to good customs, norms, and morality of French culture. The expression assumes a Catholic hegemony and is used without regard for Christian differences and diversity.

[133] "That which mixes with blood the prayer and the tears, salus non erat in sanguine [salvation was not in blood]."

self-definition associates the flesh with Judaism and the spirit with Christianity (e.g., Romans 1:3-4).[134] These associations also extend to the dualism of the internal versus the external, which correspond to that which is authentic versus inauthentic, when early Christians defined themselves as the "true" and "real" Jews who have the "true" and "real" circumcision, which is the circumcision of the heart (Romans 2:25-29, which refers to Deuteronomy 10:16). This Christian self-definition has historically depended on the subordination of Judaism as being simultaneously its origin and its supplement, something that served to prefigure and give birth to Christianity and is thereby made obsolete by it (the Jewish bible is the "Old Testament").[135] It does this by a strange temporal logic where Christianity is what "real" Judaism has always been, Christians are the "true" sons of Abraham, and Jesus is a greater prophet than Moses and a greater priest than Aaron (Matthew 3:9, Hebrews 7). Because Christians are the "real" Jews, Judaism is abolished when the difference between Jews and Gentiles is erased in Christ (Romans 10:12; Galatians 3:28).

The idea of a "real" or "true" Jew that continues to exist after Christ (the "messiah") is in this configuration of the antisemitic Christian imagination a perfect iteration of what Bennington describes as that which a system cannot think while remaining coherent to its own terms, that which a system must exclude in order to survive (DDB 283-84). Bennington explains that this need to exclude becomes a kind of controlling fascination, which in my reading is depicted in *Circonfession*'s many notes about Saint Catherine of Siena. *Fascination* is a good word to describe her relationship to Christ's foreskin, which she claimed to have received from Christ himself as a

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[134] The relationship between the first generations of followers of Jesus (most of whom were Jews) and other Jews is disputed in biblical scholarship. In the last century, particularly in the wake of the Holocaust, the "New Perspective on Paul" has allowed for Christian theologians and biblical scholars to revisit historical interpretations of the New Testament that are antisemitic. For example, see the history of scholarship drawn by Grant Macaskill (2013, 16–41) and the recent collection by Bakker et al. (2022). My intention here is not to attempt a claim about the correct interpretation of these biblical texts in their original contexts. I am indicating their historical foundational roles in Western Christian discourses of self-definition, which, regardless of the true intentions of the authors (who were "Jews" themselves), nonetheless made their antisemitic interpretations possible. These interpretations were operative during the Inquisition, from which Marranos originated. They also find an articulation in the thought of important theologians such as Thomas Aquinas (see his commentaries on Romans 9:24-33) and Augustine (see *Civitate Dei* XVIII, 46-47; XX, 29). My approach towards these biblical texts mirrors Derrida's own approach reading Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche: The question of whether Nietzsche intended his texts to be appropriated by Nazis is uninteresting; what is relevant is how the texts contained the conditions of the possibility of this appropriation, which is a historical fact, and what this appropriation teaches us about Nazism (*LVLM* 69-71).

[135] *The Spirit of Christianity* (1798-1799) is another relevant example of the historical pervasiveness of this antisemitic Christian discourse of self-definition. Hegel also writes about the history of the two religions in *The Positivity of the Christian Religion* (1795-1796, 1800). Both texts portray Judaism as what must be transcended by Christianity. For example, Hegel writes that "the religion Jesus carried in his own heart was free from the spirit of his people… This religious purity is of course extremely remarkable in a Jew" (Hegel 1988, 181).

wedding ring (a covenant or alliance) (Circon. 68, 109-10, 237). To her, Christ's circumcision was the first offering of his blood to creation, but because it was too little, he went through crucifixion to provide an appropriate fountain (Circon. 222). *Circonfession* presents its author, confronted with the question of his identity—the question of his blood, his cru, his confession—but completely deprived of a language to articulate it that does not already, systematically and without recourse, put him in a position of being subordinate. His Christian Latin interest in circumcision brings him to Saint Catherine, whom he loves (Circon. 222), but her circumcision is Christian and denies him an articulation of a Jewish confession.

In light of this history, *Circonfession* shows that its author knows that even if he made a true and heartfelt confession of being Jewish, Atheist, or even Christian, he would not be believed precisely because he is Jewish. He knows that those who listen to his confession do not trust him, despite his self-policing and his deep love for the truth (Circon. 108-109). In this reading, the historical subordination of Judaism to Christianity is why *Circonfession* so often engages with the topic of its author being a liar, someone who deceives, cheats, and dissimulates. It represents the Jewish situation before antisemitic Christian adjudicators who already believe that, by definition and without recourse, Jews are liars[136] (Circon. 86-88, 99, 109, 137, 166, 230-31, 250, 266, 275). There cannot be "real" or "true" Jews if Christianity is to make sense as long as the "real" and "true" Jews are the Christians.

The traces of the history of Judaism and Christianity, which hierarchically controls and defines Judaism according to a certain Christian self-definition, portray Derrida's relationship to his own identity as constituted by an aporia. He has no way to affirm himself without passing through the Christianity that made him and his family Marranos, pigs. At the same time, however, as we have indicated from the passages above, this Christian self-definition itself depends on a notion of circumcision that is somehow differentiated from the circumcision that is rejected. This means that the structure of the relationship between both religions, for Derrida, is the same as between the binary of speech and writing, or between presence and representation. Therefore, it is open to the same movement of deconstruction. The text portrays its author as a Jew within a Christian society

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[136] This antisemitic trope finds a possible origin in the biblical text when, in the Gospel of John, Jesus says the pharisees are not actually children of Abraham but rather children of the devil, who lie like their father (John 8:44). In the history of the West, a paradigmatic example of the pervasiveness of this trope is Martin Luther's famous 1543 treatise *Von den Jüden und iren Lügen*, *On the Jews and their Lies*.

who is always the stranger inside, the threat of contamination, the suspicion of lies and dissimulation, the excluded other that is the same, the mixture that is simultaneously remedy and poison, about which he is always writing about (Circon. 70-71). Circumcision is what joins prayers, tears, and blood, in all his writings.

My analysis so far has preserved the categories of the Christian and the Jewish which, although historically important in ways that are irreducible, are also at risk of being essentialized in ways that are incoherent with everything I have said about deconstruction and the thought of the trace. To clarify, my intention (and I believe, Derrida's also) is not to reify a Christian and a Jewish perspective and pit them against each other, but to trace an influential historical discourse of their definitions that has been represented as a hierarchical binary. To the extent that this discourse— and others like it—is still active, deconstruction seeks to destabilize it (see Caputo 1997, 47, 127, 191-97, 231). It shows us that this binary depends on an active negotiation of boundaries that replicates the structure of what Derrida calls an economy of death. The economy of death is the name of an activity, the process of life/death that avoids the ways it can go wrong through constant negotiation. Christian supremacy, European antisemitism, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust, are historical ways in which this hierarchical binary has led to unjustifiable death. This death is cause for mourning, for pause, for ethical and political reflection, and it invites the dream and hope of something new and unexpected. However, as with the many binaries, deconstruction reveals a complicated empathy that recognizes that even the iterations of the binary that led to unspeakable violence were themselves motivated by hopes and dreams of something new and unexpected. This means that we, in the present, are not absolved by simply dreaming of something different and new. The ethical work of building a different future is the same work as deconstruction and mourning: It is the activity of life/death that understands that the future's relationship to the past is never one of pure continuity or discontinuity.

Bringing together everything I have outlined, then, *Circonfession* can be read as the performance of a simultaneous deconstruction of the logics of confession and circumcision, both of which are characterized by the economy of death and thus by mourning. I turn now to how this deconstruction is intimately connected to the mourning of Georgette, Derrida's mother.

In the passage Hammerschlag quotes from *Glas*, in which Derrida responds to Hegel, circumcision is described as an activity of the Self on itself before an Other. One passage of

Circonfession portrays this well, imagining what an auto-circumcision would look like, with a mohel cutting his own foreskin and sucking the blood, doing fellatio on himself (Circon. 149-50). It goes on to describe this as "mon homosexualité impossible," which parallels the characterization of autobiographies and confessions as types of "ventriloquie homosexuelle" (Circon. 150-151).[137] The word "homosexuality" is telling. I interpret "homo" to be used here based on its most radical signification: The "same," which is not different from "auto." Most if not all depictions of circumcision in *Circonfession* make sexual associations. For example, when it reimagines Exodus 4:24-26 by portraying the story of the circumcision of Moses's son as being operated by his wife, Zippora (Circon. 68). Following a tradition which the author either read or heard about, he imagines Zippora practicing *metzitzah b'peh*, the act of a mohel sucking the blood from the cut using his mouth. He also imagines her eating the bloody foreskin. The depiction of the act is simultaneously religious, cannibalistic, and incestuous.[138] As such, it is a kind of sacred crime, which the text associates with the author's own circumcision by calling it a crime and an original sin committed against him by Georgette, who is called a daughter of Zippora (Circon. 73).

Circumcision in *Circonfession* is what Zippora and Georgette did to their sons. Even if the ceremony usually only involves men while the women wait in a separate room, hearing the baby's screams, the text says the ritual is ultimately instituted by the mother (Circon. 66). An auto-circumcision is impossible (an "impossible homosexuality") because it would not be what circumcision is. The act is defined by a sexual logic, or better put, by a reproductive logic. The semantic chain of circumcision and auto-circumcision, homosexuality, autobiography, confession, and ventriloquy can be read as different angles through which the text articulates the entanglement between the two central concerns underscored: representation and reproduction. Depicting circumcision as an act of the Self upon itself before the Other (as the Hegelian paradigm does), that is, as an auto-circumcision, misses the point that circumcision is in fact an act of the Other—God, Zippora, Georgette—on the Self. It is the moment wherein the parents and the community of origin inscribe a trace on the child to forever mark it as belonging to them, to make it one of them,

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[137] "My impossible homosexuality," and "homosexual ventriloquy."
[138] Interpreting these depictions in conversation with Freudian psychoanalysis would be incredibly interesting, but it falls outside the scope of this analysis.

under the same law, part of the same community, and charged with the duty to reproduce the community to the next generation.

Deconstruction is at work when we are told of Georgette's wondering about whether her son still believes in God. Deconstruction is also at work when we are told that this same son is not circumcising his own sons (Circon. 92, 188) and that he has decided not to engage in endogamous marriage (Circon. 92, 237). These moments and positions are only possible because of the gap between the re- and the -production of a new Jew and the -presentation of his identity. The trace on his body is insufficient to secure his belonging to the community. It requires its re-inscription, a countersignature, which must take the form of repetition as he reproduces it towards the next generation. The aporia of circumcision as the mechanism of reproduction of Jewish identity is thereby remarkably similar to the aporia of writing, specifically, that which is reproduced is by the same movement "emancipated" from the control that guarantees the reproduction (*DLG* 96). The condition of possibility of the assertion of the proper is also the condition of its impossibility. Circumcision requires a confession, but a true and authentic confession is impossible without some sort of circumcision, some sort of selection of the traces that are organized and structured together into something coherent, some sort of claim of property or propriety over what parts truly constitute the self and which parts are inauthentic and supplemental.

In the end, *Circonfession* shows us that regardless of how its author feels, regardless of how his body is marked, and regardless of what he practices, the ways in which the Self defines itself are always vulnerably exposed to the Other and the possibility of violence. Identity is always the result of a negotiation that often happens despite the Self, imposing the Self with the task of accounting for it and making sense of it. There are many examples of this, such as how in the context of the Holocaust and of antisemitism in the French colony of Algeria, when Jackie Derrida (his civil name) was born, his Jewish name "Élie" was not recorded in his official documents (Circon. 86). The event of his circumcision is traced on his body but not in his memory, as least not in ways he can identify and account for as if it really happened. It is unforgettable but forgotten (Circon. 16, 60, 93-94, 104, 140). Much of his Jewish identity and culture, including his Jewish name, was kept a secret from him that he only learned later in life (Circon. 106-107). He was treated as someone who is guilty by being expelled from school because he is Jewish, despite not understanding what that meant (Circon. 57-59, 230, 266-67). The inscription of meaning over the

experience of his body and life is always the trace of other traces, all of which escape the narrow control and desires of his individual, autonomous self, if there is such a thing.

Near the end of the text, we are told that the author was nervous about giving a lecture in English about the "final solution," one of the terms for the German National Socialist genocidal program towards Jews (Circon. 286). Later he tells us that, at the lecture, he is confronted by a "young imbecile" who asks him what he did in order to protect the Jews during the war (Circon. 289). The weight of this moment is such that the text tells us that "il suffit de raconter le "présent" pour dérouter le théologiciel de G." (Circon. 288).[139] It is as if the young man in the audience had identified Jacques Derrida as simply a French philosopher, someone who, being French, was also probably not Jewish, and being old, was probably old enough to have been able to do something to resist the Holocaust, and, implied in the question, probably guilty for not having done anything. The young man simply could not see that by 1942 Jackie "Élie" Derrida was simply "un petit juif noir et très arabe qui n'y comprenait rien" (Circon. 57).[140] Despite and against himself, his identity is always handled to the Other and it is up to him to dispute it or validate it. Even if his guilt in the Holocaust is out of the question, this confrontation is enough for him to feel like perhaps he should have done more, that he should have performed his Jewishness or his rupture from Judaism a bit more, and this either to save the Jews or to save himself from the Jews (Circon. 289).

Georgette, the mother, sees her son rightly: he passes for an atheist. After his father died, she trusted him with his wedding band, which he then lost, and found that at the same time a "dé-cision" was happening inside of him, despite himself (Circon. 237-238). In my reading, this "dé-cision," this un-cutting, was the decision to not circumcise his children, to not reproduce the cut and thereby not pass along the "ring" and "alliance" that he inherited from his mother and father (Circon. 92, 188). This allows for a very literal, specific reading of what he means by claiming to be the last of the Jews (Circon. 145, 178). Now, she is incapable of recognizing him, and perhaps this can be interpreted as more than the effect of a literal medical condition. Perhaps, the scission between him and his mother was the dé-cision he made about his sons, which, like his belief in God, she chose to circumvent and not ask him about it directly. Nonetheless, he recognizes that

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[139] "It is sufficient to tell the 'present' to derail the theologicial of G.," which interpreted means: telling the story of what just happened at that conference is sufficient to unsettle *Derridabase* and deny its intended goals.
[140] "A little Jew [who was] black and very Arabic who did not understand anything about it."

the desire behind circumcision is the same desire behind literature (Circon. 76-77). He recognizes that prayers, tears, blood, and love, walk a thin line between fidelity and treason (Circon. 98-99). It is as if the sacred crime committed against him, his own circumcision, which he is choosing not to perpetuate, is recognized as an act of love from his mother. This also means that the choice to not perpetuate it—to let it end and hopefully let his sons be free from it—might also one day be interpreted as a betrayal and crime by his sons even if he did it because he loves them (Circon. 61-62, 135-36, 274-75). He wants to see them reach out into the world and grow, forgetting him, but also mourning him when he is gone (Circon. 53, 194, 206-207). As for his mother, because of her condition, the "grand pardon" is literally impossible. She will never read his confession, *Circonfession*.

Conclusion

In the last chapter I mentioned Derrida's lecture on the question of the "final solution." This expression communicates an ideal, hope, desire, or even dream, to solve problems with enough certainty that one can claim their solution is "final," never again to be revisited. Derrida's address at a 1990 UCLA colloquium[141] on this theme (Circon. 289) dealt with "political" rather than "religious" themes. According to Gil Anidjar, who edited the publication of the English version of that same speech in 2001, what Derrida had to say was not well received, if understood. He had argued that attempting to represent the Holocaust as an exceptional event that is *finished* and left in the past would serve only to eclipse "the general complicity of Europe with the Nazis" and potentially lead to even worse events (Anidjar 2014). My reading of Derrida's treatment of the history between Christianity and Judaism in *Circonfession* is largely inspired by this perspective. By making the structure of the economy of death salient in discourses about identities and history, Derrida shows us that there is a great danger in attempting to settle and finish difficult tensions once and for all. The past, present, and future, cannot be dissociated or isolated from each other. The business of the present search for a different or new future, for something better to come, can only be done in the active work of engaging with the traces of a past that must be mourned. Specially if those traces are cuts that are still fresh, bloody, and painful, they need careful and patient attention.

If time permitted, I would articulate the complicity between the notion of "final solution" with the notion of "absolute knowledge," which are both articulated in "eschatological" terms that are theological in more than one way, namely, the idea of an end, the assumption of a presence of a totality of knowledge, and the sense of a "happily ever after" that could be weaved here with the Christian medieval idea of a "beatific vision," which tempts me to search for an etymological relationship between "solution" and "salut," the French word for salvation, even if it is not there. I would have liked to write about the bedsore repeatedly invoked in *Circonfession*, the dying/surviving body of his mother Geo that opens itself gruesomely for Derrida to see its insides in his search for self-knowledge that substitutes theology for "geology" (e.g. Circon. 40-41, 72-

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[141] The proceedings from the colloquium, titled "Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution,'" were published in (Friedländer 1992). Derrida's keynote address, however, was not included. It was later published in 1994 with the title "Force de loi," and an English version followed in 2001 in the collection "Acts of Religion," edited by Gil Anidjar.

73, 118, 230). Alas, this is not possible. Nonetheless, I trust that I have done what I set out to do: to articulate and explain, based on a selection of Derrida's works, a defensible reading of his *Circonfession*, one that allows for an interpretation of the relationship between deconstructing his religious identity and mourning his mother.

What is, then, the relationship between the deconstruction of religious identity and the mourning of the author's mother in *Circonfession*? Deconstruction is a work of mourning because it shows that discourses that are built on some notion of eternal life and perfect presence that guarantees clear hierarchical binaries actually contain the conditions of their own impossibility. Impossibility is another name for death. Deconstruction dealt with religion from its beginning as it characterized the pervasive assumption of eternal life and perfect presence in scientific discourses as *theological*. In *Circonfession*, the question of the author's religious identity is represented through the entanglement of circumcision and confession: the mark of belonging to a community, and an authentic communication between parties that assumes total self-availability and recognition. In both cases, they are shown to be insufficient and unable to effectuate what they are intended to do. Circumcision depends on the recognition of both the circumcised and the community of circumcision, but even if this recognition is in place, it still needs more performance in order to be recognized by outsiders. Confession assumes an immediate access of the Self to itself, in its plenitude, and its capacity to communicate it to an Other that somehow has the same immediate access. This immediate access, however, either does not exist or cannot be articulated, which means that it cannot be communicated.

Both circumcision and confession are occasions of mourning because they open up the experience of the impossibility of that which they are supposed to guarantee, namely, belonging and authenticity. The only way religious identity can be thought of in light of the thought of the trace is as an active negotiation that happens between the Self and the Other regarding their desire for successful re(-)production and re(-)presentation. This requires the understanding that what is produced and presented is only possible through the *différance* that operates in the cut of an accompanying re- that signifies, paradoxically, both repetition and alterity. The play of *différance* makes it so reproduction and representation are never fully in one's control, never quite linear, never quite available to understanding. This negotiation has an economical structure similar to the structure of life/death. Religious identity, whether through confession or circumcision, enacts the

economy of death. This economy is always motivated by desires but regulated—ethically and unethically—according to the understanding that these desires can lead to violence and death.

The author's portrayal of his disrupted relationship with his mother leaves the reader uncertain about whether this relationship is an example of his philosophy—or if his philosophy is an example of that relationship. Georgette is the desired origin that discloses the author's own self to itself, but an origin that is not original. In the end, she does not disclose much. They clearly love one another, but she marked his body with a trace of belonging that he rejects. She cares about his belief in God but dares not ask him about it because she fears he is an atheist. He also cares, but he knows that she would not understand what he means when he says God is still present in his life, even if he is, indeed, an atheist. He decided to no longer reproduce the mark of Jewishness to the next generation, so he feels like he is killing Judaism and is the last of the Jews. This is an immeasurable betrayal, in light of the recent political history. It is possible that he is doing it out of a sense of authenticity, but he is suspicious of this authenticity that he learned from German thinkers, whose thought is continuous with Christians, who have persecuted his family through the centuries. If only he could talk to his mother, and confess all of it, even if she knows, so he could be told that he is understood and forgiven. If only, during their times together, they had been fully present and never absent. If only she could be present now. Or perhaps, if only she could, indeed and finally, be gone? As long as he is alive, that is not possible, either.

Perhaps none of this is true in a biographical sense. It is possible that *Circonfession* is an act of dissimulation, a dream, a lie, a representation that simply writes in circles without ever saying anything. But this is only important if we care to subjugate the text to its author, Jacques Derrida, and to determine its truth depending on its correlation to what is outside the text. If we take Derrida's philosophy seriously, however, we realize that reducing this work to a lie goes too far and dismisses too much. So what if this is fiction or literature and not biography or even journalism? As he so often repeats from Saint Augustine, truth is so much more than stating facts. After all, why would we need to confess what God already knows?

The economy of life/death always ends in death, but before the end, it is the condition of the possibility of life. A "successful" mourning moves on from the loss, integrating the Other into the ego to such an extent that the love that kept the relationship and the faithfulness between parties alive after death is now itself dead. Derrida prefers a mourning that remains unfinished in order to

maintain that love and that fidelity alive. In a similar way, Derrida's deconstruction of onto-theo-teleology and of religious identity should not be understood as the simple affirmation of an atheist materialism that seeks to move on and leave religion in the past. The work of deconstruction is the work of mourning. In affirming the impossibility of God, of an authentic self, of absolute knowledge, of purity, and of a belonging that is not threatened by the Other, it nonetheless also affirms our desires for these things. Like mourning, it keeps love alive even after death.

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