On the Necessity and the Impossibility of a European Cultural Identity

When we discover that there are several cultures instead of just one and, consequently, when we acknowledge the end of a sort of cultural monopoly, be it illusory or real, we are threatened with the destruction of our own discovery. Suddenly it becomes possible that there are just others, that we ourselves are an 'other' among others. All meaning and every goal having disappeared, it becomes possible to wander through civilizations as if through vestiges and ruins. The whole of mankind becomes an imaginary museum: where shall we go this weekend — visit the Angkor ruins or take a stroll in Tivoli in Copenhagen?

Paul Ricoeur, History and Truth

1. The Universality of Diversity and the Diversity of Universality

Not since the end of the last "World" War has the notion of Europe in its totality been so incessantly interrogated. The break-up of the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, the reunification of Germany, the ethnic
conflicts in Yugoslavia, the growing trends of racism, xenophobia, and anti-Semitism in every European country all to some degree appear as the signs of a displacement of European self-consciousness and a revaluation of the terms of European cultural identity. This situation has the characteristics of both a rupture or discontinuity with the past and a continuation, even an exemplification, of traditions as old as Europe itself. Its ideological character is likewise double. For some, the radical reorganization of much of European cultural self-consciousness falls under the sign of liberalism, diverse kinds of liberty rediscovering the greater path of history; for others, there is no precedent and no rule. At the limit, this crisis — a concept which itself, as we will see, may seem to be strangely in crisis — takes the form of a radical questioning of ethnic and racial conventions, political affiliations, historical origins, linguistic norms, official jurisdiction concerning political borders, constitutional authority, representative capacity, general defense, and law enforcement. And yet the crisis of European cultural identity, its patterns and politics, cannot be simply reduced to any historical unity which might stabilize or ground the debate in a fixed origin or reference. The particularity of any crisis (krisis, krisis: separation; decision; decisive act of discrimination; judgment) is to be found in the way that its first appearance as a universal principle is contemporaneous with the conceptual diversity which constitutes it.

Although the notion of a European geographical unity is at least twenty-five centuries old, Europe as a universal, self-conscious concept is the product of a tradition younger than three hundred years originating within the politico-theoretical movements of the Enlightenment. The universalizing machinery of the Enlightenment is based on ideologies of opposition, delimitation and exclusion. In Montesquieu's The Spirit of Laws (1748), Voltaire's Candide (1759), Rousseau's Social Contract (1762), Diderot's Rameau's Nephew (1762) — published first in Germany in a translation by Goethe (1805), then in France (1821) — and Lessing's Nathan, The Wise (1775) arise the distinctions which constitute the fabric of contemporary European politics and society: nature/culture, society/politics, human/institutional, public/private. These oppositions apply and reproduce themselves automatically within modern society. They operate in a network of social-political-philosophical relations which together form a conceptual totality, the "universal spirit." Only such a unifying theoretical force would permit the internal sundering of the spheres of modern society by the introduction of its own specialization. Thus arises a fundamental dialectic of the modern: it is at once necessary for the restitution of social specialization and diversification into a totality and contingent upon the social cleavages which make it possible in the first place. Social totality is never implicitly absolute: it is always the restitution of a temporarily lost totality. This emergence of organic individualism within the spiritual whole, which functions as a socially critical counter-part to the universalism of the Enlightenment, was a fundamental element in the thought of the young Goethe (as well as the young Schiller), and first drew him to Diderot who, with Lessing, had a great influence on the young Hegel.

European culture seen as a systematic claim to universality arises first as the assertion of that universality, as a corrective or restitutional gesture. It may be said, for example, that the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (1789) claims the universal presence of those human rights which are de facto not present but rather virtual. Like all such declaratory statements, its normative status is based on its absolute truth or universality while its essential sense as a statement rests on its non-truth, that is, on the necessity of its realization. This is a structural logic particularly important to Hegel's system of thought. In the Phenomenology of Spirit (1807), for example, he asserts that no object of knowledge undergoes the "phenomenological act" of being known without some alteration. Knowledge, he says, is a "tool" whose application does not leave the object of knowledge unchanged. Knowledge is never simply knowledge in itself; it is knowledge-knowing-itself (46). Conceptual knowledge, the self-constitution of concepts, is an instrumental operation which, precisely because it is instrumental, renders impossible absolute knowledge of its object. With this argument, a direct attack on Kant's transcendental deduction of the thing-in-itself in the Critique of Pure Reason (1781), Hegel lodges a global critique of the universal spirit and its movement in human history. If Kant's thing-in-itself were absolute, Hegel argues, it would have no finite bonds or predicates; that is, it would have no qualities which are knonable by a
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finite subject. It could be known only by an absolute subject and would be thus absolutely unknowable ("Glauben und Wissen" 910). Any thing, including the thing-in-itself, the thing as absolute, universal object, is accessible to knowledge only through its determinations, through the dispersion of its being in its particular manifestations. And yet, this dispersion is precisely what precludes its universality. For Hegel, this eternal manifestation of the determinations of a universal which continually reassemble themselves forming a superior universal, constitutes the dialectic of culture (Bildung). It is at once the constitution and the realization of the universal in its diversity (Phenomenology 298).

Even though the concept of European culture is supposed as universal, it has never had an absolute and universal form, has never been detached or indifferent with respect to its own meaning, has never been in-itself. It has always been able only to recognize itself in its instrumentality, in the moment when it applies itself to the task of discovering what it is. It has never been able to remain closed, frozen in an abstract totality. Thus the concept “European cultural identity” has sense only at the moment when it breaks off from itself and self-consciously sees itself as an object. It has sense only at the moment of its own introspective decomposition, at the moment of the rupture of its integrity, at the moment of its own cultural crisis. And yet this is also the moment which signals the impossibility of a fixed concept. Thus the double bind of culture as thing-in-itself, as unitary concept. The axiom of universality is the rule of diversity. Cultural identity has always taken the form of the crisis of cultural identity, but a crisis which unifies and disperses at the same time. The cultural history of Europe is the history of crisis. Cultural identity thus cannot recall a time when it wasn’t a question of cultural identity, when cultural identity was not in question, when some form of disequilibrium, dispersion, rupture was not present, sounding the alarm and the call to redefine, re-establish the identity presumed lost or threatened. Crisis is a constant. The crisis has no time. At all moments of the history of European culture it is already present, already determining its identity through the diversity of its universality. The modern imperative of absolute contemporaneity, exemplified, perhaps, by Rimbaud’s axiom — “Il faut être absolument moderne” — cannot overtake the history of crisis: the history of crisis precedes cultural identity itself.

2. Culture and Memory

In the long essay entitled The Other Heading, Derrida takes up the question of European cultural identity by intervening in the dialectic of Enlightenment which we have briefly presented. A notion of immanence, he asserts, is present today in the European spirit, a supposition of universality. At the same time the tools and materials of this Europe are such that they permit a reflection of this immanence, that is, a kind of cultural self-consciousness. European culture is thus at one with itself and beside itself. This “anguished experience,” says Derrida, is traversed by two contradictory certitudes: on the one hand, the old subject of European identity is exhausted; on the other hand, “this subject retains a virgin body.” (5) Like the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen which I mentioned above, “European identity” has at once a declaratory function, pronouncing what is its status, and a prescriptive function: European identity as an unfulfilled promise. The fact that Europe asks itself the question of its cultural identity is at once a sign of its fissure and of the impossibility of re-establishing its totality now and as it is. European self-reflection is already the index of its non-self-identity. It constitutes a self-knowledge, yes, but also a sign of a Europe to come, a Europe which must be chosen by the societies which belong to it, societies which nonetheless don’t have the benefit of absolute self-knowledge. The Europe-to-come is unknown and yet completely determined by Europeans. In this sense, the Europe-to-come

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1 The text of The Other Heading was first given as a lecture in Turin on May 20, 1990 at a colloquium on “European cultural identity.” It was reproduced in an abridged form, simultaneously in four languages, in the review Liber, October, 1990, a supplement to the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, l'Indice, El País, and Le Monde.
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J. Peter Burgess

has already arrived; it is here with us as the trace of its presence. This trace is called responsibility. Such is the ethical imperative of this little book. The unknown is present here and now, demanding a response and thus formulating a responsibility:

Hope, fear, and trembling are commensurate with the signs that are coming to us from everywhere in Europe, where, precisely in the name of identity, be it cultural or not, the worst violences, those that we recognize all too well without yet having thought them through, the crimes of xenophobia, racism, anti-Semitism, religious or nationalist fanaticism, are being unleashed, mixed up, mixed up with each other, but also, and there is nothing fortuitous in this, mixed in with the breath, with the respiration, with the very "spirit" of the promise (6).

These "crimes" which today touch every facet of European life are the signs of a disequilibrium, of a rupture or problematization of unity. Few would question this observation. However, Derrida pushes the "logic" of crisis further by underscores the notion that these "signs," these "crimes" against some more traditional Europe, are inseparably mixed with the very spirit of the Europe whose crisis they represent. This is the core of the notion of "responsibility" which guides Derrida's discussion. The necessity of moral response to the situation is a result of the impossibility of responding with absolute certainty, that is, of the necessity of responding to an aporia. The Europe of responsibility, of morality, of politics is the same as the Europe of the social "crimes" enumerated above. What's more, their association is not fortuitous but rather necessary: the crisis which engenders the questions engenders the "crimes." The "signs" refer both to an eternal Europe and the Europe of today. What, then, does it mean that Europe exists as an age, a youth, a maturity? Derrida reformulates the question in the essay's first "axiom": "We are younger than ever, we Europeans, since a certain Europe does not yet exist." (7) On the one hand, in so far as European culture extends hundreds of generations into the past, "we" Europeans — this "we" which is the timeless universal of European identity passing through history, unaffected and untouched by the changes of time — have existed as long as Europe. We are Europe. On the other hand, in so far as we pose ourselves the question of European identity, we are the first to take responsibility for the Europe to come. The self-conscious interrogation of European identity which has always been underway as long as there has been a universal idea of Europe is such that anyone who asks and responds becomes the "youngest" European, the first in the "new" which will organize itself in the name of Europe's return to itself. Return to where? From where? And how? The entire trajectory of The Other Heading represents a patient appraisal of the impossibility of responding with certainty to these questions, and the impossibility of knowing the manner in which a tentative response might be made. The present (time) itself implies a kind of imperative. In this spirit, Derrida evokes Valéry's essay "Notes on the Greatness and Decline of Europe" (1927) and its peculiar apostrophe, "What are you going to do TODAY?" (228) in order to draw attention to its enunciation of the typical modern theme of the ephemeral character of the present (the "pressant tense" Joyce calls its in Finnegans Wake) and the moral imperative which it implies. In a certain sense, the self-reflection which leads to a changed understanding of oneself is a self-repetition in the name of newness itself:

Is there a completely new "today" whose novelty would not resemble — especially not — what was called by another well-known program, and one of the most sinister, a "New Europe"? We come across traps of this sort at every step, and they are not merely traps of language; they are part of the program. (Derrida, The Other Heading 12)

The process of Europe's self-identification, its autobiography in the name of identity, not only results in false concepts of newness, but necessarily results in false newness. No newness is absolutely new. Everything that is new is burdened by the past and by the call of the future.

The response to this situation, says Derrida, must be based on memory. Decisions about the Europe to come can only be grounded in its historical identity. And yet we have already emphasized the impossibility of fixing European identity from an "objective" point of
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reference which lies beyond it. The Europe which must serve as a reference for knowledge and action cannot be present. Its identity is already disrupted by the fact that we ask after its identity. Either we are not Europeans or Europe has no identity. Identity cannot be determined from the outside. If we pose the question, we are outside. Although this aporia is particularly occidental, it is not specific to European culture. It is rather the indissoluble paradox of culture itself: "The proper of a culture is to not be identical with itself." (9) Here Derrida presents the dialectic of universalism pushed to its most extreme human application. In Hegel's *The Science of Logic* we read that the concept of unity (of being) is "the identity of identity and non-identity" (74). In the context of European cultural identity, Derrida simply draws the consequences of Hegel's theorem: a culture can only be perceived in its integrity, that is, as completely unified (identical with itself) from a point of view which is different beyond it, foreign to it (not identical). Yet from this position of foreign-ness and of difference its identity is compromised; it cannot be known absolutely, in its absoluteness. This aporia not only constitutes the field in which much of Derrida's thought has always operated, it is indeed the founding moment of occidental civilization. "Pure difference," he writes in *Glas*, "different from (it)self ceases to be what it is in order to remain what it is. That is the origin of history, the beginning of the going down (délit), the setting of the sun, the passage to occidental subjectivity. Fire becomes for-(it)self and is lost, yet worse (pire) since better" (240a). Thus Derrida's second axiom: the only universal property of culture is its non-identity with itself.

3. The Other: Memory and Promise

I will return to this point — from which Derrida himself never strays — after outlining the major rhetorical moments of *The Other Heading*. The essay's rhetorical force is formed around a development of several variations on the French word *cap* (caput, capitis "head," "heading"): "the extremity of the extreme, the aim and the end, the ultimate, the last, the final moment or last legs, the *eschaton* in general. It here assigns to navigation the pole, the end, the *telos* of an oriented, calculated, deliberate, voluntary, ordered movement: ordered most often by the *man* in charge" (14). "Cap" has at least three senses in French: (1) a point of land which advances into the sea; (2) a certain limit implying the notion of a difficulty ("dépasser un cap" — "pass over (a difficulty)"; (3) the direction or course of a ship or airplane ("changer de cap" — "change heading").

In *The Other Heading* Derrida chooses a rhetorical intervention in the discourses of the "cap," researches its position in the network of significations in which it participates within the text of European culture. His intervention constitutes a dislodging of the position of the word within the network of the concept's meaning and a disarticulation (and re-articulation) of the system itself. This disruption is the strategic-political (and thus ethical) moment of the reading. It is precisely the gesture of reading into the text's self-dissemination which subverts the borders of the text — here the cultural identity of Europe — and demands a *new articulation* of those borders.

The strategy of intervention constitutes the *responsibility* of philosophy.

But "The other heading" — "l'autre cap," the other cap, is as such already double. By virtue of the irreducibility of the *genitus subjectus* and *genitus objectus*, the other cap implicates also the cap of the other. There are two "subjects": the first is the cap (the *other* cap); the other is an undetermined "other." What's more, the first, "the other cap," announces a change of cap, a change of course. Still a third sense presents itself: not the undetermined "other" of the cap, but rather, a determined other, the other of *this* cap, of the logic or the concept of the cap, of this entire system of reference and understanding based on the concept of the cap. Thus the other heading as a rhetorical figure for the cultural identity of Europe provides the following semantic variations: (1) European cultural identity such that it is changing its heading, the *telos* toward which it directs itself undergoes an alteration; (2) an "other," another cultural identity presents itself; (3) a completely
other conceptual system appears, an other manner of thinking the entire logic of culture, identity and cultural identity.

I have already emphasized the impossibility of absolute newness, of the Rimbaudian axiom of the "absolutely modern" as such. The imperative of newness, Valéry's "TODAY" orients itself in relation to the past (memory) and to its future (promise). The movement of European history toward its cap, toward its telos, is presupposed by its very movement. The cap is always other-wise; it lies always elsewhere, realized and realizable only at another moment. It is identifiable only by a system of references or representation: it is not present, does not inhabit the condition which Hegel already recognized as that which in itself guarantees the propulsion of history. And yet it is present in the form of anticipation. The arrival is gradual. The anticipation varies as a function of its proximity. Anticipation guarantees (negatively) its punctuality. Pain is the labor of history. The universal spirit (Weltgeist), says Hegel in the Phenomenology, must have the patience to traverse the diverse forms of universal history (Weltgeschichte) through the expansion of time (17). Moreover, because the "cap," the telos, the orienting point of our culture, is present only in its anticipation, history takes places through the introduction of the unknown into the known, the non-being into being through the course of time. A more "proper" phenomenology of history would pose the question which in one form or another poses itself across Derrida's entire œuvre: how can the conceptual passage between a thing's being and its non-being take place. What is the ontological "container" which is so radically heterogeneous that it contains being, non-being and the rule of the passage from one to the other? The other — the other "cap" in this case — is, but is not such as it shall be in the future. What will be is unforeseeable, it is as the unforeseeable itself. This is the mode of any anticipation. Anticipation anticipates precisely that which cannot be anticipated. That which has not yet been known or thought. That which must be anticipated in the course of European cultural history is precisely that which is not (yet) in the memory of European culture. What is already stored in culture as memory, history or tradition, is precisely that which cannot be anticipated: it is already present. In so far as the movement of modernity is charged with this imperative of the

absolutely new, of the moral character of newness, of the redemptive promise of the tabula rasa which has at the same time powered the darker side of modern history, the need for the memory of the "old" Europe becomes even more pressing. The debate concerning the "revision" of history among German historiographers in the last decade, for example, can be seen in this light precisely as the sign of the memory of European culture in a register which is not simply that of "subjective" memory. If there is a danger, for example, in the notion of "revisionist history," it lies in the very naiveté of such an enterprise: "revisionism" will always have as its most remarkable effect the recalling of that which it seeks to discredit. "Normalization" will never have been possible: history will (henceforth) always contain, along with the object of normalization, the event of the call to revision. Only through a "total" or "totalitarian" revision would "total" forgetting be possible. And it would not be called "forgetting" but rather something considerably more dreadful: for forgetting always contains the trace of what is forgotten. The European memory, says Derrida, is precisely what guards us from the monstrosity of the explosion of the unforeseeable into the represent. "Old Europe" will help us to hold the course (the "cap") — assuming it's the right one.

But it will not have been necessary to limit ourselves to the purely conceptual resonances of the "heading" to exhaust its rhetorical effectiveness. The modern tradition has never hesitated, it seems, to attach a European immanence to Europe's accidental geography. Europe constitutes indeed a cap, the furthest western extremity of this continent. A once popular etymological analysis linked the word "Europe" with the Hebrew word "erob" — literally "land over which the sun sets" — though opinion now favors an Indo-European development of the word. Derrida signals Valéry's geographic characterization of Europe in a text suitably entitled, "The Crisis of Spirit" (1928):

Out of all these achievements, most, and the most astonishing and fruitful, have been the work of a tiny portion of humanity, living in a very small area compared to the whole of the habitable lands.
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This privileged place was Europe; and the European man, the European spirit, was the author of these wonders. (Valéry 311-12)

In a text also written between the wars, *The Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy* (1935), Husserl similarly identifies and analyzes the crisis of the European spirit, condensing the very essence of the European spirit with its geographic and territorial situation into the concept of "spiritual geography." The notion that the telos of human history intervenes in a determinate space and time, that is, a place, that the spiritual sense of the "cap" is necessarily associated with the geographical sense is relatively recent. Much of Kant's effort in *Critique of Pure Reason*, as well as in "What is Called: Orient Oneself in Thought" (1785), is toward the construction of a link between real being and its spatio-temporal predicates. I emphasize this point because it concerns directly, for both Heidegger and Derrida, the question of the "proper" of Europe or of any other entity. The place is inseparable from the taking-place, from the pure event, from the "what happens." The originality of the European "place" as a "cap," argues Derrida, is a confusion which marks the entire history of Western thought.

Europe has also confused its image, its face, its figure and its very place, its taking-place, with that of an advanced point, the point of a phallus if you will, and thus, once again, with a heading for world civilization or human culture in general.

The idea of an advanced point of exemplarity is the idea of the


4. The Heading's Other: Two Capitals

Thus the exemplarity of this place on earth, the eschatological thinking which at once happens there and exemplifies the ontological category of happening-there (anywhere), of taking-place, form the ground conditions of an ontology of Europe. Dialectically, the proper of Europe is to not be identical to itself (9) even while it identifies itself with this place and the eschatology of this place. These are the terms, argues Derrida, of the discourse of the Western modern. Europe struggling with the signification of the borders which erect themselves everywhere within its borders, sees itself nonetheless on the horizon of history. This is what Europe holds as the most proper in its paradoxical difference with itself.

Both the semantic extensions on the Latin sememe "cap" and their deconstructive implications are considerable. Derrida, for strategic reasons, will concentrate on two: "la capitale" (a capital city) and "le capital" (economic capital).

1. The notion of a governmental and bureaucratic capital of Europe is associated with its place, with its geographical position as the extremity of this continent. But it also represents a physical determination of the essence and trajectory of European culture which the first sense of "cap" tries to seize. A capital is always singular. Whether or not it is geographically central, it represents the center of
the nation, state or civilization: by its organizing or administrative principles it constitutes a stabilizing, unifying, mastering point. Any government, culture or civilization distinguishes itself by its particular structure and logic. The relations of power, legislation, and jurisdiction are founded upon and stabilized by their singularity — that is, by the unique relation of each to the general structure of relations which make it possible to speak of a civilization, culture, or political system in the first place. One might argue that no unification of the diversity of European culture would consent to one central capital of Europe. Nonetheless, suggests Derrida, the interaction of competing interests doesn't take the form of dispersion of cultural power but rather, the notion of the "capital" is already the sign of a struggle for cultural hegemony:

Through the established and traditionally dominant powers of certain idioms, of certain culture industries, through the extraordinary growth of new media, newspapers, and publishers, through the university and through techno-scientific powers, through new "capillaries," competitions — sometimes silent but always fierce — have broken out. (37)

The establishment of cultural identity characterized by a system of unifying characteristics implies the establishment of a certain number of political and economic institutions which, directly or indirectly, establish and support the culture by multiple means of reproduction and transmission. Even the origin of a cultural practice may be traced to cultural institutions, these institutions accord its existence in modern society. Cultural institutions determine, in one way or another, the identity of the culture. Their interaction, the play of their competitive forces, constitutes the shape of European cultural forces. The hegemonic structure of these forces establishes its de facto center. The critique of the concept of center, of the centerlessness of the center, has of course been a nearly permanent interest of Derrida since his first major analysis of the French structuralist movement in the 1960's. Its resonances with the question of European culture are clear:

It has always been thought that the center, which is by definition unique, constituted that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center. (Writing 279)

The sophistication of the argument in The Other Heading resides in its taking measure of the techno-scientific agencies at work in forming both European cultural identity and its "capitals." The "capital" of Europe signifies by way of the competitive forces of modern society, its hegemonic centrality. On the one hand, a culture cannot disperse itself without limit. A radical decentralization of cultural phenomena is certainly possible, but with a rule or logic of cohesion. Without a structure or system of binding relations, it is not identifiable. Thus, by a logic of coherence, if there is culture, there is a capital: that is, there is cultural hegemonic centrality. Culture which is is necessary culture which collects itself around an identifiable rule. On the other hand, modern science presents us with innumerable technologies of dispersion, of the dissolution of cultural hegemony. The networks of communication which unite the cultural cosmopoloi of Europe insure the remoteness of its individual participants:

A contradiction that is all the more serious in that, if these movements of "democratization" have accelerated, it is to a large extent thanks to this new techno-media power: to this penetrating, rapid, and irresistible circulation of images, ideas, and models, thanks to this extreme capillarity of discourses. (41-42)

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4 Derrida suggests in Glas that being itself is inseparably associated with a matrix force of collection, organization, limitation. Being would have founded itself upon restriction, restraint, constriction or limitation, upon resistance against dispersion which seems to precede it. Thus, being could not be abstracted from a kind of original bind which is never recoverable but ever present in the thought of being: a homonym intimates the association: y a (there is/mi lia (there bound). (23b)
Modern technologies of reproduction and transmission, the machinery of mediatization, contribute both to this dispersion, decentralization and to the alienation of cultural participants and consumers, while at the same time providing a unification of consumers through the connecting power of communication technologies. Technology has spanned the gap between high and low culture, emancipated the consumer, while at the same time introducing a new order of cultural alienation. In one sense, the advent of a television in every home is an ideal of democracy. But only if we don’t lose sight of the fact that democracy itself cannot function at all without each participant presupposing the isolation and the exclusiveness of individual interest.

2. What can still be said of capital, its critique and the great Capital which cast its shadow on this century? For Derrida, it is a matter of establishing a new way of “reading” capital in general and Capital in particular. This analysis, says Derrida, takes into account both of the totalitarian dogmatism of Marxist-Leninism and the counterdogmatisms which appear in opposition to it today. What, it must be systematically asked, are the new effects of capital in relation to the new techno-social circumstances in which we find ourselves.

For the principles of such an analysis, Derrida turns again to Valéry’s “The Freedom of Spirit” (1939) in which he address immediately and directly the question of capital in the European context. “For myself,” says Valéry, “(...) they are a kind of capital that grows and can be used and accumulated, can increase and diminish like all the imaginable kinds of capital — the best known of which is, of course, what we call our body...” (200). With the notion of capital, Derrida returns to the question of universality itself. Valéry generalizes the notion of capital to include not only the commercial aspects ordinarily understood, but also those elements which contribute to the development of culture. By means of a mechanism I have already discussed, the terms of a universalization not only permit the diversity of terms which particularize the universal, they also ground themselves upon it. Valéry recognizes the reality of the capitalist culture as well as the strategic necessity of recognizing the crisis of culture within the structure of capital. The universal, the ideal of our culture, is one which does not escape the logic of capital. The “capital” which is culture or civilization is, in this sense, constituted by the treasures and artifacts of this culture — material objects and those “who know how to use them.” The model of cultural capital is analogous with that of the universality of culture in general. It is made up of particular moments of the universal, the machinery of its consumption and transformation on the ideality of culture itself. The transformation effected by those who use the cultural artifacts permits them to go beyond the bounds of the culture as it is, to extend the limits of the ideal. Thus the “production machine of our civilization” as Valéry describes it, constantly and necessarily finds its trajectory beyond itself.

According to the capital logic that we see confirmed here, what threatens European identity would not essentially threaten Europe but, in Spirit, the universality of which Europe is responsible, of which it is the reserve, le capital or la capitale. What put cultural capital as ideal capital into a state of crisis (...) is the disappearance of these men who “knew how to read — a virtue now lost,” these men who “knew how to hear, and even how to listen,” who “knew how to see,” “to read, hear or see again” — in a word, these men also capable of repetition and memory, prepared to respond, to respond before, to be responsible for and to respond to what they had heard, seen, read, and known for the first time. (69-70)

5. Responsibility

European culture is thus universal and particular, monopoly and heterogeneous disparity. Never absolutely present, it is a condensation of the memory of the past and an indeterminate event to come. It cannot be a question of either/or, of fixing the multiple dialectics of its auto-affirmation. Nor does thinking European cultural identity entail
accepting or encouraging its own polysemity: it is on the contrary necessary, says Derrida, not to content ourselves with one monolithic idea of Europe, but rather recognize that we move toward a future Europe which is impossible to anticipate, even though everything which we can undertake today refers in one way or another to anticipation itself. The “heading” of European culture leads to something beyond European culture, something beyond the modern tradition. It will take a form which is unimaginable and unforeseeable for us now. It is difficult to navigate: our goal lies utterly foreign to this structure of navigation which leads us to it. The imperative of action consistent with such a notion of the future, of the unforeseen comes to us from the past, or rather from the presence of the past. The heritage of European culture relegates to us a very special kind of responsibility to which we have, in effect, no recourse.

The alternatives seem hopelessly contradictory. Action can consist neither of breaking with the past nor of repeating it. It is clear that another kind of gesture is necessary, another type of action whose modality it will be necessary to invent (30). Yet, as Derrida has demonstrated elsewhere, not even the logic of invention, its revolutionary or emancipatory character, escapes a structure of aporia. (“Psyché” 60) It does not escape the aporia of European cultural identity and precisely for this reason it constitutes a position of responsibility. Responsibility itself is constituted by nothing more and nothing less. In any moment of ordinary decision — decision which permits itself to be made within a logical structure — there is an analytical judgment; the alternatives stand waiting, prepared by the logic or the nature of the question. It is only a matter of choosing among them. When the question itself of what European culture is can be decided based on the materials at hand here and now, the decision is always already made. The materials for the response to every question are already inscribed in the interstices of the question. We must, insists Derrida, recognize this fact and cease to speak of such “decisions” in terms of moral or political responsibility. But the central “principle” of The Other Heading is that the question of the future of Europe cannot be posed in an ordinary way, in the only way we know, that is, one in which the answer is a synthesis of the elements which control the question. This is the fundamental law of all interrogation. In fact, all of Derrida’s strategic effort has contributed to formulating the question which does not meet this criterion, the aporiaic question, the question for whose response the materials are simply not at hand. The artifacts of cultural memory are simply indexes of what the absolutely new by its nature excludes. Its form, as we have seen, leads to contradiction within the only structure of questioning which we know. By answering in the same terms, we will never escape the program which presupposes our responses. And this is precisely where responsibility and the necessity of a response begin.

The condition of the possibility of this thing called responsibility is a certain experience and experiment of the possibility of the impossible: the testing of the aporia from which one may invent the only possible invention, the impossible invention. (41)

The radicality of this remark must, of course, not be underestimated. Its force is difficult to ignore. True responsibility begins there where we do not possess the terms, the system, the “language” or structure of the response which is demanded of us. The terms of the questions which we pose are already contaminated with the logic and the structure of the old questions and old ways. The question — of how to respond to the culture-to-come of European culture — already contains the form of the “new” which of course is nothing but the same old new. And yet we know no other possible way of responding. Nor can we turn away: just as we do not have the tools to answer the aporia, we are also unequipped to dissolve it, to turn from its unknowable monstrousness. Responsibility thus implies necessarily responding in an impossible way. The future of the new must be invented before decisions about the new can be taken. And yet an invention, precisely in so far as it is an invention, breaks with what is hitherto considered possible. (If it were already possible, the “invention” would be nothing new). The invention of this response represents an illegality, be it metaphysical, and the rupture of the continuity of what we consider the domain of the possible. It’s for this reason that Derrida calls it impossible: the “impossible invention,” (“Psyché” 60).
Rimbaud could never have foreseen that, in order to responsibly respond to the imperative of newness (of the "modern"), it is necessary to surpass the logic of newness. "il faut être absolument moderne" becomes suddenly absolutely naïve: newness becomes obsolete.

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Works Cited


