The Science of Writing

Introduction
In 1967 the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, published in book form a collection of texts he had been composing, under the title De la Grammatologie, *Of Grammatology*.[1] The book was translated into English in 1974 by Gayatri Spivak and, with its one-hundred-page translator's introduction, constituted the first major introduction to Derrida for English-speaking audiences. In 1985 an American professor of English Literature, Gregory Ulmer, published his engagement with Derrida under the title, *Applied Grammatology: Post(e) Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys*.[2] Ulmer's investigation is one of the very few instances where Derrida's mention of 'grammatology' is taken up at length. In July 2008, at the *Derrida Today* conference held at the University of Sydney, in Australia, the French Derrida scholar, Catherine Malabou, presented a key note address that probed the fate of Derrida's notion of 'grammatology' and how its question might be re-engaged or re-invented today.[3] By 'grammatology,' Derrida inferred a 'science of writing,' though an approach to the question of writing that radically engages with the question of science, of truth and of knowing. And if Ulmer activates the question posed by grammatology, it is in order to question a scene of teaching the radically questions writing as such. This paper aims at asking if the work of Derrida and Ulmer has continued relevance for a radicalising of the scene of teaching precisely by a critical engagement with what we commonly name as writing and what we commonly understand as its agency.

The End of the Book

The philosopher Jacques Derrida is perhaps best known for his invention of the notion of 'deconstruction.' Working in a philosophical tradition that engaged closely with the work of Martin Heidegger, Derrida significantly renovates Heidegger's thinking with respect to two key Heideggerian terms: those of 'destruction' and 'ontological difference.' Both of theses are crucial for an overarching project of philosophy for Heidegger — that of ending the tradition of metaphysics in Western thought. Derrida, too, is concerned with the closure of Metaphysics, or with Heidegger's understanding of that closure, as a task of philosophy. By 'destruction,' Heidegger infers a way of philosophising such that we secure ever more primordial engagements with the question of being, working through the errancy of Western metaphysics in order to reach the originary spring or leap into the question of what is. By 'ontological difference' Heidegger means that essential difference between beings that are in the world and the being of those beings. Indeed, metaphysics is inaugurated when this difference is forgotten and being itself is approached in an interrogation of beings that are rather than the being of those beings. Hence for Heidegger there is the intimate relation between the way of philosophising and the difference essential to being.

Derrida radicalises Heideggerian 'destruction' in the term he invents, 'deconstruction.' It too is a way of philosophising, though its approach to the question of origin will differ remarkably, and it too is engaged in a 'deconstruction' of the western metaphysical tradition. Derrida also radicalises Heidegger's notion of difference, in the neologism, *différance*, which in a similar way confounds the originality of an originary distinction Heidegger would want to make between beings

and being.[4] *Différance* is the confluence of two primordial and essential abyssal relations with respect to any closure to meaning with respect to context: firstly, there is a radical openness in a spatialising of language such that meaning, the question of meaning, operates in an economy of differential relations that defer one to another in an infinite circuit of exchange; secondly, in that the question of meaning happens in plays of difference and never in the closed or saturated context of a transcendental signified, meaning, as saturated or closed is infinitely deferred. *Différance* refers to this crossing-over of a differing and deferring with respect to the production of meaning and with respect to the dissolution of a transcendentalism with respect to the finitude or self-certainty of metaphysics.

Derrida has been most often engaged with for his contribution to a post-Heideggerian thinking with respect to the crucial terms of Heidegger's philosophy, as well as for radicalising the project of philosophy with respect to its relations to literature, psychoanalysis and politics. As I mentioned above, one of the first Derrida texts to appear in English was *Of Grammatology*, which certainly had Heidegger in its sights, and it introduced a particular notion of writing under the term 'Grammatology' that would not resurface in Derrida's latter corpus. Though we may recognise that during the 1970s in a series of publications Derrida not so much theorises but practices grammatologically as the invention of ways of writing that exemplify both deconstruction and *différance*. I am referring to his 1974 text *Glas*, the short text *Cinders*, and *Envois*, the preface to his study on Freud in *The Post Card*.[5]

If we get a sense from what I have said above about Derrida's approach to Heidegger, even if it is a vague sense, it has a particular emphasis on how the notion of origin is considered, indeed, how we question, philosophise or think without recourse to this notion as essential or fundamental to thinking as such. In *Of Grammatology* Derrida approaches the scene of writing from the vantage point of origins, in two senses that are both embedded in the metaphysical tradition and maintain Heidegger in that tradition. What are those two? Firstly, Derrida is able to emphasise that historico-philological and philosophical investigations into writing invariably become stalled when they attempt to broach the question of the origin of writing in its emergence from primitive modes of inscription. The origin of writing as the emergence of the human from primitivism becomes not simply an undecidable and speculative task of history and anthropology, it becomes decisive in a secondary manner for differentiating the human from the non-human, the human from animality, for example.[6] I emphasise in a secondary manner, because of that other emphasis Derrida gives in his approach to the question of writing.

In the same year as the appearance of *Of Grammatology*, Derrida published another monograph titled *Speech and Phenomena*.[7] Each of these texts refers to and relies on the other in some way. Together they present what is perhaps most essential in Derrida's approach to the question of writing, in relation to it as secondary or supplementary to speech. Hence, essential to the western metaphysical tradition is the search for a ground, or essential nature such that knowing has its certainty and self-certainty. Derrida emphasises from Plato to Husserl the privilege given to presence as this self-certainty, and the overwhelming emphasis given to the evidential nature of this presence in the self-presence of the voice to oneself, what Derrida termed phono-centrism. In as much as language is constituted in the speaking self, language has its philosophical privilege in the voice, and constitutes writing as a supplement to

speech, the secondary inscription of the voice. This Derrida terms logo-centrism. From Plato we find writing to be undecidably good and evil as that which destroys living speech and that which enables the transmission of what is said.[8] As a *techne*, or technology, writing presents from the first the requirement of its own effacement in a semiology, from Aristotle on, that privileges the transcendental signified or meaning, over the play of signifiers or elements of inscription that necessarily exceed what may be voiced. If for Aristotle human being is the animal with language, and indeed Derrida has emphasised that the tradition from Aristotle to Heidegger has repeated this horizon, writing, for this speaking animal, will be its distinguishing *techne*, or essential technology that opens temporality to historicity and human being to anthropology.

If Derrida's encounter with the project of the closure of metaphysics engages a project of deconstruction, one of its key techniques, in its readings of the texts of philosophy is to recognise the hierarchical binaries that operate implicitly in those texts, as if they were natural, as if they were simply the exposition of truth, logos, logic. Deconstruction aims to locate the economy of the binary and its hierarchy, and crucially, avoid an inversion that would simply maintain the economy and hierarchy as such though invert the terms. Rather, Derrida aims to show how that economy unhinges itself, how the supposition of a natural standpoint is itself always already structured by the supplemental or secondary term. Hence, with respect to the requirement in the text of philosophy for the effacement of writing as the living presence of a text's meaning, Derrida will emphasise the supplemental economy of writing as that which continually undoes the idealism of a transcendental signified and hence emphasises the disseminating play that writing inaugurates as material inscription and excess not reducible to presence or self-presence. In fact writing is precisely the presentation of the radical effacement of that self-presence, as the open possibility of text to meaning. This is necessarily a displacement of the ideality of an author-originator as arche or archeon as well as the teleological closure or certainty of meaning.

In *Of Grammatology*, and in the context of deconstructing 18th century engagements with the origin of language in a natural primitivism, particularly with the work of J.J. Rousseau, Derrida will introduce the notion of the 'dangerous supplement' as that secondariness that radically destabilises the naturalised understanding of the truth of meaning or the essence of being. His engagement with or understanding of writing extends this dangerous supplement to displace the originary question of the being of beings in terms of a presentness in logos, in language, to a trace-structure of absence as an archi-ecriture, or originary writing the always already precedes and make possibly both speech and writing in their spacings and temporalisings, differing/deferring structures and difference one-to-the-other. And if the three cultures of the book, those of Greece, Judaism and Islam, had consolidated a Western tradition of thinking that itself cannot be though outside of the book, the phenomenon of the book, the technics and transmissibility, circulation and translation of the book, that book's essential relation to truth cannot be separated from an onto-theology that essentially brings these three traditions together in their difference. The book is onto-theological and in that cannot escape the transcendental as both its limit and moment of origin. It is in this sense that Derrida introduces grammatology precisely in terms of the end of the book and the beginning of writing.[9]

The Scene of Teaching

What, if anything, has this to do with tertiary students and issues around writing? Would not what I have been discussing be far removed from any here and now of a scene of learning or teaching? Would any activation of a concern with pedagogy, radical or conservative, be able to make use of this obscure philosophical thinking of Derrida's concerned, it seems, with something essential to writing? In short, can we remotely consider an applied grammatology, one that sets about, systematically or haphazardly, using such an engagement with writing in the scene of learning? It is interesting that Derrida simultaneously published along with *Speech & Phenomena* and *Of Grammatology*, a collection of previously published essays, under the title *Writing and Difference*. Though writing appears in its title, and Derrida will engage with the radicality of deconstruction with respect to inscription and dissemination, as well as the question of the book within the western tradition, he will not again reference grammatology. Equally, in what followed, in *Dissemination* (1972), another collection of essays, Derrida maintains his sustained philosophico-critical engagement with meaning, language, inscription increasingly bringing into the free-play of the philosophical signifying chain the question of literature and psychoanalysis as each of these have undermined the naturalised functioning of the transcendental signified. Though no return to grammatology.

Hence, it was with some surprise that in 1985 an American literary theorist, Gregory Ulmer produced a remarkable engagement with Derrida, precisely under the title *Applied Grammatology*. Ulmer had been teaching at the University of Florida (and still is) in the same department as one of the English translators of Derrida's 1974 extraordinary text *Glas*, a disseminating play of writing that moves between two columns of text, one a column on the German philosopher GWF Hegel and the other a column on the French writer Jean Genet. The editors produced a companion volume to their translation, titled *Glassery*, which provided a sustained and further disseminating play on the texts of *Glas*.[10] Though philosophically erudite, and engaged in the closest of readings of Hegel and Genet, Derrida provides no footnotes or other referencing to the complex myriad of interweaving references he brings to his engagement. The text is excessive, obscene even, as academic writing. Ulmer was invited to contribute to *Glassery*, having initially encountered *Of Grammatology* while researching Rousseau, and in that encounter, deciding to become a scholar of Derrida rather than Rousseau.

Ulmer distinguished sharply between the related though clearly different projects of deconstruction and grammatology, though this difference would be neither binary nor hierarchical, where either would serve as an originary moment for the derivative nature of the other. Ulmer suggests:

> The difference between Writing and deconstruction may
> be seen most clearly in the different ways Derrida treats
> philosophical works (which he deconstructs) and literary
> or artistic texts (which he mimes). The methodologies of
> the two instances here bear little resemblance to each
> other: the philosophical work is treated as an object of
> study, which is analytically articulated by locating and
> describing the gap or discontinuity separating what the

work "says" (its conclusions and propositions) from what it "shows" or "displays" (its examples, data, the materials with which it, in turn, is working). Literary or plastic texts (a "new new novel" by Sollers, or drawings by Adami, for example) are not analysed but are adopted as models or tutors to be imitated, as generative forms for the production of another text.[11]

An initial reception to Ulmer's text by certain Derrida scholars suggested that Ulmer was committing the cardinal error of turning deconstruction into a method or methodology, something Derrida refused on a number of occasions, as method or methodology, in its reliance on logos understood precisely in the metaphysical tradition of presence, logic and linearity of temporal succession, would subsume his project as science in the broadest sense, with the inside-outside borders that this would entail as to the extent to which philosophy, literature and writing as such may be within or excluded from science understood as episteme. However, Ulmer was doing much more and much less than that, and a reading of 'applied' grammatology as the instrumentalising of Derrida would be missing the point entirely.

Rather, Ulmer goes straight to the heart of the matter of episteme in engaging the scene of learning with the question of writing and in doing so undoes the naturalised hierarcheries that would differentiate the sciences and humanities, for example, with respect to the question of truth and the subject of truth. But more than this, Ulmer locks on to the inscriptable strata that constitute the layered 'semes' or seams of writing and meaning, the 'picto-ideo-phonographic' that Derrida identifies as his styles of writing. And crucially Ulmer introduces here, and significantly extends in subsequent monographs, the issue of the tele-technologies of circulation that constitute the 'postal system of the letter' constitutive of writing's media. Thus in *Teletheory* and in *Heuretics*, Ulmer places increasing emphasis on the accelerated shifts in the late 20th century from literacy to 'electracy' to something that has to be encountered otherwise than as the substituted technics of a writing that has moved from hand-writing to machine writing, as if the nature of evolution and the naturalness of evolving technologies are able to maintain undisturbed the essential relation of writing to meaning. This is more fully explored in his 2003 text *Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*.[12] We would need to here emphasise the fundamental implications of deconstruction and grammatology with respect to Derrida's ongoing and ethical question of the human in relation to the non-human, which implicates the differences understood between the natural and the artificial, between the living and the machine. A deconstruction of these binaries and recognition of the naturalised role of writing as a technical medium are central to concerns with grammatology, writing, the scene of writing and cybernetic technologies that have transformed literacy to 'electracy.'

Technology before the human

It is the current pervasiveness of tele-technologies of internet circulation that need to become the focus of such a questioning. Internet modes constitute the 'picto-ideo-phonographic' displacement of the linearity of alphabetic literacy. However, we need to recognise and research the extent to which this circulation of the scriptable

constituted horizons for disclosing in grammatology not simply the plasticity that has always already inhabited the free play of signifiers restricted to the monolingualism of a transcendental signified, but more essentially and precisely as the disturbing artificiality of the natural, the always already intimate relation of the artificial, the technical, the supplemental, as that which enabled the possibility of naturalised meaning to emerge. This equally disturbs our understanding of the monocultural or essential understanding of author-originator, and opens the space for an econo-mimesis to displace the unified field of meaning always at question in logocentric engagements with writing. In terms of pedagogy and the discipline of writing or the writing of discipline, we may begin to recognise the extent to which the question of knowing may not reside in the restricted economy of the harnessing of language to the certainty of meaning, as if language is a tool transparent to the logical task of knowing. In this writing becomes the secondary and to-be-effaced medium of a wanting to say. Rather, we may recognise that what we considered an unassailable binary, the organic and the inorganic, the human and the machine, may have been the most naturalised of origins for thinking the human as rational animal, and the origin that grammatology as a 'science of writing' essentially undoes.

Notes

1. Jacques Derrida (1967/1974). *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. Gregory Ulmer (1985). *Applied Grammatology: Post(e) Pedagogy from Jacques Derrida to Joseph Beuys*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
3. The Malabou presentation is forthcoming in the second edition of the journal *Derrida Today*, whose inaugural volume was launched at the 2008 conference. It is noteworthy that the 2008 edited collection of texts, Derrida's legacies: Literature and philosophy, has a number of contributions that make explicit reference to grammatology, as if this issue, left behind in Derridean study, is now becoming a moment of scholarship in the wake of Derrida's death. See in particular Christopher Johnson (2008). "Derrida and technology." In *Derrida's Legacies: Literature and Philosophy*. Eds. Simon Glendinning and Robert Eaglestone. London & New York: Routledge, pp. 54-64.
4. The key text for engaging Derrida on these Heideggerian themes is his text Différance, delivered in January 1968. See Derrida (1968/1982) "Différance." In *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Brighton: The Harvester Press, pp. 1-27.
5. See Derrida (1974/1986). *Glas*. Trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., & Richard Rand. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press; Derrida (1987/1991) *Cinders*. Trans. Ned Lukacher. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press; Derrida (1980/1987) *The Post Card*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.
6. For a book-length engagement on the question of the divide between the human and the animal, see Derrida (2006/2008). *The Animal That There I Am*. Trans. David Wills. New York: Fordham University Press.
7. Derrida (1967/1973). *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*. Trans. David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
8. See Derrida (1968/1981) "Plato's Pharmacy." In *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 65-172.

9. See particularly Derrida (1967/1978) *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Routledge. Note that *Writing and Difference* was the third simultaneous publication by Derrida in 1967.

10. John P. Leavey Jr. (1986) *Glassary*. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.

11. Ulmer (1985). *Applied Grammatology*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. x-xi.

12. Ulmer (1989) *Teletheory: Grammatology in the Age of Video*. London & New York: Routledge; Ulmer (1994) *Heuretics: The Logic of Invention.* Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press; Ulmer (2003*) Internet Invention: From Literacy to Electracy*. New York: Longman.