Many of these essays have been translated before. Although all the translations in this volume are "new" and "my own"—the quotation marks serving here, as Derrida might say, as an adequate precaution—I have been greatly assisted in my work by consulting:


Although I read it after completing the work on this volume, I believe that Philip Lewis's "Vers la traduction abusive" (in Les fins de l'homme—à partir du travail de Jacques Derrida, Paris: Galié, 1981) contains the criteria by which all translations of Derrida will be judged.

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New York City
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I will speak, therefore, of a letter.

Of the first letter, if the alphabet, and most of the speculations which have ventured into it, are to be believed.

I will speak, therefore, of the letter a, this initial letter which it apparently has been necessary to insinuate, here and there, into the writing of the word difference; and to do so in the course of a writing on writing, and also of a writing within writing whose different trajectories thereby find themselves, at certain very determined points, intersecting with a kind of gross spelling mistake, a lapse in the discipline and law which regulate writing and keep it seemly. One can always, de facto or de jure, erase or reduce this lapse in spelling, and find it (according to situations to be analyzed each time, although amounting to the same), grave or unseemly, that is, to follow the most ingenuous hypothesis, amusing. Thus, even if one seeks to pass over such an infraction in silence, the interest that one takes in it can be recognized and situated in advance as prescribed by the mute irony, the inaudible misplacement, of this literal permutation. One can always act as if it made no difference. And I must state here and now that today’s discourse will be less a justification of, and even less an apology for, this silent lapse in spelling, than a kind of insistent intensification of its play.

On the other hand, I will have to be excused if I refer, at least implicitly, to some of the texts I have ventured to publish. This is precisely because I would like to attempt, to a certain extent, and even though in principle and in the last analysis this is impossible, and impossible for essential reasons, to reassemble in a sheaf the different directions in which I have been able to utilize what I would call provisionally the word or concept of differance, or rather to let it impose itself upon me in its neographism, although as we shall see, differance is literally neither a word nor a concept. And I insist upon the word sheaf for two reasons. On the one hand, I will not be concerned, as I might have been, with describing a history and narrating its stages, text by text, context by context, demonstrating the economy that each time imposed this graphic disorder; rather, I will be concerned with the general system of this economy. On the other hand, the word sheaf seems to mark more appropriately that the assemblage to be proposed has the complex structure of a weaving, an interlacing which permits the different threads and different lines of meaning—or of force—to go off again in different directions, just as it is always ready to tie itself up with others.

Therefore, preliminarily, let me recall that this discreet graphic intervention, which neither primarily nor simply aims to shock the reader or the grammarian, came to be formulated in the course of a written investigation of a question about writing. Now it happens, I would say in effect, that this graphic difference (a instead of e), this marked difference between two apparently vocal notations, between two vowels, remains purely graphic: it is read, or it is written, but it cannot be heard. It cannot be apprehended in speech, and we will see why it
also bypasses the order of apprehension in general. It is offered by a mute mark, by a tacit monument, I would even say by a pyramid, thinking not only of the form of the letter when it is printed as a capital, but also of the text in Hegel's Encyclopedia in which the body of the sign is compared to the Egyptian Pyramid. The \textit{a of difference}, thus, is not heard; it remains silent, secret and discreet as a tomb: \textit{oikesis}. And thereby let us anticipate the delineation of a site, the familial residence and tomb of the proper\(^2\) in which is produced, by \textit{difference}, the \textit{economy of death}. This stone—provided that one knows how to decipher its inscription—is not far from announcing the death of the tyrant.\(^2\)

And it is a tomb that cannot even be made to resonate. In effect, I cannot let by a tacit monument, I would even say by a pyramid, thinking not only of the familial residence and tomb of the proper\(^1\),

\begin{footnotes}
\item[1] TN. Throughout this book I will translate \textit{le propre} as "the proper." Derrida most often intends all the senses of the word at once: that which is correct, as in \textit{le sens propre} (proper, literal meaning), and that which is one's own, that which may be owned, that which is legally, correctly owned—\textit{all the links between proper, property, and propriety}.

\item[2] TN. The last three sentences refer elliptically and playfully to the following ideas. Derrida first plays on the "silence" of the graphic difference itself, as a tomb, like a pyramid, like the pyramid in which Hegel compares the body of the sign. "Tomb" in Greek is \textit{oikesis}, which is akin to the Greek \textit{okos}—house—from which the word "economy" derives (\textit{okos}—house—and \textit{nemen}—to manage). Thus Derrida speaks of the "economy of death" as the "familial residence and tomb of the proper." Further, and more elliptically still, Derrida speaks of the tomb, which always bears an inscription in stone, announcing the death of the tyrant. This seems to refer to Hegel's treatment of the Antigone story in the \textit{Phenomenology}. It will be recalled that Antigone defies the tyrant Creon by burying her brother Polynices. Creon retaliates by having Antigone entombed. There she cheats the slow death that awaits her by hanging herself. The tyrant Creon has a change of heart too late, and—after the suicides of his son and wife, his \textit{family}—kills himself. Thus family, death, inscription, tomb, law, economy: In a later work, \textit{ Glas}, Derrida analyzes Hegel's treatment of the \textit{Antigone}.

\item[3] TN. ". . . not fortuitously affiliated with the objectivity of \textit{theorein} or understanding." A play on words has been lost in translation here, a loss that makes this sentence difficult to understand. In the previous sentence Derrida says that the difference between the \textit{e} and the \textit{a of difference/difference} can neither be seen nor heard. It is not a sensible—that is, relating to the senses—difference. But, he goes on to explain, neither is this an intelligible difference, for the very names by which we conceive of objective intelligibility are already in complicity with sensibility. \textit{Theorein}—the Greek origin of "theory"—literally means "to look at," to \textit{see}; and the word Derrida uses for "understanding" here is \textit{entendre}, the noun form of \textit{entendre}, to hear.
\end{footnotes}
present, a being-present\(^1\) in its truth, in the truth of a present or the presence of the present. Now if \textit{différence} \(\Kappa\) (and I also cross out the \("\Kappa\") what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone. Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge or in a hole with indeterminate borders (for example, in a topology of castration).\(^5\) In every exposition it would be exposed to disappearing as disappearance. It would risk appearing: disappearing.

So much so that the detours, locutions, and syntax in which I will often have to take recourse will resemble those of negative theology, occasionally even to the point of being indistinguishable from negative theology. Already we have had to delineate \textit{that différence is not}, does not exist, is not a present-being (on) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything \textit{that it is not}, that is, \textit{everything} and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent. And yet those aspects of \textit{différence} which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies, which are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being. Such a development is not in question here, and this will be confirmed progressively. \textit{Différence} is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological—ontological—reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which onto-theology—philosophy—produces its system and its history, it includes onto-theology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return.

For the same reason there is nowhere to begin to trace the sheaf or the graphics of \textit{différence}. For what is put into question is precisely the quest for a rightful beginning, an absolute point of departure, a principal responsibility. The problematic of writing is opened by putting into question the value \textit{arkhè}.\(^4\) What I will propose here will not be elaborated simply as a philosophical discourse, operating according to principles, postulates, axioms or definitions, and proceeding along the discursive lines of a linear order of reasons. In the delineation of \textit{différence} everything is strategic and adventurous. Strategic because no transcendent truth present outside the field of writing can govern theologically the totality of the field. Adventurous because this strategy is not a simple strategy in the sense that strategy orients tactics according to a final goal, a telos or theme of domination, a mastery and ultimate reappropriation of the development of the field. Finally, a strategy without finality, what might be called blind tactics, or empirical wandering if the value of empiricism did not itself acquire its entire meaning in its opposition to philosophical responsibility. If there is a certain wandering in the tracing of \textit{différence}, it no more follows the lines of philosophical-discursive than that of its symmetrical and integral inverse, empirical-discursive. The concept of \textit{play} keeps itself beyond this opposition, announcing, on the eve of philosophy and beyond it, the unity of chance and necessity in calculations without end.

Also, by decision and as a rule of the game, if you will, turning these propositions back on themselves, we will be introduced to the thought of \textit{différence} by the theme of strategy or the strategem. By means of this solely strategic justification, I wish to underline that the efficacy of the thematic of \textit{différence} may very well, indeed must, one day be superseded, lending itself if not to its own replacement, at least to enmeshing itself in a chain that in truth it never will have governed. Whereby, once again, it is not theological.

I would say, first off, that \textit{différence}, which is neither a word nor a concept, strategically seemed to me the most proper one to think, if not to master—thought, here, being that which is maintained in a certain necessary relationship with the structural limits of mastery—what is most irreducible about our \textit{"era"}. Therefore I am starting, strategically, from the place and the time in which \textit{we} are, even though in the last analysis my opening is not justifiable, since it is only on the basis of \textit{différence} and its \textit{"history"} that we can allegedly know who and where \textit{we} are, and what the limits of an \textit{"era"} might be.

Even though \textit{différence} is neither a word nor a concept, let us nevertheless attempt a simple and approximate semantic analysis that will take us to within sight of what is at stake.

We know that the verb \textit{différer} (Latin verb \textit{differre}) has two meanings which seem quite distinct; for example in Littre they are the object of two separate articles. In this sense the Latin \textit{differre} is not simply a translation of the Greek \textit{diapherein}, and this will not be without consequences for us, linking our discourse to a particular language, and to a language that passes as less philosophical, less originally philosophical than the other. For the distribution of meaning in

\(^4\) TN. As in the past, \textit{être (Sein)} will be translated as \textit{Being}. \textit{Êtant (Seiendes)} will be either beings or being, depending on the context. Thus, here \textit{Êtant-present} is "being-present." For a justification of this translation see Derrida, \textit{Writing and Difference}, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), Translator’s Introduction, p. xvii.

\(^5\) TN. "... a hole with indeterminate borders (for example, in a topology of castration)." This phrase was added to "La Differance" for its publication in the French edition of this volume and refers to the polemic Derrida had already engaged (in Positions; elaborated further in \textit{Le Facteur de la vérité}) with Jacques Lacan. For Derrida, Lacan’s "topology of castration," which assigns the "hole" or lack to a place—a hole with determinable borders—repeats the metaphysical gesture (albeit a negative one) of making absence, the lack, the transcendental principle that can be pinned down as such, and can thereby govern a theoretical discourse.

\(^6\) TN. The Greek \textit{arkhè} combines the values of a founding principle and of government by a controlling principle (e.g. archology, monarchy).