

Introduction: Beyond the Paper Principle

DAWNE McCANCE

To edit this memorial issue on Jacques Derrida was to experience what he called “the tension between gathering and dispersion” (*Paper* 13). For, on the one hand, production of the issue was an enactment of “the power of consignation,” as defined in *Archive Fever*: all of the following essays came in response to a call made to established Derrida scholars to gather together in his name, to send their work for coordination into a single corpus, a *Mosaic* issue that, in many ways, is characterized by synchrony and “the unity of an ideal configuration.” The issue, already an archive, not only obeys the “archontic principle” (*Archive* 3) of gathering together, but also resides within the shelter of an academic institution, with all the hermeneutic entitlement that comes with that address. Yet, on the other hand, the essays collected here, written *after Derrida*, disturb ideas of institutional and interpretive privilege and effect a dispersion of what would be gathered into one. The resulting ambivalence the issue enacts, between conservation and dissociation, gets played out, according to Derrida, in every gesture of archivization, every publication, and every scene of writing. He was interested in the *between* of this dramatization. Always, it seems, he called attention to the between. Might we find something of his legacy there?

What follows, by way of an introduction, a “supplement,” to this special issue, is but a note “on” paper (it was written first by hand with a mechanical pencil, then transferred to a PowerBook paper machine); a note, let’s say, on Derrida’s *paper between*. It is derived for the most part from his *Paper Machine*. The note deals, all too briefly, with Derrida’s reflections on Freud’s *A Note Upon The ‘Mystic Writing-Pad.’*

1. *prosthesis*

It is as if memory cannot remember well enough. This is one of the points Sigmund Freud makes in *Note* on the mystic writing-pad. In the *Note*, Freud tells us that if he “distrusts” his memory, he can “supplement and guarantee its working by making a

note in writing” (227). And distrust his memory Freud does. Like René Descartes before him, Freud cautions against trying to remember too much; we should instead rely on paper, on writing, for the prosthesis it is. The word *prosthesis* (from *pros*, in addition + *tithenai*, to place, put) designates a substitute or supplement that involves “translation, transfer, or displacement” (Wills 13) from “nature,” a body (lacking), to an “artificial device.” Think, for instance, of a hearing aid, or for that matter, a “false breast,” which is the example the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives in defining prosthesis as “an artificial part supplied to remedy a deficiency.” When he needs to supplement deficient memory, Freud reaches for paper, “a sheet of paper, which I can write upon in ink,” and which then becomes “a ‘permanent memory trace’” (227). All we need to remember is where we have put that piece of paper, Freud adds, and we can reproduce the memory deposit unaltered, at any time we like.

Judging from the number of times he turned to the text, Derrida was fascinated with Freud’s *A Note Upon the ‘Mystic Writing-Pad,’* and not the least for the role that “paper” (*writing* paper) plays in the text and in Freudian theory overall. Freud’s prosthesis is a paper support. “He goes with paper, as backing and surface of inscription, as a place where marks are retained,” Derrida points out in *Paper Machine*; “but simultaneously he tries to free himself from it. He would like to break through its limits. He uses paper, but as if he would like to put himself *beyond a paper principle*” (48). The limitation of paper, for Freud, is that its surface is quickly exhausted. “The sheet is filled with writing, there is no room on it for any more notes, and I find myself obliged to bring another sheet into use, that has not been written on.” The disadvantage cannot be overcome by recourse to slate board and chalk, in which case, while the surface capacity may be unlimited, there is, with each erasure, no lasting or “permanent trace” (227). It is, of course, in the crux of this dilemma that Freud introduces the *Wunderblock*, his own model of a “paper machine”—something *between* the paper principle (the *Wunderblock* is bordered by paper) and a technical apparatus; *between* manual and mechanical imprinting.

Decades after Freud’s *Note*, the prosthesis remains divided. This is, at least, the case for a periodical such as this one, which resides, Derrida suggests, between, “the *journal*, between the book and the newspaper” (*Paper* 3); all the more so is this the situation of *Mosaic*, given its *title* and its *interdisciplinary* mandate. When I joined the journal as Editor about six years ago, the office functioned for the most part as a card-file operation, with my predecessor meticulously editing submissions by manual inscription onto the page. Given the rhythm of its production—proofs, second proofs, printing, reprinting, binding of sheets together, mailing, and warehousing—and given the practice that I continue of editing essays by hand, *Mosaic* still belongs

to the era of paper. At the same time, in the process of “*de-paperizing*” (55) its support, the journal has generated a Web page, powerful database architectures, electronic submission, subscription, replication, and archival formats. It resides, then, somewhere *between*: “between the era of paper and the multimedia technologies of writing that are transforming our existence” (53). *Between*, we have come to learn, does not mean *end*: the transition to electronic prostheses has not rid our offices of paper, but only added more.

In one sense, Derrida says in *Paper Machine*, “paper” is all he ever talked about. “I have never had any other *subject*: basically, paper, paper, paper” (41). Although he wrote *on* paper, during a period when its end was foretold—“the ‘loss’ of the support: the end of the ‘subjectile’ is nigh” (42)—Derrida preferred to speak of paper’s retreat, its *withdrawal* (*retrait*), rather than its death. It was his way of introducing to a discussion of “paper,” as if we know what that word means, a questioning of the *apocalyptic* and of every discourse that proffers finality, a destination or end. Derrida preferred to say “withdrawal,” so as to invite a thinking of being, and of the being of paper: “Hasn’t ‘withdrawal’ always been the mode of being, the process, the very movement of what we call ‘paper’? Isn’t the essential feature of paper the withdrawal or sidelining of what is rubbed out and withdraws *beneath* what a so-called support is deemed to back, receive, or welcome?” (50). His reflections on paper’s “*retrait*” take us beyond a discussion that is bound by inherited notions of “subject,” “substance,” and “support,” to a thinking of the *trace*—and therefore, of mourning, the work we are engaged in *after Derrida*, the work he gave us to do all along: “Isn’t paper always in the process of ‘disappearing’—dying out—and hasn’t it always been? Passed away, don’t we mourn it at the very moment when we entrust it with mourning’s nostalgic signs and make it disappear beneath ink, tears, and the sweat of this labor, a labor of writing that is always a work of mourning and a loss of the body?” (50).

2. *fold, feuille*

Derrida belonged to the era of paper. For much of his writing life, he was, by his own account, what Heidegger called a “man of the hand,” who worked first on paper with a pen, one he dipped in ink (62), and who wrote several of his most experimental texts—including *Dissemination*, “Tympan,” *The Post Card*, *Glas*—well before the computer (25–26).

The machine remains a signal of separation, of severance, the official sign of emancipation and departure for the public sphere. For the texts that mattered to me, the ones I had the slightly religious feeling of “writing,” I even banished the ordinary pen. I dipped into the ink a long pen-holder whose point was gently curved with a special drawing quill, producing

endless drafts and preliminary versions before putting a stop to them on my first little Olivetti, with its international keyboard, that I'd brought abroad. I still have it. My idea must have been that my artisanal writing would really break its way through into that space of resistance, as near as possible to that hand of thought or word evoked by the passage in Heidegger that I later tried to interpret in "Heidegger's Hand" (20).

In the experimental texts "written" by hand before the computer, his "most refractory texts in relation to the norms of linear writing" (25), Derrida, as much as Freud, wanted, "*desired*," to pass beyond the paper principle, to free himself of "those constraints of paper—its hardness, its limits, its resistance" (47). It would seem that he discovered the beyond between: not only between the page, the post card, the Olivetti typewriter, and a Macintosh computer, but also between and within the folds of the sheets "on" which he wrote those radical books, the paper that we commonly take to be a flat and impassible surface, but that is indeed a screen. "Paper echoes and resounds, subjectile of an inscription from which phonetic aspects are never absent, whatever the system of writing," Derrida suggests in *Paper Machine*, in words that could well describe *Glas*. "Beneath the appearance of a surface, it holds in reserve a volume, folds, a labyrinth whose walls return the echoes of the voice or song that it carries itself; for paper also has the range or the ranges of a voice bearer" (44).

3. *prosthesis of the inside*

In his *A Note Upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'*, Freud observes that prostheses used to assist sensory functions—spectacles, photographic cameras, and ear trumpets for instance—are built on the same model as the sense organs themselves. And what of a device such as a writing tablet, the mystic pad, that can be used as a memory aid? What is so compelling for Freud about the *Wunderblock* is that it models, "shows a remarkable agreement with" (228), the structure of the psyche itself.

The mystic pad, Freud explains in his essay, consists of a slab of dark brown resin or wax with a paper edging; the slab is overlaid with a dual coversheet consisting of a thin transparent upper layer and a more delicate waxed paper layer beneath. When a stylus scratches the surface of the mystic pad, the inscription is transferred via the waxed paper to the underlying slab; to lift the double coversheet is to erase what has been written, thus to free the seemingly-pristine surface to receive new notes; the permanent (memory) trace of what was written is retained, however, on the waxen substrate. The imperfections of the contrivance are unimportant, Freud says; what matters is the magic pad's "approximation to the structure of the perceptual apparatus of the mind" (229).

We approach another ambivalence here, the irresolvable tension between inside and out. “But where does the outside commence? This question is the question of the archive” (*Archive* 8). For if, as Freud claims, the mystic writing-pad, the *Wunderblock*, perfectly represents the psyche, the archiving apparatus that memory is, it would not do to stress the “secondary and accessory exteriority” of the mechanical apparatus, to “natural” or interior memory. Although memory cannot but limp on its own and must needs rely on prosthetic support, and although the prosthesis is already inside as the working of memory itself, Freud “invariably maintains a primacy of live memory and of anamnesis in their originary temporalization,” Derrida contends (92). Even as he offers radical accounts of repression and the unconscious that put “writing,” a paper machine, on the inside, anterior to psychic speech, Freud bows to metaphysics and its interior/exterior, natural/technical, life/death oppositions. In several texts, Derrida reads in Freud’s work this movement, sliding, back and forth across the border between two opposing terms, the play that implicates one in the other and that is productive of difference. In these texts, again, Derrida takes us beyond the paper (pleasure) principle and eschatological thinking to the *trace*, *différance*, as “originary,” and as constitutive of “the essence of life” (“Freud” 203). Movement across and between: as Derrida reads him (in “And Say the Animal Responded?”), Lacan, too, even as he advances beyond Freud, would arrest deferral in favour of fixing a hierarchical, “literally Cartesian” (127), boundary separating response from reaction, the human from the animal-machine; it is “the purity, the rigor, and the indivisibility of the frontier” (125) that troubles Derrida, “especially when—and this is singularly the case for Lacan—the logic of the unconscious is founded on a logic of repetition which, in my opinion, will always inscribe a destiny of iterability, hence some automaticity of the reaction in every response, however originary, free, deciding [*décisoire*] and a-reactional it might seem” (127).

4. theater of the prosthesis

What difference would the computer have made to Freud’s account of memory? Derrida wondered about this more than once, and in the context of observing that prostheses are structuring (“what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way” [*Archive* 18]). In *Paper Machine*, Derrida recounts his own transition from pen and paper to the computer as the experience of another “dramaturgy,” wherein prompts and commands to add or delete are programmed for us by a machine, “staged by a theater. The text is as if presented to us as a show, with no waiting. You see it *coming up* on the screen in a form that is more objective and anonymous than on a handwritten page, a page which we ourselves *moved down*” (24–25). So many

changes are outlined by Derrida in these pages, changes to our experience of space, place, time, the body (“the arms and the hands, our embracing of the written thing at a distance”), and not the least, the family (the computer “renders *other* our old sorting out, our familiar altercation, our family scene”) (25). The computer is a transformative paper machine. And yet, Derrida suggests, it does not put a halt to the specter’s comings and goings. Perhaps it even makes more fluid the movement between two, the folding of the outside in. “No more outside. Or rather, in this new experience of specular reflection, there is more outside and there is no more outside. We see ourselves without seeing ourselves enveloped in the scroll or the sails of this inside/outside, led on by another revolving door of the unconscious, exposed to another coming of the other” (27).

WORKS CITED

- Derrida, Jacques. “And Say the Animal Responded?” Trans. David Wills. *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal*. Ed. Cary Wolfe. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2005. 121–46.
- _____. *Archive Fever*. Trans. Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1995.
- _____. “Freud and the Scene of Writing.” *Writing and Difference*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1978. 196–231.
- _____. *Paper Machine*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2005.
- Freud, Sigmund. *A Note Upon The ‘Mystic-Writing Pad.’* 1923-1925. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey. Vol. 19. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961. 225–32.
- Wills, David. *Prosthesis*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1995.