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Apostrophe and Apocalypse: Notes on Theatricality in Jacques Derrida's "Envois"

Abstract. This article aims at uncovering and interpreting the selected theatrical tropes in Jacques Derrida's "Envois" in relation to an interpretative path paved by Samuel Weber in *Theatricality as Medium.* Following Weber's intuitions, "Envois" is read as a process of staging the postulates posed by Derrida in his previous works, including "Freud and the Scene of Writing" or "Envoi." The logic of staging, as it is argued, relies first and foremost on the trope of apostrophe, understood both as an act of addressing somebody and a punctuation mark. Derrida's spectral correspondence—in which addressees, addressers, destinations, and postcards themselves engage in an ongoing play of hide and seek—employs the performative aspect of apostrophe in order to keep the deconstructive wheel in motion, in search of the genuine intimacy with the other. By means of numerous encrypted and deciphered events, actual and fictional encounters, allusions to the *fort/da* scene and the mirror stage, or the revisions of Matthew Paris's illustration of Socrates and Plato, Derrida invites readers to immerse themselves in the ghostly exchange and its inherent temporal and spatial twists; the stake of this task is to follow the link joining *apo-strophe* with *apo-calypse*, with regard to the *catastrophe* that resides between them.

Key words: Jacques Derrida; deconstruction; materiality; apocalypse; apostrophe.

Citability / Iterability

Although theatricality has never occupied a central position in Jacques Derrida's writings, it seems that its ghosts persistently percolate through them. Samuel Weber points out that in "Double Session," a text devoted to Stephane Mallarmé's closet drama, Derrida "moves from a purely 'theoretical' discourse, describing an object independent of it, to a 'theatrical' mode of (re)writing that *stages* (dislocates) what it also recites: the theatrical movement of Mallarmé's writing" (2004a: 14, emphasis in the original). Weber continues: "In the almost four decades since this essay was published, Derrida's writing has not ceased to demonstrate and explore, with increasing explicitness and variety, its own theatrical quality as a 'staging' or *mise en scène*, rather than as an essentially constative reading of something held to exist independently of it" (2004a: 14, emphasis in the original). Be it through the spectral dialogue of the two columns of *Glas*, the selection of earlier works and their re-readings on separate sides of *Cinders*, the director's notes smuggled into *Specters of Marx*, or finally the enigmatic postcards of "Envois," Derrida attempts to utilize the materiality of the paper as an interruptive instance hindering a spatial-temporal standstill threatening every single act of writing. Just as drama opens itself up to an infinite number of possible performances, revisions, and interpretations, the stages Derrida so eagerly constructs aim at guaranteeing the ongoing, iterable replication of differences, which cannot be easily put down as a subtle form of logocentrism.

Let us shift towards another founding father of Weber's theory of theatricality—Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin, what the Copernican Revolution of the Epic Theatre has irreversibly changed is the confirmation that theatrical gestures are citable, that is, both quotable and prone to be put in motion, following Latin *citere*. Unlike human actions, gestures—even if they are but speech acts, as Derrida perhaps would argue—have definite beginnings and ends. According to Weber, citability is the capability of being moved from *site* to *site*, with our *sights* oriented towards that which is to come (Weber 1996). Furthermore, both German *zieteren* and English *to cite* equally signify the action of breaking the movement, of "arresting it" (Weber 1996). Due to its potential citability, the gesture thus becomes a fixed element within a greater fluctuating form. Consequently, as Weber reinterprets this observation, "a gesture . . . interrupts and suspends . . . the intentional-teleological-narrative movement toward a meaningful goal and thereby opens up the possibility of a different kind of space, that

of an incommensurable singularity" (2004b: 46). Such a singularity marks the withdrawal from treating theatrical works as fixed forms, privileging sudden ruptures they bring instead. Inherently discontinuous, theatre thus becomes the most suitable space of Derridean iterability as it relies on the acts of citation—or repetition—which at the end of the day does not replicate a source element, but rather produces a sheer novelty instead.

This article aims at mapping and exploring selected theatrical tropes in Jacques Derrida's "Envois," which, as I believe, reaches the peak of the strategy indicated by Weber. Firstly, on the postcards included in it, not only does Derrida *re-play* (or *reply to*) and *re-stag*e the *fort/da* scene and the mirror stage (the founding spectacles of psychoanalysis), but also he reconstructs numerous encrypted and deciphered events, actual and fictional encounters, and stubbornly revises Matthew Paris's illustration of Socrates and Plato. Secondly, while writing about these issues, he persistently returns to the figures of apostrophe, tragedy, scene, catastrophe, and theatre, both on their textual and performative or material strata. In my reading, I endeavour to focus on the latter manifestation. I will try to extract the deconstructive trope of apostrophe, which Derrida frequently employs and ponders upon in his spectral correspondence. Eventually, I will try to trace the course from *apo-strophe* to *apo-calypse*, followed by the postcards, with regard to *catastrophe* that resides between them.

Staging the Apostrophe

What is the relation binding Derrida's two autonomous texts, "Envoi" and "Envois"? What is the functional link between the philosophical essay on Martin Heidegger and the epistolary quasi-novel, respectively? If one sticks to Weber's account of citability and its association to iterability, it might be argued that the latter text stages the critique the former puts forward in a sequence of scattered gestures. Simon Critchley summarizes Derrida's attack carried out in "Envoi" as follows:

> What is being challenged by Derrida is the unilateralism of Heidegger's claim that there is a sending (*envoi; Schickung*) of Being from the Greeks through epochs of increasing oblivion, which is gathered into the destiny or destination of Being (*das Seins-Geschick*) at the end of philosophy. (2014: 84, emphasis in the original)

In other words, there is no being (*l'être*) wandering through the history of philosophy; there are only letters (*lettres*). Instead of an apocalyptic revelation, there is only the ongoing play of concealing and revealing scattered and fragmentary particles. Consequently, instead of a complete form, there are only discontinuous stagings. Yet, Derrida is aware of the danger of a subtly hidden logocentrism that his critique might smuggle, and hence he attempts to immunize it by means of both unfolding "Envoi" as homophonous with "Envois," and by writing the latter as a network of deconstructive practices which are already at work.

As I am convinced, a figure that is capable of shedding light on this intricate network is that of apostrophe. To put it bluntly, "Envois" as a selection of postcards is first and foremost an apostrophe. As Derrida ensures its reader(s) in its opening sentence, "[y]ou might read these *envois* as the preface to a book that I have not written" (1987: 3). Moreover, in his biography authored by Benoit Peeters, it is pointed out that in 1977 Derrida worked on the project entitled *Freud's Legacy*, consisting of "Le facteur de la vérité," a text on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and a preface, later included in *The Post Card*, yet "[a]t that stage the 'Envois' were not part of the project at all" (Peeters 2012: 295). No matter how fixed the final composition of *The Post Card* is, "Envois" seems to wander off the rest of the contents. It happens to be a preface without the book, a paratext without its constitutive text, and a set of postcards without their proper destinations; as a speech act it is oriented towards the matter which is either concealed or absent, yet simultaneously this displacement of an addressee does not annul the process, but rather maintains it. This is precisely the first side of apostrophe Derrida is fascinated with. Etymologically speaking, apostrophe stems from *strephein*: a turn or an act of turning away. Hence, apostrophe as a figure—no matter whether in a play or a poem—is anchored in the foundational break; it suspends the chain of events and silences all the other speakers in order to privilege a third party, be it a deity, a muse, an audience, or a reader. However, this gesture by no means guarantees that the apostrophic speech will not be eavesdropped or appropriated by someone not entitled to do it. Consequently, the addressed deities turn out to be readers, crimes plotted aside—common knowledge of the audience, and general turn to the audience—intimate experience of each of its members.

Postcards—due to their form—are exposed to similar dangers. Just like letters, they might reach wrong places or people, they might come later than expected, or they might not be received by any addressee at all. Unlike them, however, postcards are not carried in envelopes, and therefore they remain ceaselessly exposed to the other. We never know who has read them before us

and whether somebody has changed the messages written on them. Derrida, fond of the analogy binding together postcards and apostrophe, describes the strategy of "Envois":

> Thus I apostrophize. This too is a genre one can afford oneself, the apostrophe. A genre and a tone. The word—apostrophizes—speaks of the word addressed to the singular one, a live interpellation (the man of discourse or writing interrupts the continuous development of the sequence, abruptly turns toward someone, that is, something, addresses himself to you), but the word also speaks of the address to be detoured. (1987: 4)

Through the announced play of one addressee and a detour, Derrida numerously shifts tones in "Envois," from love letters to readings of Freud and Heidegger, from private reports on daily events to provocative erotic messages and visions of death, never entirely ensuring us who is speaking at the very moment, and who is presupposed as an addressee. Real events merge with fictional encounters, whereas philosophical meditations intertwine with mockery and intimate desires.

Radical discontinuity performed in "Envois" leads us to the aforementioned other side of apostrophe: apostrophe as a punctuation mark. Derrida writes: "In question might be a proper name or a punctuation mark, *just like the apostrophe that replaces an elided letter*, a word, one or several letters, in question might be brief or very long sentences, numerous or scant, that occasionally were themselves originally unterminated" (1987: 4, emphasis mine). Apostrophe in this sense marks an absence. It results from the substitution of a textual element with a sign staging the break in the word. But what kind of letters are elided by means of apostrophe? If "Envois" indeed consists of apostrophes, then the apostrophized segments displace not only their proper addresses, but also each of the messages. Precisely, through the passages omitted and indicated in the text through the blank spaces, Derrida reminds us that the typed content might be equally misleading. Firstly, they might be apostrophes *per se*—effects of substituting one content with another one, with no guarantee whether one is reading the initial text or the mark of its dislocation. Secondly, because of the logic of apostrophe, each of the *envois* never reaches its final and fixed form, but partakes in an undecidable movement oriented towards possible alterations and transactions to come. What is at stake is rather an ongoing interruption, transporting one from site to site, and finding each of the entered posts temporary and not satisfactory.

Staging the Apocalypse

Rendering Derrida's ghostly postcards as apostrophic inevitably leads us to the notion of an archive. Michael Naas argues:

> From the very beginning of his work right up to the very end, Derrida was . . . preoccupied in a particularly acute way by the archive, sensitive from the very beginning to the way in which past discourses, past archives, come to occupy the terrain in advance, sensitive, therefore, to the impossibility of ever escaping the archive, though also to the *undesirability* of ever wishing to do so. (2015: 126, emphasis in the original)

On the spatial level, the text of "Envois" is a result of an arbitrary selection: the *envois* included are governed by the particular order, while its reader can never be entirely sure what scope of Derrida's correspondence is indeed included in it, and how it has been manipulated prior to the publication. However, just as in "Différance," instead of speaking of metaphysical and transcended being [*l'être*], Derrida focuses on the letter a [*la lettre a*] (Derrida 1982a: 3–4), in "Envois" apostrophe, already inscribed as a split in being [*l'être*], is transformed into a letter [*la lettre*] opened up to the logic of movement, dislocation, and other contingent postal conditions. Consequently, the text of "Envois" is constantly staging its capability of saving and preserving messages, and the dangers that might interfere with their readability. The temporal level of the postal archive is often recalled through Matthew Paris's illustration with Plato dictating Socrates what to write. This accidental apostrophe which could not have taken place shows a similar coincidence, occurring when a postcard from a holiday reaches us after the arrival of its addresser. Derrida calls this sudden twist of temporalities—resurfacing numerously in the case of the mentioned illustration—catastrophe: *kata-strephein* or an overturn. After all, since Socrates has not left any written texts and most of our knowledge about him is already mediated by others, the origins of philosophy turn out to be the origins of the archive, haunted by spectres appropriating and interrupting the linear course of time, re-citing past elsewhere as the upcoming past, as if from beyond the grave. Once again, there is no being sent for us from the Greeks; there are only postcards.

Wandering postcards, written (and overwritten) by ghosts to ghosts, happen to keep the turning wheel of catastrophe in motion as it rolls through iterable concealments and revelations, hence their apocalyptic tone. On

the one hand, for instance in "No Apocalypse, Not Now" (1984) and "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy" (1982b), Derrida perceives apocalypse as a logocentric structure anchored in the transcendent name that is promised to be eventually revealed, while the secret it keeps—entirely and widely comprehended. This is one of the reasons of Derrida's robust critique of Heidegger in "Envoi" (in the singular) and the counter-model presented in *The Post Card.* On the other hand, there is another apocalypse in "Envois," rooted in *apo-kalyptein*, that is—the act of speaking *from* the *concealed* position, whose address and destination cannot be traced. For John D. Caputo, this form of apocalypse might be considered as "an apocalypse *sans* apocalypse, an apocalypse of the *sans*, of the secret *sans verité* . . ." (Caputo 1997: 95): the apocalypse without a presupposed horizon of expectation and openness to the fact that any post may suddenly call us to abandon it. Instead of addressing the ultimate event, the apocalypse-without-apocalypse rehearses its intrinsic spectacle, and through this rehearsal—if one keeps in mind that for Derrida repetition always involves a production of differences—maintains the ongoing differing and deferring.

The iterable and haunting sense of apocalypse can be easily spotted in Derrida's *Specters of Marx* and its opening reading of Hamlet. In fact, the father's spirit reveals the secret of the king's death and the name of the murderer, whereas the legitimacy of the ghost's words relies solely on Hamlet's oath (Derrida 2006: 6–7). This asymmetrical relation with ghosts stems from the visor effect, which protects the identity of the spectre and forces us to take the other exclusively by its word (Derrida 2006: 6–8). Similarly, "Envois" seems to announce that any reaching of the addressee is in fact received by the other, whereas the pure moment of being together with the others is disrupted by the necessity of an addressee or a destination. In this place, the visor or *la visière* known from *Specters of Marx* meets the rear mirror of "Envois," *le rétroviseur*, in a ghostly encounter. The automotive metaphors in "Envois," as Alan Bass notes, originate in their common etymological root, since *vois* of *envois* and *voi* of *voiture* commonly stem from Latin *via* (1987: xvi–xvii). At the same time, an *automobile*, to play on this word for a little longer, is something which *automatically* and *autonomously* puts itself in motion. The rear mirror allows one to turn without the actual turning around to check what is spatially behind. Anchored in the French word *rétroviseur*, it provides one with the capability of reacting to the events before they actually happen. As a metonymy of catastrophe, the rear mirror is subject to the ongoing play of covering and unveiling, supporting Derrida's impasse with the other. After all, it is a mirror which does not aim at reflecting the one who is looking at it; it is a mirror that cannot equally

reflect two people sitting next to each other. Finally, it is a *viseur*, a sight, which indeed enhances vision, although by means of diverting it.

As we can judge from Derrida's focus on checking whether he is not followed, the lovers' secret meetings, both evading others and stimulated by their possible and intimate presence, might imply a refiguration of apocalypse from the ultimate spectacle at the end of time into a mode of either postal or spectral intrusion of the other. Just as there is no ultimate sending from the Greeks, the Biblical history also does not identify an addresser, an *envoi* wandering through the epochs, and its final destination. We have to bear in mind that the seven missives known from the Apocalypse—just as sendings or *envois*—are exposed to the danger of missing their proper destinations and addressees, whereas John, firstly an addressee (as a prophet) and later an addresser (as a writer) of the whole revelation, happens to be a name subsuming an unknown number of authors under itself. Apocalypse, therefore, in its very core seems to deprive itself of apocalypse, dividing its one promised *envoi* into the sendings spreading within the catastrophic correspondence. It might be claimed that apocalypse is but apostrophe, whose message is both interrupting and interrupted. Importantly enough, in *Faith and Knowledge* Derrida claims that revelation (*Offenbarung*) is inherently presupposed by the mechanical revealability (*Offenbarkeit*) (1998: 16). Yet, what is there to be revealed or opened (following German *öffnen*) if postcards are not carried in envelopes, and everyone who dares halt them believes that he or she "opens" them for the very first time?

Maintaining the Intimacy

The ontological and apocalyptic perspectives hinted above by no means transport us far from the mundane events and secret lovers' accounts Derrida's epistolary piece delineates; all of these tropes, in fact, might be subsumed under the common yearning for maintaining the intimate. Apostrophe alone aims at fulfilling this task, since it either signifies the decision to address the other or marks the elided letter with a punctuation mark, and then establishes the congruence between the substituted content and the sign which replaces it. However, intimacy itself might turn into a dangerous logocentric structure, and consequently fetishize the other. The ontological and apocalyptic projects open themselves to the juncture at the end of times, understood as something they inherently lack, yet pose it via the specified link to their own origins. The idea of fulfilling the circle falls back into a deconstructive trap not only because it mistakes the exterior event with the quality that is already

presupposed, but also because it claims that the very same event guarantees a closure. The catastrophic twists "Envois" introduces aim at deconstructing such a seeming standstill. By the same token, the ongoing correspondence can never reach the point of an absolute certitude, be it that of an addresser, an addressee, or a content; it would replace the otherness with an instance of an "I."

For Catherine Malabou, "[t]he catastrophe or dangerous reversal results from a collision-which is at the same time by chance and of necessity—between the desire for an absolute intimacy with the other and the very impossibility of every joiningtogether" (Malabou and Derrida 2004: 195). Still, against this statement, I believe that the absolute intimacy should not be mistaken with an ultimate reunion, but rather identified as the unexhausted possibility of maintaining the motion. Putting it bluntly, after the "joining-together," there is nobody to whom one may write. The otherness fuelled by the postal principles dissipates during the encounter, which by no means retrieves the other "inhabiting" the postcards. There is being instead of the letters. However, if indeed postcards included in "Envois" are citable gestures—in other words, if they operate according to the principle of iterability—then one should no longer focus on the intimacy with the other, but rather the intimacy with the machinery producing the otherness.

In "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Derrida postulates that Sigmund Freud's teachings on the unconscious should be re-educated by means of the self-sufficient machine, supplementing it with a radicalized understanding of a trace (2001: 287–289). "Envois," in turn, demonstrates how such a machine could work. Perhaps this provides one with a reason why Derrida, in his spectral correspondence, reconfigures two foundational spectacles of psychoanalysis, and aims at depriving them of their hidden instances of a standstill. The first one is the mirror stage, which Derrida tackles by means of his descriptions of the rear mirror in a car. Lacanian mirror stage points to a moment when an infant captures its own reflection in a looking glass, dividing its own identity into the "I" and "non-I" (Lacan 2006). The incompatibility of the two and the striking congruence between both sides of a mirror result in a need for language capable of differentiation. Nonetheless, the identity is split, since it cannot absorb or reject the foundational lack. An integrity of a person is therefore rooted in the impossibility of such an integrity, which numerously resurfaces in adult life by means of those traumatic moments which bring the linguistic cognition to the extreme. The second spectacle covers the *fort/da* scene, which Freud himself observes on the example of young Ernst and describes in detail in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. According to Freud, his grandson repetitively throws away and

pulls back a reel tied to a string. As the psychoanalyst claims, this gesture, in fact, reveals a process of working through the symbolic loss of the mother. The movement of the reel indicates the never complete transition from closeness to absence in the very moment when the boy endeavours to accept the lack (Freud 2010: 17).

Both cases are recalled by Derrida because of their seeming opening towards motion, which at some point becomes arrested in a standstill, depriving the other of its autonomy. In the case of the mirror stage, Derrida points to the rear mirror stage in which there is never one "non-I." Rather, all of the scenes with the rear mirror indicate the reciprocity and constant movement of the same and the other, which by no means inhabit separate realms, even if the frontiers can be easily traversed. Instead, in the process of writing and staging, they interweave within an intense production of differences, whose maintenance drives a parallel fascination and exploration of the matrix that makes such a relation possible. When *fort/da* scenes are rendered in "Envois," the stake remains similar; the burning question which is raised is— "Who is the object of Hans's working through in each of the cases?" Once again, Derrida, by means of writing and staging, radicalizes the differing and deferring of his spectral correspondence, and exposes the temporal and spatial intricacies of the otherness that these two psychoanalytical scenes have aimed to put in a standstill.

Concluding, in my article I have tried to examine how the theatrical tropes of apostrophe and catastrophe are both indicated and staged in "Envois." By associating them with the figure of apocalypse, Derrida engages in the discourse of revealability and concealment, or preservation and recollection, demonstrating how the postal principle reflects itself in writing, and includes us in its archival and spectral processes. Consequently, apostrophe orients us to the undecidability lying in the heart of every correspondence, fostering its intimacy with the others and exposing us to the expanding distance between us and them. This tragedy is performed through the ongoing shifting of theatrical figures, staged textual tropes, and textualized staged events. The psychoanalytical spectacles, targeted specifically, recall the intricacies of a spectral correspondence Derrida aims to explore. Instead of inter-acting with possible addressees and readers, *envois* as a form *intra-acts* with them, to use Karen Barad's term (2007: 101), and includes them as productive agencies partaking within the immanent movement through different posts, blurred spatial boundaries, and anachronic temporal relations.

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