

READING TIME

I

The title 'Reading Time' lends itself to two possible readings at least.¹ The first of these takes 'reading' as a participle, and suggests in a quite straightforward way that I should talk about the reading *of* time—something like the interpretation or clarification of the concept of time within my designated field, that of 'Modern French Thought'. And I shall indeed spend some time today discussing the reading of time, in this sense, especially in the work of Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Derrida. But 'reading time' also suggests a second reading: here the expression is taken as a compound noun (and we might be tempted to hyphenate it to mark that fact: reading-time), and we are invited to think not so much about the reading *of* time as about the time *of* reading, or perhaps about time *for* reading. This second possibility seems more complex and multifarious: 'the time of reading' encourages us to think about *quantities* of time (even in quite practical ways: one pressing question for academics these days is to do with finding *enough* time for reading, for example, however we might decide what 'enough' could mean in this context), the amount of time that reading takes; but also about the rhythms

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and velocities of reading (so that many of us are instinctively inclined to defend the importance of reading *slowly*, in some gesture of defiance against a perceived cultural demand for speed, for speed-reading as extraction of 'information', part of the general imperative to 'gain time' mentioned by Lyotard in the opening to *Le différend*, for example). All reading (even the reading of time in the first sense of the title) clearly *takes time*, takes *some* time, but it does not seem immediately clear how much time, so that the question of speed is inescapable: Paul de Man famously, and with characteristic mischief, placed Pascal's 'Quand on lit trop vite ou trop doucement on n'entend rien' as an epigraph to *Allegories of Reading* in 1979, but this double restriction (neither too fast nor too slow) leaves entirely open the question of how to calculate or appreciate *how* fast or slow a good reading is.

This second sense of the title 'Reading Time' seems more complex and obscure than the first, and there seem to be at least two reasons for this. *First*, an investigation of the time of reading in fact presupposes some sort of reading of time in our first sense, some more or less explicit and worked out grasp of the concept or concepts of time in general, which are then available for application to the specific problem of the time of reading (as opposed to other sorts of time—the time of waking and sleeping, living and dying, calendrical time, cosmological time, and so on). This suggests the need to begin by working out something around that concept, some preliminary clarification at least (and this prudent, and often I fear slightly parodically philosophical gesture will indeed dictate the structure of this lecture). Such a preliminary clarification would then in principle provide for the different senses of time at work in our second

reading ('the time of reading') and help us keep them in some sort of order. But *secondly*, this apparently happy methodological situation is complicated, not only by what I dare not quite call a 'familiar' Heideggerian situation whereby even our most preliminary attempt to clarify the concept of time is *already* in time, already involved in some sort of pre-comprehension of that concept before the clarification begins, but beyond that by the fact that this 'already' is, from the start, involved *in* reading itself: we cannot hope simply to clarify the concept of time *before* moving on to use that concept in the context of a discussion of reading, because (or so I shall argue in the 'French Thought' context I have just mentioned) the 'already' of our involvement in time is *already* a question of reading, 'in a text already' as Derrida says in *Of Grammatology*.

This apparently abyssal situation, in which each of the concepts named in my title seems to require clarification before the other, does not, for all its evident complexity, seem to be unique, nor even uniquely difficult—many (perhaps all) concepts depend on others in ways that generate this type of issue, and philosophy deals with that situation as best it can. But I want to suggest that there is nonetheless something specific, and specifically complex, about the relation of 'time' and 'reading' in this regard, and that this specific complexity might have something to do with the specificity of 'Modern French Thought', and might help us to motivate the tendency to use the term 'thought' (rather than just 'philosophy') in this context. To put it still much too bluntly (but bluntness still has a point, of course): Modern French Thought (at least as exemplified for me here by Lyotard and Derrida, although we could certainly also find a good deal of further material in Bataille, Blan-

chot or Barthes, for example) has specific things to say about reading that complicate and exceed the order of philosophy itself insofar as philosophy is—we might be tempted to say—constitutively intolerant of reading, or at least devoted to *reducing* the question of reading.² Modern French Thought *addresses* reading, addresses the addresses of reading, in a way that what I am calling ‘philosophy’ does not, and in that address it calls for a thinking about time that also *tends to* exceed philosophical grasp. ‘Reading Time’ in both (in all) its senses should then in principle allow us to get at something specific to Modern French Thought in what means that it is, in a mode that is essentially affirmative, not strictly philosophical. We shall see that this leads us quite rapidly to the thought that reading can only be thought in relation to an essential (and essentially irreducible) *unreadability* which is what keeps the question of reading *open* (open beyond even the grasp of the concept of ‘question’), and that this essential unreadability engages with an equally complex thinking about time. ‘Reading time’ will not, even in principle, lead us to a triumphant conceptual clarity

² ‘Reading’ would on this view have a status similar to that accorded by philosophy to concepts such as ‘sign’, ‘writing’ or ‘metaphor’, i.e. concepts thought in view of their demise: metaphysics proposes these ‘secondary’ concepts as determined by their teleological resolution into various forms of ‘presence’, whence the deconstructive potential of maintaining these (metaphysical) concepts against their metaphysical absorption. See Derrida’s comments in, for example *L’écriture et la différence* (Paris : Seuil, 1967) p. 412; *La voix et le phénomène* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1967) p. 26; *De la grammatologie* (Paris : Minuit, 1967), p. 31 (on the concept of ‘sign’), and in *Marges—de la philosophie* (Paris : Seuil, 1972), p. 323 (on metaphor). It would appear, however, that reading must have a certain priority within this logic, if only because all these concepts have first to be read...

regarding time *or* reading, but will rather produce a complexity in thought that, beyond what understanding we can (and should) nevertheless aspire to, calls for something we shall see to be of the order of *enactment* or *confession* or *witnessing* that is no longer strictly philosophical, though it is arrived at not *alongside* or *against* philosophy (as simply another discipline, say), but by claiming to *pass through* philosophy (to *read* philosophy, precisely, in a sense that philosophy *qua* philosophy cannot quite conceptualise), to be as philosophical as possible in the interests of *opening philosophy up to reading*. I shall argue that this ‘opening up’ entails something I am tempted to call *an experience of unreadability*.³ And this type of reading, it seems to me, engages essentially with the philosophy of time. To simplify what I am trying to do here as much as possible, I shall first illustrate how Lyotard and Derrida both complicate philosophical concepts of time by appealing crucially to the Freudian structure of *Nachträglichkeit*, and then try to show that only some such reading of time can begin to describe the time of reading itself.

II

The famous comment by St. Augustine, subject of Jean-François Lyotard’s remarkable posthumous

³ The concept of ‘experience’ is difficult here, for reasons laid out by Derrida in *De la grammatologie*, p. 89, insofar as it has ‘always designated relation to a presence’ (Ibid.); my usage of it here relies on its cautious ‘retrieval’ in texts of the 1980s, perhaps influenced by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, where it comes to name the very ‘traversal’ or passing through already called for in the *Grammatology*: I shall follow the vicissitudes of this concept in forthcoming work.

book *La Confession d'Augustin*,⁴ which I believe was first worked out in seminars at Emory University, and which will be haunting us here today, and which analyses of time seem always destined to quote ('Si nemo a me quaerat, scio; si quaerenti explicare velim, nescio' ('If no-one asks me, I know; but if I am asked and want to explain it, I do not know'; *Confessions*, XI, 14): Husserl's *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness* open with this remark) should perhaps be read less as a preliminary gesture, recognising a difficulty that philosophy will then confront and resolve (so that the natural *telos* of any philosophical explanation of time is to overcome that not-knowing and replace it with clear and explicit knowledge), and more as a positive or affirmative claim: perhaps time is such that my knowledge of it can only *ever* be of the order of non-knowledge, or a 'knowledge' that fades or disappears when questioned or called upon to present itself in the form of a theory or a thesis. If time is such that I 'know' what it is only when not called upon to thematise or explain it, and see that 'knowledge' dissolve or disappear when I attempt to articulate it, then it would bear some resemblance to the problem of lateral vision as discussed by Lyotard in *Discours, figure*: the attempt to bring lateral vision into focus immediately loses the object we were trying to investigate just by transforming it into the focal vision that by definition it is not.⁵ This analogy suggests that time may be of a similar order, simply lost (or at least distorted back into shape) in any thematic or thetic presentation, and therefore calling for modes of indirection in writing

⁴ Paris: Galilée, 1998.

⁵ *Discours, figure* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1971), p. 159; see my *Lyotard: Writing the Event*, pp. 73-4.

that philosophy traditionally finds difficult to admit. On this view, the problem of time would require philosophy to accept and even affirm the unknowledgeable knowledge suggested by Augustine, not in a gesture of renunciation (simply giving up the question as beyond the reach of philosophy, to be left to the implicit knowledge Augustine suggests), but in an effort of writing (not necessarily of a recognisably 'literary' nature, nor simply giving up traditional philosophical demands for consistency and rigour) that would attempt to engage otherwise with this essential obliquity of time, to respect the 'knowledge' I have of it when no-one asks me, without forcing it into the non-knowledge that emerges when I am called upon to give a philosophical account.⁶

Lyotard's earlier analyses of time as 'presentation' in *Le Différend*⁷ are in this respect helpful not so much in that they would provide a definitive philosophical account of time, but in that they show up the formal impossibility of any such account, and to that extent already call for the more allusive and oblique treatment produced by Lyotard in the texts of the 90s, culminating in the *Confession d'Augustin* itself. *Le Différend* and other associated texts in the 80s suggest that a sentence 'presents' a 'universe' *now*, absolutely now, in an event of presentation that constitutively escapes presentation in the universe thus presented. Time can be presented in the form of various temporal markers and relations (deictics and/or date and time-names) in the universe presented, but the event of presentation *itself*, in its event, can only ever be presented in a

⁶ Although rarely thematised in Lyotard, it seems clear that this 'effort of writing' also entails an inventive 'effort of reading', as we shall see.

⁷ Paris : Minuit, 1983.

subsequent sentence (not necessarily the next sentence) which takes as its referent the event of presentation of the 'first' sentence. But that subsequent sentence itself always again involves a presentation that it cannot itself present, and so on.

This argument is helpfully summarised at the beginning of a 1987 text entitled 'Time Today':

As an occurrence, each sentence is a 'now'. It presents, now, a meaning, a referent, a sender and an addressee. With respect to presentation, we must imagine the time of an occurrence as—and only as—present. This present cannot be grasped as such, it is absolute. It cannot be synthesized *directly* with other presents. The other presents with which it can be placed in relation are necessarily and immediately changed into presented presents, i.e. past.

When the time of presentation is glossed and we reach the conclusion that 'each' sentence appears at each time, we omit the inevitable transformation of present into past, and we place all the moments together on a single diachronic line.

We thus let ourselves slip from the presenting time implied in 'each' occurrence, to the presented time it has become or, better, from time as 'now' [*nun*] to time considered as 'this time' [*dieses Mal*], an expression which presupposes that 'one time' [*ein Mal*] is equivalent to 'that time' [*das andere Mal*]. What is forgotten in this objectifying synthesis is that *it* takes place *now*, in the presenting occurrence that effects the synthesis, and that this 'now' is not *yet* one of the 'times' it presents along the diachronic line.

Because it is absolute, the presenting present cannot be grasped: it is *not yet* or *no longer* present. It is always too soon or too late to grasp presentation itself and present it. Such is the specific and paradoxical constitution of the event. That something happens, the occurrence, means that the mind is disappropriated. The expression ‘it happens that...’ is the formula of non-mastery of self over self. The event makes the self incapable of taking possession and control of what it is. It testifies that the self is essentially passible to a recurrent alterity.⁸

This structure, then, is offered not so much as a definitive account of time, but as an account of how time must in part escape any definitive account, the event or occurrence of presentation ‘as such’ being rigorously unrepresentable (having no ‘as such’). This is why, in *Le Différend*, Lyotard can reasonably claim that his provocative insistence on ‘now’ (‘absolute’ now, not yet bound and situated) as the time of the event does not amount to a revival of the ‘metaphysics of presence’,⁹ and why he can confidently assign as a

⁸ ‘Le Temps aujourd’hui’, in *L’inhumain: causeries sur le temps* (Paris: Galilée, 1988), 69-88 (p. 70) (*The Inhuman: Talks on Time*, tr. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 58-77 (p. 59)).

⁹ See *Le Différend*, p. 114. The remark occurs in the course of a dense ‘Notice Aristote’ inserted into the chapter on ‘Presentation’ I have been summarising. In the same ‘Notice’, Lyotard distinguishes his thinking about time from the later Heidegger of the Ereignis on the grounds that the latter still thinks time in terms of gift and destination, i.e. in terms of instances situated within a presented phrase-universe, rather than as the bare ‘occurrence’ of the event of presentation of that universe: ‘[Heidegger] persists in making of ‘man’ the addressee of the donation that gives and gives itself in reserving itself in the

paradoxical task, to philosophers and others, 'to present that there is some unrepresentable'¹⁰, the unrepresentability of presentation 'itself' giving the resource for inevitably failing attempts to present it in its unrepresentability, or as more positively put, to 'bear witness' to that unrepresentability, such 'bearing witness' then being the task (in a quasi-Kantian sense) of philosophers as well as writers and artists.¹¹

Ereignis, and in particular he persists in seeing the one who accepts this donation as man fulfilling his human destination by hearing the authenticity of time. Destination, addressee, addressor [*destination, destinataire, destinateur*], man, are here instances or relations in universes presented by sentences, they are situated, to logo. The There is takes place, it is an occurrence (*Ereignis*), but it does not present anything to anybody, it does not present itself, and is not the present or presence. Insofar as a presentation is phrasable (thinkable) it is missed as an occurrence.' (*Ibid.*, p. 115)

¹⁰ This almost ungrammatical slogan first appeared in the polemical article 'Réponse à la question: Qu'est-ce que le postmoderne?' (*Critique*, 419 (1982), pp. 357-67 (p. 364), reprinted with slight modifications in *Le postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), 13-34 (p. 27)), where it is in fact used to characterise 'modern', rather than 'postmodern' art. But Lyotard goes on say that 'The postmodern would be that in the modern that alleges the unrepresentable in presentation itself' (*Ibid.*, p. 366 (32)).

¹¹ I cannot here discuss Lyotard's extensive art-writing: in this context, see especially *Sur la Constitution du temps par la couleur dans les œuvres récentes d'Albert Ayme* (Paris: Edition Traversière, 1980), and *Que Peindre? Adami, Arakawa, Buren* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 1987). We might gloss this 'quasi-Kantian' notion of 'task' by referring to De Man's wry comment on the title of Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator', namely that 'Aufgabe, task, can also mean that one who has to give up'. It is also worth pointing out that both Lyotard and Derrida complicate the status of 'witnessing', the former already in the final sentence of *L'Inhumain* ('the witness is a traitor', p. 215), the latter for example in *Demeure*.

Although the description given in *Le Différend* and 'Time Today' is 'formal', and to that extent disallows any particular content being ascribed to the event of presentation, it is striking that Lyotard (here, as often, closer to Derrida than either might acknowledge), both before and after (but not during) *Le Différend*, seeks help from psychoanalysis to complicate the phenomenological picture with which he begins.¹² And Lyotard himself comes to make massive use of this Freudian figure in his late work, often centred on the motif of *infancy*.¹³

Nachträglichkeit can itself be given a formal description, in the sense that in it the Husserlian flow of instants is interrupted by a time which jumps discontinuously from a past with which the present has no conscious retentional or rememorative link. According to Freud, as early as the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1895), a traumatic childhood 'experience' is in some sense repeated in later life with an experience of uncontrollable and incomprehensible affect: the temporality here is one in which the original 'experience' was not really experienced as such at the time of its occurrence, and is in a sense *experienced for the first time in its repetition* long after the event: but this second

¹² As confirmed in Dolorès Lyotard's *Avant-propos* to the posthumous collection *Misère de la philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 2000), Lyotard always envisaged writing a 'Supplément au Différend' which would extend its analyses. Lyotard himself says as much in 'Emma' (*ibid.*, 57-95): 'But what is lacking in [*Le différend*] is precisely what matters to us here and that I am seeking (as a philosopher) to supply: *quid* of the unconscious in terms of sentences?'

¹³ I give a fuller account of this motif of infancy in 'Before', in *Afterwards: Essays in Memory of Jean-François Lyotard*, ed. Robert Harvey, The Occasional Papers of the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook, No. 1 (2000), pp. 3-28.

experience, with the affective charge carried from its 'first time', appears as a disruption of ability of the later time-consciousness's ability to process it, and is certainly not simply a 'memory' of the 'first' event. In the perhaps unexpected context of his 1988 book *Heidegger and "the jews"*, Lyotard makes abundant use of this structure in an attempt to specify the position of 'the "jews"'¹⁴ in Western culture, likening it to the Proustian theme of 'temps perdu' as understood by Deleuze:

...this sort of past that is preoccupying us, which is beneath the forgotten, much closer to actuality than any past ... cannot be called up by voluntary, conscious memory [...]

It suffices to imagine that an 'excitation', i.e. a shaking-up of the system of forces constituted by the psychic apparatus... affects the system when it has no means of dealing with it: on entry, within, on exit. Not even the protection against excitation of banal temporality. An excitation that is not 'introduced', in the sense that it affects, but does not enter, and in the sense that it has not been 'introduced' and remains unrepresented.¹⁵ It is, then, a shock, since it 'affects' a system, but one of which the object of the shock cannot account for, of which the apparatus (the mind) cannot take account according to its internal physics. This shock, this excitation will not have to be 'forgotten',

¹⁴ I have attempted elsewhere to bring out some of the problems and ambiguities involved in Lyotard's various analyses of Judaism: see my 'Lyotard and "the jews"', in Brian Cheyette and Laura Marcus, eds., *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 188-96.

¹⁵ Lyotard refers here to Freud's article on 'Repression'.

repressed, according to the procedure of representation, nor that of acting out. Its 'excess' (of quantity, of intensity) exceeds the excess that gives material (presence, place and time) to the unconscious and the preconscious. It is 'in excess' like air and earth are in excess for the life of a fish.¹⁶

The claim, which Lyotard lays out in more detail in a text entitled simply 'Emma' (after the name Freud gives to his exemplary patient in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*), and with the help of Husserlian diagrams from the *Lectures on the Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, is that this configuration escapes in principle the type of account of temporality that Husserl is able to provide, and generates paradoxes for phenomenological description, in that the affect (and even the event) involved cannot confidently be *represented* in the terms of the intentional consciousness Husserl is describing; and Lyotard, pursuing the paradoxes of presentation we saw in *Le Différend*, argues that this produces a kind of non-representable 'presence' of affect which 'bears witness' to an 'infancy' that the articulations of philosophy can only simultaneously betray.

In *La voix et le phénomène*, writing in an idiom apparently quite different from that of Lyotard in the 1980s, Derrida had also briefly invoked Freud in the context of his own reading of Husserl's *Lectures*, and more specifically suggested that the temporal configuration named by Freud as *Nachträglichkeit* would

¹⁶ Heidegger et "les juifs" (Paris: Galilée, 1988), pp. 29-30. Compare the very similar description in 'Emma', pp.69-73, which explicitly spells out the difficulty of presenting the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* in Husserian terms.

exceed the descriptive possibilities of Husserl's account (a little earlier, in 1966, Derrida had suggested that *Nachträglichkeit* was Freud's 'true discovery', something that takes psychoanalysis outside psychology and even from psychoanalysis itself) and stressed the rhythmic discontinuity of the temporality implied by Freud's 'Mystic Writing Pad'¹⁷) by introducing into the flow of Husserlian time a discontinuity unaccountable in terms of the Husserlian concepts of retention and protention, representation and imagination.¹⁸ And Derrida explicitly suggests that this is essentially where what he still calls a 'debate' between what I earlier called 'philosophy' and 'thought':

And it is indeed around the privilege of the actual present, of the now, that in the last instance this debate is played out, this debate that can resemble no other, between philosophy, which is always philosophy of presence, and a thought of non-presence, which is not necessarily its opposite, nor necessarily a meditation on negative absence, nor even a theory of non-presence *as* unconscious.¹⁹

¹⁷ 'Freud et la scène de l'écriture', in *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 337.

¹⁸ *La voix et le phénomène*, pp. 70-71, also quoting the 9th supplement to Husserl's Lectures on the 'absurdity' of a belated 'becoming conscious of an "unconscious" content'.

¹⁹ *La voix et le phénomène*, p. 70. Lyotard's insistent use of the concept of presence clearly has some polemical (or at least provocative) edge in the context of this type of Derridean claim. But just as Lyotard was able to defend his earlier concept of 'presentation' from quick suspicion of falling into the 'metaphysics of presence', here too he would certainly argue that the 'presence' invoked is not that of metaphysics. For Derrida's remarks on Husserl, cf. too *De la grammatologie*: 'It is not then a question of complicating the structure of time

while maintaining its fundamental homogeneity and successivity, showing for example how past present and future present constitute originally, while dividing it, the form of the living present. Such a complication, which is basically the very one Husserl described, sticks, in spite of an audacious phenomenological reduction, to the presence of a linear, objective and worldly model. Now B would be constituted as such by the retention of now A and the protention of now C; in spite of all the play that can ensue from the fact that each of these three nows reproduces this structure in itself, this model of succession would disallow that a now X take the place of the now A, for example, and that by a delay-effect inadmissible to consciousness, that an experience be determined, in its very present, by a present that would not have immediately preceded it but would be considerably 'anterior' to it. This is the problem of the delayed effect (*nachträglich*) of which Freud speaks. The temporality to which it refers cannot be that which lends itself to a phenomenology of conscience or presence and no doubt one can at that point contest one's right still to call by the names time, now, anterior present, delay, etc., everything that is at issue here' (p. 98; in 'Ousia and Grammé', Derrida famously suggests that 'The concept of time belongs through and through to metaphysics and it names the dominance of presence... one cannot oppose it with another concept of time, since time in general belongs to metaphysical conceptuality.' (*Marges*, p. 73). See too *Marges*, pp. 21-2: 'The structure of delaying (*Nachträglichkeit*) disallows one from making of temporalisation (temporalisation) a simple dialectical complication of the living present as an originary and incessant synthesis, constantly brought back to itself, gathered and gathering onto itself, or retentional traces and potential openings. With the alterity of the 'unconscious' we are dealing not with modified present-horizons—past or to come—but with a 'past' that has never been present and never will be, whose 'to-come' will never be production or reproduction in the form of presence.'

III

Although Derrida does not explicitly link the two, it is I think no accident that this irruption of Freud into the phenomenological account happens in the same text in which some early discreet references to the issue of reading can be found. In *Le voix et le phénomène*, Derrida makes an initial distinction between ‘commentary’ and ‘interpretation’, the one reconstructing the apparent or declared ‘intended meaning’ of the author, the other, drawing on the logic of that intended meaning, allowing itself to reach conclusions that may contradict it (cf. p. 32); but also, at the beginning of the last chapter of the book, suggests a further possibility, and this further possibility is brought up in the immediate context of a summary of the temporal complications produced in commentary and interpretation:

Différance is... unthinkable on the basis of consciousness, i.e. of presence, or simply its opposite, absence or non-consciousness. Unthinkable too as the simple *homogeneous* complication of a diagram or line of time, as a complex ‘succession’... We must now verify, *through* [à travers] the first *Investigation*, how these concepts respect the relations between the sign in general (...) and presence in general. *Through* Husserl’s text, that is in a reading which cannot be simply that of commentary nor that of interpretation. (p. 98)

This kind of ‘reading through’, then, in no way belittles or even criticises the activities of commentary and interpretation, and indeed relies on them and is committed to their necessity and general excellence. In *Of*

Grammatology, Derrida writes of the need for a certain *parcours*, a journey or traversal, *through* transcendental phenomenology, and of the necessity of this *parcours*'s leaving a *sillage*, a track or wake, in the text, failing which, 'abandoned to the simple content of its conclusions, the ultra-transcendental text [i.e. Derrida's own here, which will later tend to attract the epithet 'quasi-transcendental' rather than 'ultra-transcendental'] will always look just like the precritical text'.²⁰ And this structure, which does not give rise to any final triumphant conclusive *thesis*, is just what suggests an irreducibility of *reading* as something other than the teleological tendency to produce a result or a conclusion. Reading on this description is structurally interminable, could never, even in principle, be *finished*, and this is why deconstruction (and, so I am arguing, 'Modern French Thought' more generally) is not, *in the end*, philosophy (nor indeed the end of philosophy).²¹

These features of reading are not *merely* methodological preliminaries arrived at by a process of transcendental reflection. The effort of reading, quite respectfully and respectably driven in the first instance by the demands of commentary and interpretation, is led through its very experience to this affirmation of structural interminability. It is quite crucial to the description of this situation that it not be immediately assimilated with that of the 'Idea in the Kantian sense', which I would describe as the most seductive way in which philosophy attempts to reappropriate the interminably excessive or defective moment of reading. According to this 'Idea' based

²⁰ *De la grammatologie*, p. 90.

²¹ Rodolphe Gasché's admirable work is a salient example of an impenitent re-philosophising of deconstruction.

description, we can concede quite readily that *in fact* adequate or total interpretation will never be achieved, that any finite effort of interpretation will not deliver the total meaning promised, but that our 'Idea' of such a total meaning or interpretation still prescribes a *telos* and a task which *guide* our more or less successful finite efforts in their inevitable falling short. On this view, the finitude of our reading-efforts still *tends asymptotically towards* an infinitely distant, but still conceivable, total grasp. But the structure of reading as I am describing it here must involve an *interruption* of this Idea-based presentation (which, significantly or fortuitously enough, is first laid out by Kant himself around the question of how to read the very term 'Idea' itself in Plato²²) and that 'interruption' must be more radical than the type of interruption that the Idea itself allows for and indeed draws on.²³ Whereas the 'Idea' presentation of reading allows for the inevitability (for the finite readers that we are, or for the readers that we are just because we are finite) of an interruption or falling short in any finite case of reading, but locates that interruption somewhere *along the way* to the total reading it will never in fact be, the type of complication of reading time that I am suggesting flows from Lyotard and Derrida cannot be figured in this way. Here, the 'interruption' does not so much happen as an empirical limitation somewhere along an ideally infinite progress, but marks it *from the start* in the 'ultra-

²² I have discussed this in some detail in *Frontières kantiennees* (Paris: Galilée, 2000).

²³ These remarks about the 'Idea' can look very close to the Hegelian critique of Kant (e.g. 'The limit and the ought' in the *Greater Logic*): but Hegel still and nonetheless relies on a totalising teleological structure even as he criticises the 'bad infinite' set up by Kant.

transcendental' manner to which Derrida refers. It is this 'marking from the start', from the *opening* to reading of the readable, that I am attempting to bring out in the notion of the unreadable. 'We read because we do not know how to read', as Lyotard has Augustine say in *La Confession d'Augustin* (p. 63). The general consequences of this quite subtle difference are, it seems to me, enormous (especially perhaps in the case of moral and political concepts), and in principle liberate the possibilities of reading (and its description) from the slightly pious terms we have been using so far.

If reading-time is marked from the beginning by this moment I am still inadequately calling an 'interruption', then on the one hand it is freed up, beyond any more or less moralistic prescription as to 'How to Read', for description in its essential *distractedness* and *disorder*. Insofar as it is marked by the temporal dislocation we approached via *Nachträglichkeit*, reading is essentially, and not just accidentally, disordered. The orders of reason and history, however construed, are belatedly and more or less repressively imposed on this fundamental disorder that opens the possibility of reading. This in no way implies an apologia for a subjectivist notion of a 'freedom' of reading and its pains and pleasures to be defended against pedagogical or scholarly repression (*encore que...*), nor for the kind of politically-motivated but politically quite irresponsible idea that a given text would have no intrinsic properties at all, but is constituted purely by its readings, which can therefore be programmed in advance by some desirable political *telos*, but suggests that the most pedagogical or scholarly description of reading owes it to its own demands to factor in this moment of disorder, which is what I am referring to the notion of unreadability, and this disorder must in

principle also affects the distribution of academic disciplines and their institutional arrangement. Just as Derrida can say, reading Descartes against Foucault, that I only philosophise ‘in the *terror*, but the *avowed* terror of being mad’,²⁴ so we can say that I read only in the terror (or the *jouissance*,²⁵ even sometimes the hilarity) of unreadability. This moment of unreadability in principle precedes generic distinctions between different types of text and even between different types of *attitude* towards texts (such as those famously described by Roman Ingarden in the *Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*²⁶).

This terror, *jouissance* or hilarity, upon and against which all our protocols and methods of reading are constructed, and which is familiar to all the professional readers we are as the more or less panic-stricken feeling of an inability to read what we are professionally bound to read, along with the insistent sense that just this vulnerability gives reading what value it has,²⁷ that feeling our professional readings

²⁴ *L'écriture et la différence*, p. 96.

²⁵ Barthes himself regularly associates *jouissance* and fear. See especially *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris : Seuil, 1976).

²⁶ Tr. Crowley and Olson (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1973), §23, dismissing the attitude only interested in ‘amusement’ (‘the work is degraded to a mere tool of pleasure’ (p. 172)), and concentrating in ethico-teleological tones, on the ‘scientific’ attitude of ‘investigation’ and the ‘aesthetic’ attitude. Ingarden’s careful phenomenological accounts of the temporality of the reading-experience are faithfully Husserlian, and nowhere address the type of *nachträglich* complication I am here pursuing.

²⁷ Cf. Lyotard’s remark in the context of a discussion of the relation between philosophy and psychoanalysis: ‘I attempt here to maintain the philosophical ambition [*prétention*]: to articulate in intelligible fashion on the subject of something beneath articulation [*l'en-deçà de l'articulable*], that is a *Nihil*,

can scarcely confess, scarcely not disavow (or avow only in the form of a disavowal), should not necessarily just be referred to texts recognised as 'difficult'. Just as Derrida produces the avowal of the terror of madness at what might appear to be the most clear and lucid of all philosophical moments (the *cogito* itself), so the experience of illegibility or unreadability affects in principle any reading whatsoever, and need not give rise to the secondary reassurances provided by demonstrably difficult or obscure texts, in which unreadability can be naturalised and neutralised as merely a property of the object. Unreadability in the exposed and vulnerable sense I am trying to capture is, rather, the absolutely familiar companion of readability, as *heimlich* as it is *unheimlich*, its very element, the same thing, the connivance of possibility and impossibility, competence and incompetence, fear and *jouissance*, that 'reading' names.

IV

Although I am suggesting that unreadability in this sense affects in principle all reading, it is not surprising that certain texts or textual moments figure it more explicitly than others. Often enough (I'm thinking especially of Bataille and Duras here, whom I have discussed elsewhere in this respect) this figuration involves elements of inarticulacy, violence, primitivism or even animality, a sort of crying or shouting out that is at one and the same time a demand for reading and a defiance of reading, a figure of the way in which texts appeal or *cry out* for reading

which is also what excites this very ambition' (*Misère de la philosophie*, p. 60).

with a *cri* that is never itself quite readable, an urgent 'read me if you can' that I found exemplified in Duras's wonderful short film-text *Les mains négatives*,²⁸ in which the pre-historic hand-prints of the title are 'read' as 'Je crie que j'aimerai quiconque entendra que je crie que je t'aime'. But this type of crying out is certainly not just a feature of 'modern' or 'postmodern' writing, and can be found too, with very different affective inflections, though in both cases with a kind of madness, in Rousseau and Stendhal, for example. The former's increasingly desperate attempts to secure a reader for confessional texts that consistently incriminate as much as they exculpate, or the latter's invocation or dedication to 'The Happy Few' at the end of *La Chartreuse de Parme*, for example, both show up, in anguish or hilarity, the structure of reading as demanding an addressee who will never quite be able, finally, to read what is thus addressed. This moment can also appear more thematically, as it were, in which case it often generates humour and paradox, as for example in Kierkegaard, who not only often appeals explicitly to the reader (at the beginning of the Preface to *Either/Or*, for example), or in the 'Letter to Mr. X, true reader of this book' at the end of *Repetition*, but who at least once humorously asserts the non-existence of that reader, in the extraordinary 'Letter from Frater Taciturnius to the Reader' that concludes the final 'Guilty?—Not Guilty' section of *Stages on Life's Way*, with its own concluding section or post-script assuming, or pretending to assume that there is not a single reader left by this point ('My dear reader!—But to whom am I speaking? There is perhaps not a single reader left...In case it were

²⁸ Marguerite Duras, 'Les mains négatives', in *Le Navire Night et autres textes* (Paris : Gallimard/Folio, 1986), 93-101

thinkable (as I do not assume) that there was one reader who had held out and had got to the point of reading this Conclusion (a thing I could not have imagined, and, if I had, I would not have written this)...Ah, what luck that there is no reader who reads the whole thing through!²⁹

This moment of unreadability that affects all reading with a principle of disorder corresponds to what Lyotard's late work calls 'infancy', which is less an anthropological state of the human animal than a moment of radical passivity (or 'passibility' as Lyotard often calls it) that is precisely related to the structure of *Nachträglichkeit* we saw him develop in his reading of time. Infancy and unreadability are never simply present states subsequently endured and left behind in adulthood and competence, but of the order of an affect that arrives always now in its return from the kind of 'absolute past' that radical passivity implies, and that I have been arguing is 'there' in all its disconcerting familiarity whenever reading takes place, whenever a text and a reader are 'open' for reading.

This is why Lyotard can claim to read what he calls a 'libidinal-ontological' constitution of temporality under the 'official' phenomenology of time-consciousness put forward by Augustine, which comes out in the obscure lining of what is *professed* by what is *confessed*. (In every sense, the 'profession' of reading is haunted by 'confession', the professor by the confessor: and this lecture too, of course, is as

²⁹ *Stages on Life's Way*, tr. Walter Lowrie (OUP, 1945), pp. 437, 442, 444. Remember a similar gesture in *Glas* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), p. 50: 'Departed then are, without exception and as such, the archeologists, the philosophers, the hermeneuts, the semioticians, the semanticians, the psychoanalysts, the rhetoricians, the poeticians, perhaps even all those readers who still believe, in literature or anything else' (my translation).

confessional as it is professional.) Lyotard's suggestion that the proto-phenomenological account of time is implicated in the very structure of belatedness and delay that is the object and performance of confession, complicit with the worldly time of desire and concupiscence to be confessed before the absolute, and absolutely disruptive time of God's visitation, writes the moment of unreadability back into the clarity of the philosophical exposition as its obscure motive force. And in so doing, he implicitly *enacts* the temporality of *Nachträglichkeit* he elsewhere more thematically presents, so that the belated 'repetition' of Augustine in the confrontation of Husserl and Freud (or equally well the repetition after the fact of Husserl and Freud in the reading of Augustine), and even the belated and displaced 'repetition' of Derrida in Lyotard himself (or indeed in Derrida himself), entails a thinking of the historicity of reading quite unavailable to standard dated narrative-historical description. It would not be difficult to show that this complex structure is also that of all Derrida's readings of what he calls the metaphysical tradition, and that this structure is dictated by just the moment of 'madness' found in Descartes, the strictly unreadable excess of hyperbole in its tension with the historically determined discourse from which it departs alone giving rise to the possibility of reading Augustine or Descartes (for example) still and again today (and tomorrow).

If I am right to suggest that this double structure of reading time, brought out by Lyotard and Derrida, helps to *define* 'Modern French Thought' as an object of study, then the very logic of what we have seen also simultaneously undermines any security of that definition. According to the temporality of reading I have sketched out here, 'thought' happens essentially

in an activity of reading that is not specifically modern (just as the time of *Nachträglichkeit* defies any simple answer to the question ‘when?’ asked of its event, so the events of thought picked out here happen ‘in’ Augustine or Descartes as much as ‘in’ Lyotard or Derrida), nor even specifically French (it would be easy to show that this view of reading entails a comparable account of the necessity, possibility and impossibility of translation too, whereby ‘French Thought’ is irreducibly *in translation* from the start). Professing ‘Modern French Thought’, then, caught up in reading time and in reading-time, cannot then mean simply constituting a definable, datable object according to the familiar and still massively historicist protocols of academic study, but owes it to itself, out of its most respectful and responsible academic responsibility, to read and re-read, still, again, the terror and *jouissance* of the unreadable.