

Deconstruction – Space – Ethics: Where to Start...

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Had we but world enough, and time...

Some would say, ‘Deconstruction – Space – Ethics’ is an impossible phrase, if it is a phrase at all. What about its syntax for example: is it a gradation, and if so is it ascending or descending – building up from deconstruction or down to ethics? What is the *relation* between these three ‘concepts’ (the question of relation and non-relation to space – the always already *there* – will be tackled head-on in the final essay by Ivan Callus, below)?

Let us assume deconstruction opened up a space – and let us imagine that this might be the space of ethics, in the radical sense of a possibility for a decision ‘in the first place’ – this would, of course, still be a very specific understanding of ethics, an entirely *other* ethics, namely an ethics not based on the calculable or the relatable or any somehow tamed concept of the other. But would this space, rather than coming out of deconstruction in some way, not rather already be there in ethics itself? And would it then not presuppose such a space *in* ethics, or an ethical space (for example, in the idea of justice, if that were a space) which, in its aporetic, or undecidable manifestation, only gave rise to deconstruction, but would itself remain undeconstructible?

Less patient others, on the other hand, would merely see plain contradiction between something as supposedly frivolous and nihilistic as deconstruction, with its emphasis on freeplay and something that is so obviously grave and tied to rules and regulations, presuppositions and values (in short, relationality itself) as space, and even more so, ethics.

Many speak of an evolution within (Derridean) deconstruction – a supposed ethical tum in the later Derrida – which, in turn, would presuppose other tums: political, autobiographical, media-technological, etc. But an attentive reader of Derrida’s early texts would see this combination of deconstruction – space – ethics at work from the beginning (this is the starting point of the first essay below, by Laurent Milesi).

It all goes back to the work within the silent ‘a’ of *différance*, in the impossible difference between space and time, differing and deferring of meaning, in its beginning in-between, *entre* or rather *antre*, the irrecoverable ‘animal den’ of the origin of meaning, the mythical tabula rasa housed in the innermost, the essence of the human, the desert, worse, the desert of the desert or *khôra*, the secret or crypt at the centre of every essence. Somewhere between these impossible – possible *because* impossible, and therefore (conceptually, structurally...) necessary – spaces a *there* has already emerged, and that space produces an ‘I’ and demands a decision, in other words, it produces a space-ethics, or maybe an a-thics, and all that deconstruction seems to be doing is questioning its conditions of *taking place* while demanding some hospitality, namely, the time of and for a decision.

The essays assembled here are concerned with deconstruction’s ‘im/possible’ and hence ethical spaces. An experience of the possible-impossible, of the aporia, or radical undecidability, is, according to Derrida, a precondition for a decision and

hence for ethics and politics, or ethical politics. Where is the space for encountering this possible-impossible? What does deconstruction do about these spaces? But also, what space, if any, today, does there remain *for* deconstruction? Does one have to worry *for*, and maybe less *about*, deconstruction, these days?

In opening this preface, 'I' could have started anywhere... precisely, because no I has an absolute origin that lies in self-presence or self-conception, which is why I am or I is always already – always already, is this a location, in space or in time? – just like meaning in general, under way, differing from its origin, deferred from coming into its own, a trace in *différance*. I could have started anywhere. But where an I starts is absolutely crucial. This aporia is maybe what constitutes the impossible starting point for or the space of deconstruction. An I is subject both to the contingency *and* necessity of its location or its deixis (cf. Russell West-Pavlov's essay on contemporary South-African literature and the transformations of postcolonial spaces).

The origin or space of deconstruction lies maybe here, right between this necessity and this contingency, in the event of a *there is* or a *taking place*. The fact that there is deconstruction – right here, right now, it is taking place – does not mean that some kind of deconstructive space preexists it, that deconstruction derives from somewhere. It is always elsewhere (*ailleurs*), but this *ailleurs* is always a specific elsewhere grafted onto, or inhabiting a specific space. It is everything but random. It finds refuge in specific texts, for example (but what an example!) most forcefully, in the Derridean text. But also elsewhere, in writing in general. Any mark is haunted by its own deconstruction, because the fact that there is something (but why?) is the result of a disappearance, a repression, a forgetting, an exclusion – in short, *différance*. Deconstruction is merely the haunting of this repression, it takes place *despite* everything, inevitably, inexorably. It just happens... and cannot be controlled, only accepted, sometimes it can be forced a little, sometimes it is being repressed.

As such, due to its uncontrollable taking place, my reaction to it can in fact only be ethical (or indeed unethical for that matter). It doesn't respect systems of morality, it doesn't wait for an ethical space to be opened up for it. It inhabits the space of the moral (or political) decision. One could say, it befalls this space even before that space arises. That doesn't mean that it advocates indecision – deconstruction doesn't advocate anything, full stop – it happens. This is why the 'ethics of deconstruction' (cf. Simon Critchley's path-breaking and space-opening work in this respect) is an ethics *without* ethics, based on the differential movement (the deferring of an event and the differing of that same event from itself, not a straight-forward ethics of decision – again, this is the focus of the first essay below, by Laurent Milesi). The unpredictability of an event, its spacing (its *espacement*) calls for a careful attention to its radical singularity and contextuality. Every taking place is absolutely necessary *and* contingent, awaited *and* unpredictable, always deferred *and* already here. Hence this strange connection between space and ethics based on a hospitality towards the radically other, an other who is always other and will remain other (*tout autre est tout autre*, as Derrida writes in *Donner la mort*).

And nevertheless, *malgré tout*, life goes on... So, had we but world enough and time, we might be able to understand and do it (deconstruction – space – ethics) justice. But we don't. In fact, we seem to be running both out of world and time very fast. And we

might also be running out of *we* (humans, nonhumans, world...). Questions of relevance are irrepressible under these conditions, given our eminently political, ecological and planetary times (both Christopher Müller and Marie-Eve Morin explore in their respective ways the question of nonhuman or posthuman deconstruction, or better, deconstruction *outside* the human). One might indeed be tempted to question the relevance of deconstruction in the time of climate change, global depletion of resources and extinction threats. Why should anyone care about deconstruction – especially since it seems to happen or take place anyway, even without humans? In this respect deconstruction seems a little like Portia's invoked quality of mercy – the hope for a just and kind decision, for forgiveness, or salvation, and which is in need of some forceful implementation – all for a good cause of course. What terrible thing, indeed, would be a *relevant* deconstruction? It might just be that deconstruction is (the) only hope, but a hope without space, incalculable, precisely. A non-utopian hope, or a utopia without space, beyond the idea of any pre-existing *world*.

The essays that follow interrogate, invoke and also inevitably try to fill the spaces of deconstruction. Much has been said about the taking place (*avoir lieu*) in or of deconstruction (Arleen Ionescu's essay on Derrida, Blanchot and Mallarmé takes this as its cue): on the one hand, deconstruction attempts to reconfigure the notion of space without defining or confining it; on the other hand, deconstruction as an academic practice takes place in an institutionalized space that sets up contradictions, which inevitably generate the need for further deconstruction. *Différance*, the trace without origin, *khôra*, the desert, the crypt... are all in their own way spaces *of* and *in* deconstruction. That is, they are spaces that in being deconstructed themselves, deconstruct the practice of deconstructing; they somehow accommodate it and are hospitable to deconstructive readings, but also thereby reveal an ethics that arises at the limits of that readability.

It is this double tension, between the deconstruction of space and the space of deconstruction, which opens up the possibility of conceiving what is called ethics otherwise. Deconstructive ethics is no longer limited to forms of decision making and responsibility that are recognizably programmable or calculable but instead welcomes what pushes the critical gesture to limits of undecidability, aporia and (im)possibility. Such deconstructive spaces call for the acknowledgement of the necessity to cross the threshold separating the known or hospitable from the radically unanticipatable or inhospitable.

Laurent Milesi's '*séance tenante*' – the phrase he uses to designate the apparent and often invoked contradiction between the logic of deferral and the urgency of responsibility in Derridean deconstruction – revisits the entire nexus of a politics and ethics of deconstruction. With admirable depth and breadth at once the essay manages to relate all the cornerstones of Derridean thought, from *khôra* to hospitality, to contribute to, in his words, 'the recent debates surrounding deconstruction and ethics... [that] attempt to articulate the "(non-)place" of the ethical in Derrida'.

Following this rearticulation of the spatio-ethical problematic in deconstruction, Marie-Eve Morin's essay locates the understanding of Derridean ethics in terms of space (rather than time) within the context of the so-called spatial turn. She takes issue with Bruno Latour's rejection of Derridean ethics as purely 'future-oriented' and

instead enlists deconstruction as a possible ally for the ‘destabilising’ of our ‘welcoming apparatuses’ (the ethics and politics of hospitality). Morin is wondering what would happen if Latour’s project of assembling a hospitable collective of human and non-human entities and agencies in the form of a peaceful cohabitation ‘were complemented with a Derridean understanding of unconditional hospitality’.

In a similar vein, Christopher Müller returns to the work of Günther Anders whose eco-apocalyptic ‘desert ethics’ serves to ‘illustrate an originary and generative relationship between (“human”) life and technology’ and the ‘evil of abstraction’ it harbours. Müller finds this conceptual nexus at work in both Derrida and Anders. Following recent ecocritical, postanthropocentric or posthumanist attempts to think the future ‘without us’, he argues for a necessary ‘desert/space’ outside conventional morality and politics that would challenge ‘the destructive and erosive potential’ of abstraction.

These three philosophical essays are followed by three essays that take their cues from and are concerned with literature. Arleen Ionescu returns to the question of literature and writing as practices of *espacement* via Blanchot and Mallarmé and his famous *coup de dé*. In a fascinating tour de force she focuses on the notion of (poetic) rhythm and its syncopating and repetitive quality that turns writing against itself. The specific (differential) rhythm of and in deconstruction would thus be ‘attuned to a poetic invention of the other as the *arrivant*’ through which ‘a more originary ethics, pre-critical and intervallic’ could be born.

In marked change both of tone and style, Russell West-Pavlov’s reading of the supermarket in postcolonial South-African novels by Mpe, Vladislavic and Dangor traces a very concrete ‘geography of *différance* – the temporalizing and spatializing process embodied not only in the “hollowing out” and “turning inside-out” of once segregated Johannesburg, but also in the infiltration of all realms, whether poor townships, decaying inner-city precincts or wealthy white suburbs, by the ubiquitous supermarket, which serves as an illustration of a space of and in deconstruction’. He argues that the living on and crossing of shifting borderlines fictionalized in these specific novels produces spaces of undecidability and ‘drives the imperative to debate and decide ethically’.

The final essay provides a neat summary and outlook of the implications of an inhuman or posthuman aesthetics opened up by the idea of a deconstructive ethical space *without us*. It is constructed through a kind of creative writing thought experiment that discusses and problematizes the im/possibility of relation through narrative and fictionalization. In other words, it asks what happens to, and whether there is, space at all outside subjectivity. In doing so it provides a link between ‘the question whether art’s representing exists, if there is nobody to regard it’ and object-oriented ontology, which also returns us to the question of deconstruction’s continued relevance.

Without further deferment, this preface will give way to the essays in the hope that it will have opened more spaces than closed them, always conscious of the pressing time of the decision, in the face of the desert (of ethics):

But at my back I always hear

*Time's winged chariot hurrying near;
And yonder all before us lie
Deserts of vast eternity.*