

IMPOSSIBLE INVENTIONS:  
A REVIEW OF JACQUES DERRIDA'S  
*THE OTHER HEADING: REFLECTIONS ON  
TODAY'S EUROPE*

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What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is — the absolute substance which is the unity of different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition enjoy perfect freedom and independence: "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I."

—Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*

Somebody must be responsible for *my* pain.

—S.A. Jackson, "Scribblings on Nietzsche"

Hegel's vision of culture in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* culminated in the *Aufhebung* of identity and difference, a differentiated totality, as the "completion" of the dialectic of *Geist*. In one of his most recently translated works, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe*, Jacques Derrida seems to be working (once again) within and against this dialectical unity of *arche* and *eschaton*, origin and end, identity and difference. Indeed, this work might be read as one of Derrida's more obvious efforts to extend the thematic of *différance* to what we might hesitantly call "the public sphere"—as a rhetoric that inserts difference *within* identity without canceling out the obligation to affirm cultural identity.

This gesture of affirmation, however, entails exceeding the strictures of what Derrida terms "two contradictory imperatives": on the one hand, or the one heading, Europe "cannot and must not accept the capital of a centralizing authority" that "would control and standardize, subjecting artistic discourses and practices to a grid of intelligibility"; on the other hand, or the other heading, it must resist

and renounce the proliferation of "a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms"—must resist and renounce, in short, difference for its own sake (39). Experiencing the aporetic desire *both* for unification *and* for maintaining the difference that makes cultural identity possible, Europe must undergo what Derrida terms "*the experience and experiment of the impossible*" (45)—the drive conditioned by two contradictory laws. Historically, the responsibility of Europe consisted in living up to its status as "the capital," the exemplary and immanent manifestation of the universal. *Today*, this responsibility needs to be thought in the rift of an aporia: responsibility *now* consists in rendering a contract, making a promise, whose principle is not to translate the idiom of the other into a totalized discourse of the Same, yet, *at the same time*, to resist the multiplication of difference for its own sake. Such is the responsibility of Europe *today*.

Hence, Derrida would urge strongly against the inane and indeed irresponsible "commitment to *telos*" that is being popularized by certain scholars of communication who claim to be interested in thinking the problematics of difference *within* culture. Such a commitment, Derrida shows, "is exercised in the order of the possible, it simply follows a direction and elaborates a program. . . . It makes of ethics and politics a technology" (45). In the uncritical and unreflective "commitment to *telos*," the ethico-political becomes regulated by the law of the self-same, and responsibility a simple and unreflective exercise. Under this law, culture becomes a self-reproducing machine and responsibility becomes robotics. If we are to exercise responsibility and commitment at all, it must then be on the order of the impossible, of the identity and difference of same and other as they articulate culture and are articulated by it.

This responsibility thought through the experience and the experiment of the impossible is perhaps what is missing from Martin Heidegger's "Letter on Humanism," a text of great importance to Derrida's 1968 lecture "The Ends of Man" and perhaps here again in *The Other Heading*. For though Heidegger commits himself to understanding action in its essence, he understands the "destiny of man" in terms of a "horizon" that affirms the unity of *arche* and *eschaton* in the teleological drive towards Being. This, Derrida shows in his 1968 lecture, is an "end of man" that produces the self-same and hence the obliteration of difference. It is, in the terms of *The Other Heading*, the *telos* of "the capital," of appropriation, and of "the proper." It is the horror implicit also in the Hegelian notion of Absolute Knowledge which, as Kojève's lectures on the *Phenomenology* illustrate, is the death of desire.

Experiencing and experimenting with the impossible, Derrida faces the aporetic moment of the *today*, of the "now" which Heidegger's

*Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (233-234) identifies as being radically non-self-coincident, and turns toward rhetorical invention as a means of halting the dialectical drive toward *either* the heading or the other heading in an effort to exemplify their complicity. The impossible invention that inscribes an axiomatics of *différance* seems the only genuinely responsible invention for Derrida. He writes:

Responsibility seems to consist today in renouncing neither of these two contradictory imperatives. One must therefore try to *invent* gestures, discourses, politico-institutional practices that inscribe the alliance of these two promises or contracts: the capital and the a-capital, the other of the capital. That is not easy. (44)

And later:

Any invention of the new that would not go through the endurance of the antimony would be a dangerous mystification, immorality *plus* good conscience, and sometimes good conscience as immorality. (72)

The aporia, the antimony, out of which the possibility of genuine responsibility emerges calls for inventiveness on the order of the impossible.

In order to be "new," invention must face the impossibility which the deconstructor confronts at every moment. Like the rhetoric of Derrida's Rousseau, who appears most forcefully in the final pages of *On Grammatology*, the invention of the impossible emerges as a dream in the structure of a gift from a subject who—though perhaps hoping, desiring, and longing for things to be otherwise—must ultimately return to the language available to him even while seeking to change it or to turn it through the "act" of writing or speaking. Such is the burden and promise of the impossible invention and of deconstruction: to necessarily use the available means of persuasion while simultaneously desiring to invent them otherwise. But, if we take Derrida's axiom that we *must* take on the responsibility of the impossible, the antinomy must be endured, the aporia worked through.

