The questions of time and history, which were explicitly at the center of Heidegger’s thought since its beginning, have constituted in a more latent and implicit way the kernel of Derrida’s deconstruction. The word “deconstruction” appears for the first time in 1967, in *Voice and Phenomenon*. Derrida himself considered this essay, which is an “Introduction to the Problem of the Sign in Husserl’s Phenomenology” as the subtitle states, as coming first since it deals with a decisive point: the question of the privilege given to self-presence in so-called living speech. Within this privilege, it was the difference between signifier and signified, pure presence and representation that was to be “deconstructed.” But already in the first part of *Of Grammatology*, a text also published in 1967 but written in 1965, Derrida explained that deconstruction has to be understood not as a “demolition” but as a “de-sedimentation,” showing thereby that he was borrowing this word not only from Heidegger but also from Husserl. Heidegger had, of course, announced in 1927 in paragraph 6 of *Being and Time* the project of a “destruction of the history of ontology,” while Husserl, in his last book, *Experience and Judgment* (published posthumously in 1939), undertook the task of a genealogy of logic in order to excavate, under the deposits of the logical subjective operations that give to the world its present meaning, the original source on which it is founded, which Husserl calls “pre-predicative experience.”

In *Experience and Judgment*, Husserl used the German word “Abbau,” which literally means a de-construction, to describe the operation aiming at the dismantling of scientific idealizations in order to return to their original source. The return to pre-predicative experience is the return to the *doxa*, to the common opinion and belief, which finds thus, against the entire philosophical tradition, a new justification – as
the ultimate domain from which scientific knowledge draws its meaning. Heidegger understands in the same way what he names in *Being and Time* “Destruktion,” emphasizing that it should not be taken in the *negative* sense of a demolition of the ontological tradition, but as “a loosening of a sclerotic tradition and the dissolving of the concealments produced by it” (Heidegger 1996, 20). Heidegger does not use there the word “Abbau,” but it appears in the course he gave during the same year 1927 on “The Basic Problems of Phenomenology,” which was first published only in 1975. “Abbau” can also be found in texts which Derrida could read during the 1960s, like the famous 1955 lecture Heidegger gave in Cerisy on “What is Philosophy?,” which was published in 1957. Here Heidegger recalls that *Destruktion* does not mean to destroy, but to deconstruct (*abbauen*), that is, to excavate and put aside. But it is most probably in *The Question of Being*, Heidegger’s 1956 essay dedicated to Ernst Jünger, that Derrida found the word “Abbau,” which was translated as “déconstruction” by his friend Gérard Granel in the 1968 French publication of this text. This essay was quite important for Derrida, since, as he stressed in *Of Grammatology*, Heidegger crossed out there the word “Being,” an “erasure” considered by Derrida as the last writing of the epoch of ontotheology, the metaphysics of presence, and logocentrism (OG, 23).

Derridean deconstruction however corresponds neither to Husserl’s genealogical project aiming at a rehabilitation of this pre-predicative kind of experience (*doxa*) nor to the definition given by Heidegger to the deconstruction of the history of being, which should allow a return to the original experiences in which the first determinations of Being were grounded. For Derrida, who in this respect breaks in a decisive manner with the phenomenological way of thinking, the historical process is without origin. In *Voice and Phenomenon*, he showed that Husserl’s phenomenology is commanded by the principle of living presence, a presence that phenomenology thinks can be given to an original intuition or perception. This principle explains the phenomenological injunction to go back to the thing itself, instead of remaining on the level of pure verbal significations. But Derrida, relying upon Saussure’s linguistics, in which signs do not signify by themselves but only in their systematic interplay, in which, in other words, signs are pure differences devoid of all positivity, considers that the process of signification has no origin and no end and takes place only, as he says at the end of *Voice and Phenomenon*, because “the thing itself always steals away” (VP, 89). And he breaks in the same manner with Heidegger’s question of Being in so far as it can be understood as an attempt to restore a transcendental signified, Being having been defined in *Being and Time* as “the transcendens pure and simple” (Heidegger 1996, 33–34). This break explains why, according to the meaning Derrida gives to the word, deconstruction can neither be defined nor can it be understood as an analysis, that is, as a regression toward an indecomposable origin. Derridean deconstruction is not an operation or an act, but rather an historical process that takes place in itself and which has to do with the destitution of the ontological problematic that has dominated the entire Western philosophical tradition.
Already in this early period, despite the fact that Levinas’s name is mentioned only once in Of Grammatology (OG, 329 n. 33), Levinas’s critique of ontology and his concept of trace have become the determinative horizon of Derrida’s thinking. In “Violence and Metaphysics,” the long 1964 essay dedicated to Levinas, Derrida already emphasized the fact that Levinas understood experience in a “meta-theological, meta-ontological, meta-phenomenological manner” as “the encounter of the absolute other,” an encounter that has the form of a “separation” and not of an intuitive contact (WD, 85). Such an encounter with a “beyond” that is only present as a “trace” defines the “eschatological character of experience” independently from any relation to a belief, a religious or philosophical dogma (WD, 95). Derrida explains here that “the messianic eschatology” from which Levinas draws his inspiration does not refer to a theology, a mysticism, or a religion, but is based on the very nature of experience (WD, 83). We find therefore already in 1964 the matrix of this historical thought of “messianicity without messianism” understood as “thought of the other and of the event to come” and the “universal structure” of experience that Derrida begins to develop, almost 30 years later, in Specters of Marx (SM, 59, 65, 100–101). On this basis, it becomes easier to understand Derrida’s Of Grammatology definition of signifiers as “traces” or even “arche-traces,” since they imply the indefinite differencing of the “thing itself,” just as the Saussurean concept of language as a form and not as a substance presupposes the reduction of reference. Such a differencing presupposes a conception of time that no longer locates time within the horizon of Being (Heidegger), but that locates it within the “mode of the beyond being,” as it is defined by Levinas (Levinas 1987, 30). This conception of time as dia-chrony, as in-adequation and non-coincidence (Levinas 1987, 32) is the basis of Derrida’s critique of the Husserlian and Heideggerian thought of time.

1. Derrida and Levinas

In his famous 1967 essay, Voice and Phenomenon, Derrida wanted to emphasize, in his analysis of Husserl’s first Logical Investigation, the meaning of the difference made by Husserl between expression and indication. Soliloquy, that is, inward speech, is there understood as the realm of pure expression, that is, the realm of immediate proximity to the full presence of the signified, in so far as there is no use of any factual language, as we are required to use in indication and communication with others. Husserl therefore thinks that in soliloquy I do not “speak to myself,” which means that I do not need to indicate in an indirect way something to myself, as I have to do with others by means of words uttered out loud, vocally. For Derrida, the fact that, for Husserl, inward communication is not needed comes from the “non-alterity, the non-difference in the identity of presence as self-presence” (VP, 50). But on the other hand, Husserl developed, in his 1905 lectures “On the Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness” (published in 1928), a new conception of time based on the
difference between the “now” and what he calls the “living present” which includes in itself the dimensions of the immediate past and the immediate future. As Derrida explains, the presence of the perceived present is much larger than a punctual “now” since it “is in continuous composition with a non-presence and a non-perception,” that is, with the retention of what has just past and the protention of what is immediately to come (VP, 55). It means therefore that for Husserl himself there is an alterity in the self-identity of the subject, but this original alterity is precisely the condition of presence and presentation, since only a non-instantaneous consciousness can be consciousness of something other. It is possible to agree with Derrida when he says that this relation to non-presence in the living present “destroys every possibility of self-identity in its simplicity” (VP, 56). But this impossibility of simplicity does not mean, as Derrida argues, that there is no difference between retention and representation, primary memory and secondary memory. It does not mean that the representational character of sign and indication can already be found in the self-relation of the subject. If representation were inserted in this way into presence through retention and protention, we would be able to oppose perception to retention and to protention as if retention and protention were different and separate temporal moments, but this opposition would mean, in contrast to what Husserl in fact says, that there is no real continuity between perception and retention-protention.

Derrida declares that he does not want to “reduce the abyss that separates retention and representation.” Instead, he says that he is looking for their common origin in “the possibility of repetition in general,” that is, “the trace in the most universal sense” (VP, 58). But in order to re-present something, consciousness must already be constituted, and this constitution is possible only on the basis of retention and protention. This role of retention and protention implies that retention and protention can be considered as “repetitions” of past and future only if time is understood as discontinuous, as dia-chrony, if in other words this internal and temporal self-alterity which constitutes consciousness is understood, as Levinas did, not as “the achievement of an isolated and lone subject,” but as “the very relation of the subject with the Other” (Levinas 1987, 39). In contrast, for Husserl there are no discrete instants that successively appear on the “line” of time, as his diagram of time seems to imply. There is only a continuous modification of the same original impression, as he explains in paragraph 11 of his 1905 lectures. This continuity, which has to be thought as a process of self-differentiation, cannot be explained in terms of “différance” or “trace,” since, for Derrida as well as for Levinas, the trace, which is différance itself, retains the other as other in the same (OG, 62). Whereas for Husserl, retention, perception, and protention are never isolated elements of the temporal flow of experience, which modifies itself continuously, for Derrida, who follows Levinas here, alterity, that is, exteriority (Levinas 1969, 290), is precisely what constitutes the dia-chronic structure of experience, which can never be totalized. Phenomenology appears therefore as a metaphysical discourse because it understands
the temporal process as unity and continuity. And, as Derrida points out, it cannot explain the “after-event” of the becoming-conscious of an unconscious content, which is the structure of temporality implied in Freud’s texts (VP, 54). As Derrida explained in his 1968 “Différance” lecture, Freud gave the name of “unconscious” to a radical alterity in relation to all modes of presence so that with the alterity of the unconscious we are dealing with “a past that has never been present” (MP, 21). This “past that has never been present” is an expression explicitly borrowed from Levinas, who in “The Trace of the Other” explains that the face of the other is an “immemorial past,” “an utterly bygone past” (Levinas 1986, 355). This association implies therefore that the radical alterity of the Freudian unconscious is considered as analogous to the alterity of the other subject, as if the self had in itself another self from which it is separated. It seems therefore that in order to deconstruct the “metaphysics of presence” of which phenomenology is the most radical and critical restoration (OG, 49), Derrida has to adopt the metaphysics of exteriority and separation of which Levinas is the promoter.

It has become clear that in Voice and Phenomenon, Derrida placed himself no longer inside phenomenology and philosophy, but in their “margins,” in proximity both to Levinas’s “heterology” and Heidegger’s “destruction” of ontotheology, considering that the privilege given to the present defines the element of philosophical thought (VP, 53). Husserl is accused of participating in “the obstinate desire to save presence” (VP, 43), while trace and différance are said to be “older than presence” (VP, 58), self-nonidentity being considered as the “origin,” if this word can still be used, of self-identity. Levinas showed in Time and the Other that the relation we can have with death is the relation with something absolutely other, which implies that, in opposition to Heidegger, the solitude of the existent is not confirmed, but broken by death (Levinas 1987, 74). This non-solitude means that the relation with death places the existent on a ground where the relationship with the other becomes possible (Levinas 1987, 76). In the same manner for Derrida the otherness of death and the contingency of factual existence is what remains concealed in the metaphysical belief that presence is the universal form of all experience. It implies, as Derrida emphasizes, that “I am” means originally “I am mortal” (VP, 46–47). As Derrida explains in the Introduction to Voice and Phenomenon, Husserl’s phenomenology is a philosophy of life that gives to death only the empirical meaning of a worldly accident and discoverers, as does all metaphysics, within life itself, the possibility of a duplication between the empirical and the transcendental level of experience. This identity of empirical and transcendental life can be discovered in language itself, which is what seems to “unify life and ideality” (VP, 9). In uttering a word, the subject elevates himself to the level of its ideal content, which can be indefinitely repeated in such a way that speech appears as the medium by which the subject can surmount its own mortality, ideality being thus, as Derrida says, “the preservation or mastery of presence in repetition” (VP, 8).
2. Derrida, Heidegger, and Time

Such a denial of one’s own mortality cannot be found in Heidegger. We can find this denial in Derrida, however, precisely because Derrida shares Levinas’s conception of death and his criticism of ontology. Consequently, Derrida remained all along in a marked ambivalence towards Heidegger. He could, on one side, see himself as Heidegger’s heir when he declared in 1967 that all he has attempted so far would not have been possible without the opening given by the Heideggerian questions (POS, 9). But at the same time he could also suspect Heidegger of confirming the “metaphysics of presence” which constitutes in Derrida’s view the core of Western thinking. He thus declared in 1971 that he sometimes had the impression that the Heideggerian problematic was the most profound and powerful defense of what he himself tried to call into question under the rubric of the “thought of presence” (POS, 55). At the end of the first part of Of Grammatology, Derrida said again that the metaphysical concept of time cannot be used to describe the structure of the trace, which refers to an absolute past (OG, 66). Indeed, even in Husserl’s phenomenology of time-consciousness, the linearity of time is still presupposed. Derrida acknowledged that such a “linear” concept of time is what Heidegger has named “the vulgar concept of time,” showing that it has determined from inside the entire ontology (OG, 66, 86).

It is precisely on this point that Derrida engages his first direct critical debate with Heidegger in the 1968 text entitled “Ousia and Grammē.” Later collected in Margins of Philosophy, this essay was first published in a volume dedicated to Jean Beaufret, to whom Heidegger’s “Letter on Humanism” was addressed. Derrida’s essay deals with the longest footnote of Being and Time in paragraph 82, where Heidegger gives a very brief outline of the history of time in Western thinking from Aristotle to Hegel and Bergson. Derrida’s commentary on this note aims at dealing with the Heideggerian understanding of presence, but also at showing the relation between the problem of presence and the problem of the written trace, which is the problematic that he develops in the same period in Of Grammatology (MP, 34). Derrida questions here the difference made by Heidegger between a “vulgar” concept of time, which is the traditional concept of time governing the entire history of philosophy, and an existential one. In the vulgar concept of time, which comes from the leveling down of original time, time is understood as a sequence, as a flux of “nows” (Heidegger 1996, 386). This understanding of time as a sequence comes from the fact that Dasein is lost in what it takes care of, but this way of being which Heidegger names Verfallenheit, fallenness, constitutes nevertheless a positive possibility of being in the world (Heidegger 1996, 164). This positive possibility is the reason why Heidegger stresses that “the vulgar representation of time has its natural justification”; it loses this justification only when claiming to be the true concept of time (Heidegger 1996, 390). But Derrida does not believe that there can be something like a “true” concept...
of time. And even if he acknowledges that *Being and Time* constitutes a step beyond or before metaphysics (MP, 47). Derrida argues that the distinction between an “authentic” and an “inauthentic” temporality is still connected with the idea of a “fall,” the concept of fallenness being in his view by no means extractible from “its ethico-theological orb” (MP, 45). It seems here that Derrida does not want to take into account Heidegger’s warning not to attribute any negative value to this term, which should not be interpreted as a fall from a purer and higher primordial condition (Heidegger 1996, 164). Derrida goes as far as suspecting that there is “some Platonism” in fallenness (MP, 63), which implies that authenticity and inauthenticity could be understood on the basis of the Platonic difference between sensible world and intelligible world. He even argues that the opposition of the primordial to the derivative and the entire quest for an origin is still metaphysical (MP, 63). However, in Heidegger’s view, fallenness means the mere fact of being absorbed in the tasks of everydayness; it involves something like a forgetfulness of one’s own transcendence, that is, a forgetfulness of one’s own being in the world. It is indeed possible to give an ethical or theological meaning to this difference between two modes of existing, as it was for example the case in Judaism and Christianity with the idea of the original “fall.” But, to be fair, it does not seem that Heidegger in *Being and Time* is only presenting a laicized version of a theological idea. It is in fact rather the opposite: the theological conception of the original fall was possible only on the basis of an existential experience, which is also the basis of the philosophical conception of thought as an experience of “elevation” and “awakening” from a state of immersion in everydayness.

Derrida’s conclusion consists nevertheless in suggesting that, against what Heidegger says, there is no “vulgar” concept of time, because “the concept of time belongs in all its aspects to metaphysics and it names the domination of presence” (MP, 63). This appurtenance of time to metaphysics means that another concept of time cannot be opposed to it. By attempting to produce this other concept, one would have to make use of “other metaphysical and onto-theological concepts” (MP, 63). But at the same time, Derrida insists on the fact that his question remains “internal to Heidegger’s thought.” Indeed, Derrida correctly suggests that, since Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, was still using “the grammar and lexicon of metaphysics,” after *Being and Time* Heidegger was led to “change horizons” (MP, 63). To Jean Beaufret in the “Letter on Humanism” Heidegger himself explained this exact point, when he stressed that the third part of *Being and Time* had to be held back from publication because the demonstration that time is the horizon of Being could not “succeed with the help of the language of metaphysics” (Heidegger 1992, 231). Thereby Derrida discovers “two gestures” in Heidegger, or as he says, “two hands” and “two texts”: one by which Heidegger, remaining inside metaphysics, would show how the temporal present of beings comes from a more original thought of Being itself as presence (*Anwesenheit*), and another one by which the determination of Being as presence would become in itself problematic and would define as such the limitation
of the Western way of thinking. The second gesture in particular would open the possibility of going “before or beyond Greece” which for Derrida means that what has to be thought is a “difference older than being itself” (MP, 66). But here, concerning the question of presence, we discover a misunderstanding. The question is not for Heidegger to call into question the privilege given to presence in the Western tradition, which is characterized by Derrida as “the metaphysics of presence.” What is in question is only the privilege given to permanent presence, which could be characterized as “the metaphysics of substance,” a metaphysics that understands Being as a presence already accomplished. In opposition to this metaphysics of substance, Heidegger aims at thinking the event of coming into presence in order to let the temporal character of Being appear. For Derrida, the dismantling of the metaphysics of presence can only come from the outside of the Western tradition (MP, 89) as Levinas’s critique of ontology shows, whereas for Heidegger the deconstruction of the metaphysics of substance implies the internal renewal of the Western thought of Being.

3. The Problem of Genesis

The concept of time, as well as those of past, future, and present, have therefore to be erased. All of them belong to the metaphysics of presence. Following Levinas’s hyperbolic way of thinking, Derrida even goes as far as saying that “time is violence” since it reduces the other to the same and defines, understood in terms of the Husserlian “living present,” egoity as the absolute form of experience (WD, 133). And this erasure is also the case for the concept of history, since this word has always been connected to the linear scheme of the unfolding of presence (OG, 85). The question is therefore to deconstruct the metaphysical concept of history as teleological history which is still widely prevalent (POS, 50) and which implies the concepts of linearity, traditionality, and continuity (POS, 57). But here Derrida insists on the fact that no concept as such is metaphysical, but only in a context, which explains that he still continues to use the word “history” in the context of a new logic of repetition and trace (POS, 58). At the same time however the metaphysical reappropriation of the concept of history is always possible, since the philosophical tradition always amounts to an understanding of history on the basis of an ontological background (POS, 58–59). Derrida explains that in this respect one must elaborate a strategy consisting in borrowing an old word from philosophy and at the same time in producing a new conceptualization of it.

It is therefore not possible to accuse Derrida of rejecting history as such, as the interest he manifested very early for the questions of history and historicity shows. It must be underlined that Derrida’s career began in a climate marked by Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of Husserl, which looked for Husserl’s “unthought” in the direction of a rehabilitation of the sensible and of the body. In contrast, Derrida tried
to understand the unity of an apparently contradictory double gesture, which combines in Husserl’s thought a strict idealism with a philosophy of history, a transcendental reduction that neutralizes the whole mundane sphere with a transcendental genesis that allows the philosophical understanding of concrete history. Derrida’s very first work, written in 1954, but published much later, deals with Husserl’s philosophy of genesis. It tried to show that the problem to be solved here arises from the fact that the genetic product of transcendental genesis, that is, ideality, transcends its own genesis and neutralizes it, so that the product of history, in so far as it can be indefinitely repeated, appears as non-historical. It seems that it is necessary to start from the derived product in order to go back to its constitutive source, which implies that the movement of philosophy is an inverse repetition of the genetic movement of life itself (PG, 138). This is what Husserl acknowledged when he finally understood that the philosophical question is truly a Rückfrage, a questioning backwards. When Derrida proposed in Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction to translate it into French by “question en retour,” he stressed that Rückfrage is marked by “the postal and epistolary reference or resonance of a communication from a distance” (IOG, 50), which implies that tradition is the opening of a space of a possible repetition.

It seems indeed that in 1962, when Derrida was writing his introduction to Husserl’s 1936 short essay “The Origin of Geometry” that has been published as an appendix in The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, he sees more clearly the general structure of delay on which the phenomenological project is based, insofar as it is “the ‘repetition’ of the genetic movement of all philosophy and all history” (PG, 177). As Derrida will explain it more clearly in a later text “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology,” Husserl wanted to maintain at the same time the autonomy of ideality with regard to facticity and its dependence regarding subjectivity and therefore rejects in the same gesture both logicist structuralism and psychologistic genetism (WD, 158). But Husserl finally refused to see that “philosophy originates from an existence whose finitude appears to itself” because, despite the immense philosophical revolution he has undertaken, he was still kept captive in the great classical tradition of philosophy which “reduces human finitude to an accident of history” (PG, 177). From there, concluded Derrida in 1954, comes the necessity of undertaking “a radical explanation [with Husserl’s phenomenology] which will be a complete conversion” (PG, 5).

Eight years later, the leading question has remained the same but now Derrida seems to see in a better light Husserl’s phenomenological idealism. He acknowledges that there is a judicial priority of phenomenology, that is, a priority of transcendentalism, because only phenomenology can “denude the pure materiality of fact” by exhausting itself in the eidetic determination (IOG, 151). That is why in Of Grammatology he insists on the fact that the post-philosophical thinking of trace, if it cannot be reduced to transcendental phenomenology, cannot either break with it (OG, 62). What is therefore required is a surmounting of transcendentalism which
does not fall back into a non-philosophical empiricism or into a critique that reduces the privilege attributed to full presence to the *intuitus originarius* but that does not really break with this ideal. The necessary delay of thought has received the traditional name of *intuitus derivativus* when it is opposed to the actuality of an atemporal infinite which can be grasped only in an instantaneous *intuitus originarius*. But, as Derrida strongly stresses, the necessary delay of thought in regard to the showing of a Being which is already there would lead to an understanding of an only empirical finitude of human thought if Being were not through and through History. Derrida says now that an “essential finitude” can be found in phenomenology and remarks in a parenthesis that “the motif of finitude has perhaps more affinity than it first seems with the principle of a phenomenology” (IOG, 138). This essential finitude comes, according to Derrida, from the necessity of the appearing of the absolute foundation of the sense of Being in a region, in the proto-region of consciousness, which means that the foundation conceals itself in the appearance of a domain of beings. In other words, the Absolute takes on the figure of the empirical in order to *appear* as foundation. There is therefore a necessity of the eidetic limitation, and from this limitation, the reduction receives its true meaning as critical humility and prudence. Seen in this light, transcendental idealism appears as required by a philosophy that wants to account for its own genesis. It is required for a philosophy that wants to become aware of its necessary delay in regard to a Being which is in itself history, “un Être-Histoire,” “a Being-History,” as Derrida says (IOG, 152).

In the light of such an “essential finitude,” it becomes possible to understand that “delay is the destiny of thought itself as discourse,” and that “only a phenomenology can say this” (IOG, 152). For, while the phenomenological reduction means the neutralization of the constituted, at the same time the reduction acknowledges that the constituted offers a necessary starting point. The reduction means not only that it is never possible to begin with the origin (IOG, 38), but also that the original meaning can only be deciphered in the final product, in a retroactive way (IOG, 64). There is, therefore, an “authenticity of the phenomenological delay” and Derrida can legitimately come to the conclusion that “the Reduction is only the pure thinking of this delay, the pure thinking insofar it becomes aware of itself as delay in a philosophy” (IOG, 152), a philosophy that is nothing other than the repetition of the origin in the discourse. The very element of reduction is effectively the language itself that operates a spontaneous neutralization of all facticity insofar as “speaking is only the practice of an immediate eidetic” (IOG, 67). Derrida shows that it is by a kind of “turnabout” (vire-volte) that, in *The Origin of Geometry*, Husserl, after having strongly reaffirmed the independence of the ideal objectivity in regard to its linguistic expression, seems to redescend to the opposite assertion that linguistic incarnation is the indispensable medium of constitution of truth itself (IOG, 76). This sudden reversal constitutes the main interest of this short manuscript because it announces another and most “decisive step” (IOG, 87), by which Husserl shows that the constitution of ideality requires in itself the apparition of writing.
The virtue of writing is precisely its power of virtualization, the writing communication being possible in the absence of the actual speaker and being therefore “a communication which has in a way become virtual” (IOG, 87). Writing is indeed the accomplishment of what Derrida calls “transcendental language” (IOG, 77), that is, a language that not only expresses but also constitutes the ideality as an intersubjective object; this language cannot therefore be identical with any factual language. Transcendental language is not only the medium of eidetic reduction, but also “the element of tradition in which alone, beyond individual finitude, the retention and the prospection of sense are possible” (IOG, 78). But transcendental language in its completed being, that is, as writing, is liberated from all reference to a factual intersubjectivity. This liberation alone gives to objectivity the perpetual being of an ideality, which is the correlate of an absolutely universal intersubjectivity. Writing confers to ideal objectivities a permanent being and gives them the identity which makes them really objective. Because, however, the perpetual being of ideal objectivities has nothing to do with an actual infinity and since this being is nothing other than the pure form of infinite iteration, of an infinite Immer wieder, over and over again (IOG, 135), the opening to infinity which takes place in human history under the form of philosophy is not the opening to an ahistorical realm of eternal entities. On the contrary, it is the opening of history itself. It is not of course the opening of empirical history, which naturally precedes the very recent apparition of philosophy, but the opening of what Derrida calls, by using an expression found in Husserl’s manuscripts, a “transcendental historicity” (IOG, 121), which is nothing other than the paradoxical history of that which remains identical and can be infinitely repeated, the “history of truth” (IOG, 69). This history of truth can be explained neither in a purely genetic manner nor in a purely structural manner. It requires the dialectical “articulation” or the deconstructive “contamination” of structure and genesis.

It is therefore not surprising to see that Derrida, in the following years, which constitute the crucial period of his own thought’s development, continues to show interest in the question of history. In 1954, the young Derrida stressed already that Husserl, despite the fact that there is in his philosophy absolutely no “atemporality” (PG, 84–85), remains nevertheless captive of the classical tradition, which understands temporality “on the background of a possible or actual eternity to which the human being has been able to participate or could be able to do so” (PG, 5). This background of eternity explains that there are “some similarities between Hegel’s and Husserl’s thoughts” (PG, xxiv). Husserl having attempted, like Hegel, to think the becoming of the Absolute in the frame of “the idea of an absolute and completed history or a teleology constituting all the moments of history” (PG, 108). In 1962, Derrida showed that Husserl was therefore led to consider human transcendental consciousness as the bearer of an absolute logos and a teleological reason constituting the ideal pole of its own development. This transcendental consciousness explained the appearance of the idea of a “transcendental deity” which is beyond history, but constitutes nevertheless the pole for itself of the transcendental.
historical subjectivity (IOG, 148). For Husserl, the meta-historicity of the divine logos, as well as the meta-historicity of the idealities, which are said in Experience and Judgment (paragraph 64c) to be “omnitemporal,” can be revealed only through the movement of history, which is nothing other than “the pure tradition of an original Logos in direction of a polar Telos” (IOG, 149).

This same question of the relation of the Absolute and history was at the center of the courses Derrida gave in the Sorbonne in 1962/3. In the first one, dedicated to “Method and Metaphysics” and to the figures of Parmenides, Plato, Descartes, and Spinoza, Derrida showed that with Hegel method becomes the logos itself, since for him the way leading to truth is neither only human, nor already accomplished in God, which is Himself movement and life. Derrida’s conclusion was again that in this respect there is a deep complicity between Hegel and Husserl, a question which was developed in the second course dedicated to “Phenomenology, Theology and Teleology in Husserl.” Derrida showed there that the thematic of a transcendental deity has to be put in relation with what Husserl called “an Idea in Kantian sense” which is the idea not of an actual infinite but of the opening of the infinite horizon of a history from which God is the telos. He quoted in this respect a manuscript in which Husserl declared that “God would die if all the human beings would die” and Husserl’s last words saying that human life is only a way leading to God and that he had for himself tried to reach the goal without theology. These are words in which Derrida saw a testimony of Husserl’s acknowledgment of the inseparability of method and metaphysics. The question of history was again taken up in 1964, at the center of his first course in the École Normale which was dedicated to the Being-question and history in Heidegger (Derrida 2013).

4. Conclusion: Play and Messianicity

All this was a preparation for a new conception of history as “play” and “writing,” which emerged in the texts published between 1968 and 1972. The theme of repetition has been very early called upon in order to criticize the idea of an originary beginning to which one would like to go back. This critical role of repetition is the reason why Derrida has very early questioned the Heideggerian opposition of the authentic and of the inauthentic, as he does regarding the opposition of original and non-original time in “Ousia and Grammé.” The writing of dissemination implies in itself the absence of all originarity, as far as the idea of origin presupposes in itself the idea of a unity. As soon as one tries to imagine an original multiplicity or a multiple origin, the difference between the originary and the non-originary disappears; all historical singularities seem to be the mere repetition of another one. If every sign is a mark and therefore a re-mark as far as it is not originary, if there are only derivative marks, it is not only impossible to establish any hierarchy, but also to think
history as a continuous flow of time. The metaphor which can be used here is the spatial metaphor of the labyrinth, which already appears at the end of Voice and Phenomenon, in relation to Husserl’s description of a Teniers painting seen in the Dresdner Gallery representing paintings which are themselves representations of other paintings, and so on. There is therefore no longer a past or a future, and the very idea of a destination becomes obsolete. We are condemned to a kind of nomadic wandering, a situation that has also been defined by Heidegger as the human being’s fundamental situation of errancy in “On the Essence of Truth” (Heidegger 1992, 132).

This nomadic wandering or errancy explains the importance given to the concepts of “game” and “play” in the 1966 lecture Derrida gave in Baltimore, a lecture that marked the beginning of his celebrity status in the United States. This lecture is of course “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences” (WD, 278–294). For Derrida, the concept of game thought of as world-game or as the play of the world results from the absence of any transcendental signified, as his own definition of game given in Of Grammatology states: “We could name ‘jeu’ (game or play) the absence of the transcendental signified as non-limitation of the game, that is to say as the undermining of onto-theology and of the metaphysics of presence” (OG, 50). There is a game, that is, unlimited interplay, when and if the signified is lacking, when and if there is a failure of presence, when and if there is something missing, a center, an origin, or an absolute arché. Play needs something like an empty space in order to be set free, that is, in order for it to have a field of infinite substitutions, where each signified is able to become in turn a signifier. In this conception of play, nothing forbids or prohibits the permutation of all terms. The movement of signification is then what Derrida calls a movement of supplementarity: it occurs in addition to the lack of foundation of the signification, it is “superabundant,” that is, it is superfluous, because, being without origin or finality, it lacks all forms of necessity. But it is also a supplement in the sense of having a vicarious function: it takes the place of the lacking presence and that is why play is said to be “the disruption of presence” (WD, 292). Play is thus always the interplay of presence and absence, because it is what allows the substitution of one term by another one, the supplement of one term through another one. But this alternation of presence and absence is the effect of play and not what makes play possible. Presence and absence are functions of play, as well as are subject, center, and origin, which, for Derrida, have nothing other than a functional value. We must think being (presence and absence) on the basis of play, not play on the basis of being. Only then will we stop considering history a “nightmare,” in Joyce’s words (IOG, 103); only then will we stop feeling lost in the Dresdner Gallery labyrinth: the “experience” of the labyrinth is the nostalgic longing for a lost presence, whereas the “joyous affirmation of the play of the world” has nothing to do with a philosophy of disappointment and loss (WD, 292). The failure of presence, instead of being felt as a loss, should be an invitation to
“active” interpretation. In Nietzsche’s terms, we should be able to transform a passive nihilism, which is a negation of life, into an active nihilism, free from nostalgia and hope, indifferent to archaeology as well as to eschatology.

This active nihilism explains Derrida’s hesitation to accept the thought of epochality and the determination of the “epoch” in the Heideggerian history of Being. It can nevertheless be said that, following Heidegger, what characterizes our time is the interpretation of the beings as objects of representation, so that all experience of beings becomes essentially representation. Because the modern meaning of Being as objectivity can appear with Descartes only on the basis of its Greek meaning as presence, we should not emphasize the difference between modernity and antiquity or medieval times. On the contrary, we must relocate the different “epochs” of the history of Being within the great epoch of metaphysics, which could be called the epoch of re-presentation. But re-presentation here means “to render present in general” and not a rendering present of everything for the benefit of the subject, which is the peculiar feature of modernity. That is more or less what Derrida suggested in a lecture entitled “Envoi” from July 1980 (PSY1, 107). And in the same lecture he emphasized the fact that Heidegger does not consider the reign of representation to be at all a calamity, precisely because in the accomplished metaphysics, in what he called Gestell, which is the other face of Ereignis, the event of appropriation, and as such the announcement of what is no longer “epoch-making,” “the modern world begins to free itself from the space of representation and calculability” (PSY1, 108). But if this is really the Heideggerian thought of epochality in general, if Heidegger understands, as Derrida stresses in “The Retrait of Metaphor,” metaphysics as the epoch or suspensive withdrawal of Being in the epochality of all the epochs (PSY1, 65), what, then, is problematic for Derrida in the Heideggerian history of Being? Derrida himself speaks in The Postcard of the “grand history” of the Geschick, of the destination that goes from Socrates to Freud and Heidegger (PC, 13). What is in fact problematic is the Ge- of Geschick and its gathering value, by which in destination Being still destines itself as if it were the unified “subject” of destination. This is why in De l’esprit Derrida speaks “for provisional convenience” of “the axiomatics of Destruktion and of the epochal scheme in general” (OS, 8). Derrida wanted thus to point out the hidden teleology which is still to be found in the epochal scheme. In The Postcard, Derrida had already expressed his suspicion of what he called “the lure” of destination in general: “To coordinate the different epochs, halts, determinations, in a word the entire history of Being with a destination of Being is perhaps the most outlandish postal lure” (PC, 66). Derrida wants to think the multiplicity of the dispensations, of the sendings, la multiplicité des envois, as coming from the other and not from Being itself, that is, as sendings back, as returns, as renvois so that there is no gathering of destination, but an original dissemination or division of destiny: “This, as it were, pre-ontological sending [envoi] does not gather itself together. It gathers itself only by dividing itself, by differing/deferring itself. . . . It does not form a unity and does not begin with itself, although nothing present precedes
it; it emits only on the basis of the other, the other in itself without itself. Everything begins by referring back [par le renvoi], that is to say, does not begin” (PSY1, 127).

One can wonder if the “messianic” conception of history that Derrida develops in his last texts, in a time when Levinas’s thought has become for him a capital reference, is compatible with his first critique of the “metaphysical” concepts of time and history. Even if Derrida is careful enough to distinguish between messianicity and messianism and between a teleo-eschatological program and the messianic promise (SM, 75) which opens up, without any horizon of the wait, to what is to come, is not his claim that “the messianic appeal belongs properly to a universal structure, to that irreducible movement of the historical opening to the future” (SM, 167), a return to a linear conception of time? And even if he indeed wants to identify the Abrahamic messianism with what he calls “messianicity,” is he not still using this Hebraic name, giving thereby a pre-eminence to a particular historical conception of time and history? And, the last and most difficult question: how can a deconstructive thinking be finally referring to the indeconstructibility of the idea of a justice which always remains to come (SM, 90)?

Notes

1 I am quoting in the following from the notes I took as a student during Derrida’s courses of the academic year 1962/3.

2 Derrida does not seem to know that the “eschatological” invention of a time oriented towards what is to come has to be ascribed to the Persian Mazdeism and Zoroastrianism, in which we find the first mention of a savior, the Sásohyant, who is supposed to restore justice through an entire regeneration of the world and who is the prefiguration of the Messiah, a Hebrew word which means “the anointed,” as does the Greek Christos.

References