15 Auto-Affection

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Auto-affection refers to self-experience. It is not, however, the experience opened up by a deliberate act of reflection through which an object called the self is given in a representation. Below reflection is a basic self-awareness, such as the experience of my own thoughts. “Of my own thoughts” is an important phrase since it tells us immediately what is at stake in auto-affection. It is an experience of sameness and selfness. “Auto” in Greek, of course, means “self” and “same,” as in “automobile”, which literally means “self-moving” or in “tautology,” which means a sentence that says the same thing twice. The idea of auto-affection seems to enter philosophical discourse when Plato, in the Theatetus, defines thinking as interior monologue (189c–190a). More recently, we see it functioning not only at the root of Descartes’ “I think therefore I am” – it is the same “I” on both sides of the “therefore” – but also at the root of Kantian autonomy: I give the law to myself. It is auto-affection therefore that supports not only theoretical foundations but also moral foundations. Because auto-affection has this grounding function, Derrida has made it the object of his deconstructions. Indeed, it is possible to say without exaggeration that every deconstruction Derrida has ever written targets auto-affection. Deconstruction aims to show that all auto-affection, however it is conceived, is really and fundamentally hetero-affection. All the neologisms or redefined terms that Derrida developed throughout his life (from “différence” to “anachronism”) attempt to name this aporetical relation between sameness and otherness to which the deconstruction of auto-affection leads us.

I. Derrida’s Appropriation of Three Phenomenological Ideas

In order to understand Derrida’s deconstruction of auto-affection, we must examine the first and most important deconstruction of auto-affection that appears in Derrida’s 1967 Voice and Phenomenon. This is
a difficult book. It looks to be a simple criticism of phenomenology, even a rejection and dismissal of phenomenology. It is not. From this book onward, Derrida embraces and indeed never retreats from three phenomenological ideas. It is impossible to understand Voice and Phenomenon without pausing over these three phenomenological ideas.

The first idea is perhaps the greatest innovation of phenomenological thinking: the *epoché*. Based on Descartes’ idea of methodical doubt, the *epoché* suspends all belief in a world that exists independently of experience. It reduces all being “in itself” to subjective experience, to “phenomena.” However, the *epoché* is more radical than Cartesian doubt insofar as it reduces subjective experience itself. The *epoché* must be strictly universal, which means that it even includes me as a psychological person within all the data that is reduced. The universality of the *epoché* opens up a pre-personal, even pre-subjective experience. For Derrida, when one moves through a deconstruction, one ends up at this profound level of experience, a level that Derrida, in *Voice and Phenomenon*, calls “ultra-transcendental” (VP: 28). The second idea concerns the composition of the ultra-transcendental level. Following Husserl (and Heidegger), Derrida conceives this level as temporal. We shall return to this idea in a moment since it is central to Derrida’s deconstruction of auto-affection in *Voice and Phenomenon*; moreover below, we shall also see that the composition of the ultra-transcendental level is a complicated relation of forces. However, for now, we must note that, when Derrida appropriates the phenomenological idea that all experience is fundamentally temporal, he demonstrates that temporalisation is a movement of differentiation. The present is always being differentiated into pastness and futureness so that the present is itself always in a process of division. The present is fundamentally composed therefore of a gap or a hiatus that can never be closed or reconciled. The third idea, closely connected to the second, comes from Husserl’s descriptions in the Fifth Cartesian Meditation, his descriptions of the experience of the alien (Husserl 1963). When Husserl describes the experience of alterity, he recognises that this experience differs from self-experience. Indeed, the difference he discovers is a genuine phenomenological insight (rivaling the innovation of the *epoché*). When I experience myself, according to Husserl, my own self is given to me in a presentation (*Gegenwärtigung*). In other words, my experience of myself is immediate. In contrast, when I experience you, you are given to me in a *Vergegenwärtigung*. There is no precise English word that is equivalent to the German “*Vergegenwärtigung*.” It is usually translated into English with the neologism “presentification,” but the prefix “Ver-” clearly indicates a kind of duplicity, as in the “re-” of “representation” which is also a
possible English translation of “Vergegenwärtigung.” The prefix indicates however that the way you are given to me is mediated. More strongly, it indicates, and this is really Husserl’s great insight, that the interior life of another is never given to me as such. In the experience of the other, there is a kind of absence or non-presence that differs from the usual kind of non-presence one encounters in perception. The perception of a three-dimensional object always includes absence insofar as there are hidden sides to every spatial object. Yet, these hidden sides can be brought into presence if I move around the object. Unlike the absence of the backside of a table, the non-presence of the other, however, remains no matter what I do, no matter how I move about. Husserl thinks that this experience of the other happens only with the other. Derrida in contrast thinks that, even in self-experience, we find Vergegenwärtigung, that is, non-presence and mediation. In other words, Derrida generalises the experience of the other to all forms of auto-affection. Now, let us examine the specific arguments against auto-affection that we find in Voice and Phenomenon.

II. The Deconstruction of Auto-Affection in Voice and Phenomenon

The precise argumentation deconstructing auto-affection appears in Chapter Six, “The Voice that Keeps Silent.” But the argumentation relies on what Derrida does in Chapter Five, “Signs and the Blink of an Eye.” We shall start with Chapter Five. In the first four chapters of Voice and Phenomenon, Derrida had been trying to show that when Husserl, in the Logical Investigations (Husserl’s first truly important book), wants to isolate logical meaning, that is, expression, from the contingent and factual meanings of everyday communication, that is, from indication, Husserl resorts, through a kind of epoché, to the experience of soliloquy, to what above we called “interior monologue” (Husserl 1980). According to Husserl, in soliloquy, the meaning of the words I am using seems to be immediately present in the moment, in “the blink of an eye.” Because Husserl speaks of the moment (the German word for moment is “Augenblick,” which literally means “blink of an eye,” hence Derrida’s title for Chapter Five), Husserl seems to be presupposing some view of temporal experience. Therefore in Chapter Five, Derrida turns to Husserl’s descriptions of temporalisation, even though Husserl himself had not yet presented his famous lectures on time until some years after the publication of the Logical Investigations (VP 68). In the lectures (called The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness), Husserl attempts to describe the experience of time (temporalisation), but especially the
experience of the present as I live it right now: the “living present.” As Derrida reads it, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*, on the one hand, indicates that the living present seems to have a center, which is the now point. But, on the other hand, the time lectures indicate that the living present seems to be thick; it includes the immediate memory (called the “retention”) of the now that has just elapsed and the anticipation (called the “protention”) of the now that is about to appear. For Husserl, the retentional phase is different from memory in the usual sense, which he calls “secondary memory”; the usual sense of memory is defined by representation (*Vergegenwärtigung*). Because of the thickness, what is at issue, for Derrida, is precisely the kind of difference that one can establish between the retentional phase of the living present and secondary memory. In other words, what is at stake is the kind of difference we can establish between *Gegenwärtigung* and *Vergegenwärtigung*, between presentation and re-presentation. We anticipated this discussion above when we referred to Husserl’s insight in the Fifth Cartesian Meditation. While Husserl shows in *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* the irreducibility of *Vergegenwärtigung* to *Gegenwärtigung*, Derrida nevertheless interrogates – without questioning the demonstrative validity of this distinction – “the evidentiary soil and the milieu of these distinctions, … [that is] what relates the terms distinguished to one another and constitutes the very possibility of the comparison” (VP: 72, Derrida’s emphasis). It is important to recognise that Derrida is not claiming that there is no difference between retention and secondary memory (or between *Gegenwärtigung* and *Vergegenwärtigung*). Instead, because Husserl at one point (in §16 of *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*) calls retention a “non-perception,” Derrida argues that there must be a continuity between retention and secondary memory such that it is impossible to claim that there is a radical discontinuity or a radical difference between retention and re-presentation. Therefore because the living present is thick, because the now cannot be separated from retention, there must be no radical difference between representation and presentation or between non-perception and perception (VP: 72). As Derrida says,

As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the non-now, of perception and non-perception in the zone of originarity that is common to originary impression and to retention, we welcome the other into the self-identity of the *Augenblick*, non-presence and non-evidentness into the *blink of an eye of the instant*. There is a duration to the blink of an eye and the duration closes the eye. This alterity is even the condition of presence, of presentation, and
therefore of Vorstellung in general, prior to all the dissociations which could be produced there.

(VP: 73)

Within the duration, there is an alterity, a heterogeneity between perception and non-perception which is also a continuity. Between retention and re-production, there is only a difference between two modifications of non-perception (VP: 73). Therefore, as Derrida concludes, the alterity of the blink of the eye “cuts into, at its roots,” the argument concerning the immediacy of meaning (expression) in soliloquy (VP: 74).

We have been considering the argumentation found in Chapter Five, but, as we said above, the argumentation against auto-affection really occurs in Chapter Six. In fact, Chapter Six is the heart of Voice and Phenomenon. Chapter Six concerns the voice of the title Voice and Phenomenon, the voice in soliloquy or interior monologue. For Husserl, according to Derrida, meaning (a thought) is generated from a stratum of silence, “the absolute silence of the self-relation” (VP: 77). Sense must be generated as an object repeatable to infinity (a universality) and yet remain close by to the acts of repetition (proximity). In other words, sense must be simultaneously present in the sense of an object (the relation to the object as over and against) and present in the sense of the subject (the proximity to self in identity, as close as possible). In order for this to happen, a specific medium or element of expression is needed; that medium or element is the voice (VP: 85). Sense is going to be generated by means of hearing-oneself-speak, by means of this specific kind of auto-affection (VP: 88). In effect in Chapter Six, Derrida provides a phenomenological description of hearing-oneself-speak.

Here are the basic features of that description. When I speak silently to myself, I do not make any sounds go out through my mouth. Although I do not make sounds through my mouth when I speak silently to myself, I make use of phonic complexes, that is, I make use of the forms of words or signs of a natural language. The use of natural phonic forms seems to imply that my interior monologue is an actual (not ideal) discourse. Because however the medium of the voice is temporal – the phonic forms are iterated across moments – the silent vocalisation endows the phonic forms with ideality (VP: 86). Thanks to the phonic forms utilised in hearing-oneself-speak, one exteriorises the ideal sense (a thought). This exteriorisation – ex-pression—seems to imply that we have now moved from time to space. But, since the sound is heard by the subject during the time he is speaking, what is expressed seems to be in absolute proximity to its speaker, “within the absolute proximity of its present” (VP: 85), “absolutely close to me” (VP: 87). We see how the
element of the voice seems to satisfy the two requirements for the constitution of an ideal meaning: the silent expression objectifies the sense (universalises it) and yet it remains in proximity to the one expressing. In other words, the subject lets himself be affected by the signifier, but apparently without any detour through exteriority or through the world; or, as Derrida says, apparently without any detour through “the non-proper in general” (VP: 88); the subject seems to hear his own voice. Hearing-oneself-speak seems to be an absolutely pure auto-affection (VP: 89). What makes hearing-oneself-speak seem to be a pure auto-affection, according to Derrida, is that it seems to “be nothing other than the absolute reduction of space in general” (VP: 89). This apparent absolute reduction of space in general is why hearing-oneself-speak is so appropriate for universality (VP: 89). Requiring the intervention of no surface in the world, the voice is a “signifying substance that is absolutely available” (VP: 89). Its transmission or iteration encounters no obstacles or limits. The signified or what I want to say seems to be so close to the signifier that the signifier seems to be “diaphanous” (VP: 90).

Yet, the diaphaneity of the voice is only apparent since, now reverting back to the argumentation found in Chapter 5, it is conditioned by temporalisation. Temporalisation indeed makes the voice ideal, but by doing so it also makes the voice (the phonic forms) repeatable to infinity and therefore beyond the acts of expression taking place right now. As repeatable, the phonic forms have the possibility of not being close by. They are able to function as referring to something that is still to come; they are able to refer to non-presence, which turns the voice into an opaque murmur. In other words, the phonic forms are able to function indicatively – within the silence of expression. So, even in the auto-affection of hearing-oneself-speak, we find that we are not able to exclude impurity and impropriety. In short, temporalisation results in auto-affection being always and necessarily hetero-affection.

III. The Two Forces of Event and Repetition

The argumentation we have just reconstructed from Voice and Phenomenon implies something about the composition of the ultra-transcendental level. It is composed of two kinds of forces: event and repetition. This is what Derrida says in “Typewriter Ribbon” (which dates from 1998): “Will this be possible for us? Will we one day be able, and in a single gesture, to join the thinking of the event to the thinking of the machine? Will we be able to think . . . , at one and the same time, both what is happening (we call that an event) and the calculable programming of an automatic repetition (we call that a machine)” (WA: 72)? The
event is one of the forces. For Derrida, the idea of event refers to the force of the living being. The living being is spontaneous and self-moving. Insofar as it affects itself, it seems to be based on nothing but itself. It is singular. The first force is the force of singularisation. But also, as the living being affects itself, the affect gets “inscribed,” as Derrida says, “right on some body or some organic material” (WA 72). The idea of an inscription leads Derrida to the other force. Here we have something like an inorganic matter, a machine, the machine of memory or retention. The machine that inscribes is based in repetition: “It is destined, that is, to reproduce impassively, imperceptibly, without organ or organicity, the received commands. In a state of anaesthesia, it would obey or command a calculable program without affect or auto-affection, like an indifferent automaton” (WA: 72). The automaticity of the inorganic machine is not the spontaneity attributed to organic life. These two forces, for Derrida, appear to be antonymic, incompatible, and yet inseparable. The thought of them together – joined and yet at war across the hiatus we mentioned above, the hiatus now resembling a sort of battlefield – opens up a new logic, an unheard of conceptual form, another kind of thinking than what we have seen in the history of philosophy. While the traditional form of thinking had opposed and separated, as Husserl opposed and separated expression and indication, the force of the event and the force of repetition, this new logic gives up “neither the event nor the machine, [it] subordinates neither one to the other, neither [does it] reduce one to the other” (WA: 74). At the beginning, we mentioned that Derrida’s neologisms attempt to name the aporetical relation between sameness and otherness. Now we see that his neologisms or reconceived terms (from “différence” to “anachronism,” and onto to “democracy”) really refer to the logic of forces of event and repetition.

IV. Conclusion: The Deconstruction of Sovereignty in Rogues

The logic of forces disturbs the theoretical foundations (as in Descartes) since the subject, we see now, is based in temporalisation. The present singularity of the “I think” is in fact contaminated with repetition coming from a past that it cannot remember and heading toward a future that it cannot predict. It also disturbs moral foundations (as in Kant) since autonomy – I spontaneously give the law to myself – is contaminated with the machinic repeatability of heteronomy, making the moral subject resemble animals. The argumentation against auto-affection and the logic of forces that emerges from it, however, go further than the theoretical and the moral. They also disturb political foundations. Derrida’s later
reflections on sovereignty flow from this argumentation. We shall conclude therefore with the deconstruction of sovereignty as it appears in *Rogues* (which dates from 2002).

The argumentation in *Rogues* is remarkably similar to that found in *Voice and Phenomenon* (more than thirty years earlier). According to Derrida, sovereignty, pure sovereignty, the very “essence of sovereignty” (R: 100), is silent. It does not have to give reasons, it “always keeps quiet in the very ipseity of the moment proper to it, a moment that is but the stigmatic point of an indivisible instant. A pure sovereignty is indivisible or it is not at all” (R: 100–101). “Ipse” is the Latin translation of the Greek “auto.” Thus we see already how sovereignty seems to rely on auto-affection. What defines sovereignty is the indivisible possession of power; sovereignty does not share power. Not sharing means contracting power into an instant—the instant of action, of an event, of a singularity. When power is contracted into an instant, it is withdrawn from temporalisation; it has no “thickness.” Recall Derrida’s examination of Husserlian temporalisation: the “thickness” of retentions and protentions. Such a withdrawal explains why sovereignty is always silent; it tries to keep its power secret. If power is to be sovereign and indivisible, it cannot participate in language, which introduces universalisation and sharing. Sovereignty is incompatible with universalisation, with the force of repetition, which divides the instant and opens up the distance of the hiatus. And yet the concept of sovereignty calls for universalisation. If it is to be effective, sovereignty must communicate its power, its freedom, its decisions. It must necessarily enter temporalisation and more concretely history. It must speak. Yet, “as soon as I speak to the other, I submit to the law of giving reason(s), I share a virtually universalisable medium, I divide my authority” (R: 101). As soon as there is sovereignty, there is abuse of power since sovereignty can reign only by not sharing its authority. And yet there can be no use of power without the sharing of it through repetition. More precisely, as Derrida says, “since [sovereignty] never succeeds in [not sharing] except in a critical, precarious, and unstable fashion, sovereignty can only tend [Derrida’s emphasis], for a limited time, to reign without sharing. It can only tend toward imperial hegemony” (R: 102).

The tendency of which Derrida is speaking means that the event of sovereign power is always to come. It is an impossible event, but, as Derrida would say, the only event worthy of the name. Yet, the tendency to the event opens up a new investigation. How are we to imagine this tendency? Is it a tendency toward the worst or the best? More precisely, is the tendency moving toward a perfect sovereign, a god who would save us all? Or is the coming of a perfect sovereign the very worst violence in which all sharing with other living beings would end? Or is it possible to
move the tendency toward something else, even though we do not know what that something else might be? Is it a tendency toward the least violence, in which all living beings would be allowed to be sovereign? Or, is this tendency toward letting all living being be sovereign itself, it too, the worst? Derrida of course cannot answer these questions, further questions that his thinking pushes us to ask. He has, of course, passed away. These are questions only for us, for those of us who still undergo the need to think of a future that keeps coming and without end.

Notes

1 The experience of the other is central to the argumentation found in Voice and Phenomenon. But it seems Derrida first emphasised the experience in his 1964 “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in Writing and Difference. See especially WD: 123.

2 Although Husserl wrote some early texts on time prior to the 1900–1901 Logical Investigations, Husserl’s time lectures really begin in 1905. Derrida had no access to these archival texts from the 1890s. In Voice and Phenomenon, he refers to Husserl’s lectures as edited by Martin Heidegger (Husserl 1928). Derrida cites the Dussort translation. At the time Voice and Phenomenon was going to press, in 1966–67, the archival material on time appeared, but probably too late for Derrida to take into account (Husserl 1966).
The question of literature in Derrida’s work is, by necessity, entangled with the question of philosophy. Like so many other binary oppositions that Derrida deconstructs throughout his career, literature seems initially to occupy the place of the subordinate term in this philosophy vs. literature opposition, excluded by the dominating metaphysical ambitions of philosophical discourse (at least since Plato’s banishment of the poets from the republic). However, in the end, Derrida works time and again to thematise literature not as philosophy’s excluded binary opposite, but as a rival mode of theoretical engagement: literature as philosophy’s secret partner and enabler.

In fact, Derrida confesses to have been interested as a young man primarily in literature rather than philosophy. As he admits at his thesis defense, looking back from 1980: “my most constant interest, coming even before my philosophical interest I should say, if this is possible, has been directed toward literature” (Derrida 1983b: 37). Indeed, he writes voluminously about literature throughout his career, and his work was first received into the English-speaking academy primarily as a kind of literary criticism, before (or at least in addition to) deconstruction’s disciplinary identity as a philosophical discourse. The standing appointments that Derrida held at Yale, Irvine, NYU were housed in literature departments, not philosophy departments; and much of his work on literature was strategically aimed at questioning the totalising pretentions of philosophical discourse, its inability or unwillingness to deal with a certain kind of excessive writing practice that might be most economically characterised as “literary.” As Derrida puts it in a 1983 interview, “My ‘first’ inclination wasn’t really toward philosophy, but rather towards literature – no, towards something that literature accommodates more easily than philosophy” (I: 73).

This tension between philosophy and literature is played out in much of Derrida’s early and mid-career work, but perhaps nowhere more intensely