From *OF GRAMMATOLOGY*

Jacques Derrida

The Program

By a slow movement whose necessity is hardly perceptible, everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name of language is beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarized under, the name of writing. By a hardly perceptible necessity, it seems as though the concept of writing

no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in general (whether understood as communication, relation, expression, signification, constitution of meaning or thought, etc.), no longer designating the exterior surface, the insubstantial double of a major signifier, the signifier of the signifier—is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all senses of the word, writing thus comprehends language. Not that the word “writing” has ceased to designate the signifier of the signifier, but it appears, strange as it may seem, that “signifier of the signifier” no longer defines accidental doubling and fallen secondarity. “Signifier of the signifier” describes on the contrary the movement of language: in its origin, to be sure, but one can already suspect that an origin whose structure can be expressed as “signifier of the signifier” conceals and erases itself in its own production. There the signified always already functions as a signifier. The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general, affects them always already, the moment they enter the game. There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language. The advent of writing is the advent of this play; today such a play is coming into its own, effacing the limit starting from which one had thought to regulate the circulation of signs, drawing along with it all the reassuring signifieds, reducing all the strongholds, all the out-of-bounds shelters that watched over the field of language. This, strictly speaking, amounts to destroying the concept of “sign” and its entire logic. Undoubtedly it is not by chance that this overwhelming supervenes at the moment when the extension of the concept of language effaces all its limits. We shall see that this overwhelming and this effacement have the same meaning, are one and the same phenomenon. It is as if the Western concept of language (in terms of what, beyond its plurivocity and beyond the strict and problematic opposition of speech [parole] and language [langue], attaches it in general to phonematic or glossematic production, to language, to voice, to hearing, to sound and breadth, to speech) were revealed today as the guise or disguise of a primary writing: 1 more fundamental than that which, before this conversion, passed for the simple “supplement to the spoken word” (Rousseau). Either writing was never a simple “supplement,” or it is urgently necessary to construct a new logic of the “supplement.” It is this urgency which will guide us further in reading Rousseau.

 These disguises are not historical contingencies that one might admire or regret. Their movement was absolutely necessary, with a necessity which cannot be judged by any other tribunal. The privilege of the phone does not depend upon a choice that could have been avoided. It responds to a moment of economy (let us say of the “life” of “history” or of “being as self-relationship”). The system of “hearing (understanding) -oneself-speak” through the phonic substance—which presents itself as the nonexterior, ((8)) nonmundane, therefore nonempirical or noncontingent signifier—has necessarily dominated the history of the world during an entire epoch, and has even produced the idea of the world, the idea of world-origin, that arises from the difference between the worldly and the nonworldly, the outside and the inside, ideality and nonideality, universal and nonuniversal, transcendental and empirical, etc .2 With an irregular and essentially precarious success, this movement would apparently have tended, as toward its telos, to confine writing to a secondary and instrumental function: translator of a full speech that was fully present (present to itself, to its signified, to the other, the very condition of the theme of presence in general), technics in the service of language, spokes-man, interpreter of an originary speech itself shielded from interpretation. Technics in the service of language: I am not invoking a general essence of technics which would be already familiar to us and would help us in understanding the narrow and historically determined concept of writing as an example. I believe on the contrary that a certain sort of question about the meaning and origin of writing precedes, or at least merges with, a certain type of question about the meaning and origin of technics. That is why the notion of technique can never simply clarify the notion of writing. It is therefore as if what we call language could have been in its origin and in its end only a moment, an essential but determined mode, a phenomenon, an aspect, a species of writing. And as if it had succeeded in making us forget this, and in wilfully misleading us, only in the course of an adventure: as that adventure itself. All in all a short enough adventure. It merges with the history that has associated technics and logocentric metaphysics for nearly three millennia. And it now seems to be approach-ing what is really its own exhaustion; under the circumstances—and this is no more than one example among others—of this death of the civilization of the book, of which so much is said and which manifests itself particularly through a convulsive proliferation of libraries. All appearances to the contrary, this death of the book undoubtedly announces (and in a certain sense always has announced) nothing but a death of speech (of a so-called full speech) and a new mutation in the history of writing, in history as writing. Announces it at a distance of a few centuries. It is on that scale that we must reckon it here, being careful not to neglect the quality of a very heterogeneous historical duration: the acceleration is such, and such its qualitative meaning, that one would be equally wrong in making a careful evaluation according to past rhythms. “Death of speech” is of course a metaphor here: before we speak of disappearance, we must think of a new situation for speech, of its subordination within a structure of which it will no longer be the archon. To affirm in this way that the concept of writing exceeds and comprehends that of language, presupposes of course a certain definition of Ian- ((9)) guage and of writing. If we do not attempt to justify it, we shall be giving in to the movement of inflation that we have just mentioned, which has also taken over the word “writing,” and that not fortuitously. For some time now, as a matter of fact, here and there, by a gesture and for motives that are profoundly necessary, whose degradation is easier to denounce than it is to disclose their origin, one says “language” for action, movement, thought, reflection, consciousness, unconsciousness, experience, affectivity, etc. Now we tend to say “writing” for all that and more: to designate not only the physical gestures of literal pictographic or ideographic inscription, but also the totality of what makes it possible; and also, beyond the signifying face, the signified face itself. And thus we say “writing” for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural “writing.” One might also speak of athletic writing, and with even greater certainty of military or political writing in view of the techniques that govern those domains today. All this to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves. It is also in this sense that the contemporary biologist speaks of writing and pro-gram in relation to the most elementary processes of information within the living cell. And, finally, whether it has essential limits or not, the entire field covered by the cybernetic program will be the field of writing. If the theory of cybernetics is by itself to oust all metaphysical concepts—including the concepts of soul, of life, of value, of choice, of memory—which until recently served to separate the machine from man, 3 it must conserve the notion of writing, trace, grammè [written mark], or grapheme, until its own historico-metaphysical character is also exposed. Even before being determined as human (with all the distinctive characteristics that have always been attributed to man and the entire system of significations that they imply) or nonhuman, the grammè—or the grapheme—would thus name the element. An element without simplicity. An element, whether it is understood as the medium or as the irreducible atom, of the arche-synthesis in general, of what one must forbid oneself to define within the system of oppositions of metaphysics, of what consequently one should not even call experience in general, that is to say the origin of meaning in general. This situation has always already been announced. Why is it today in the process of making itself known as such and after the fact? This question would call forth an interminable analysis. Let us simply choose some points of departure in order to introduce the limited remarks to which I shall confine myself. I have already alluded to theoretical mathematics; its writing—whether understood as a sensible graphie [manner of writing] (and that already presupposes an identity, therefore an ideality, of its form, which ((10)) in principle renders absurd the so easily admitted notion of the “sensible signifier”), or understood as the ideal synthesis of signifieds or a trace operative on another level, or whether it is understood, more profoundly, as the passage of the one to the other—has never been absolutely linked with a phonetic production. Within cultures practicing so-called phonetic writ-ing, mathematics is not just an enclave. That is mentioned by all historians of writing; they recall at the same time the imperfections of alphabetic writing, which passed for so long as the most convenient and “the most intelligent”4 writing. This enclave is also the place where the practice of scientific language challenges intrinsically and with increasing profundity the ideal of phonetic writing and all its implicit metaphysics (metaphysics itself ), particularly, that is, the philosophical idea of the epistémè; also of istoria, a concept profoundly related to it in spite of the dissociation or opposition which has distinguished one from the other during one phase of their common progress. History and knowledge, istoria and epistémè have always been determined (and not only etymologically or philosophically) as detours for the purpose of the reappropriaton of presence. But beyond theoretical mathematics, the development of the practical methods of information retrieval extends the possibilities of the “message” vastly, to the point where it is no longer the “written” translation of a language, the transporting of a signified which could remain spoken in its integrity. It goes hand in hand with an extension of phonography and of all the means of conserving the spoken language, of making it function without the presence of the speaking subject. This development, coupled with that of anthropology and of the history of writing, teaches us that phonetic writing, the medium of the great metaphysical, scientific, technical, and economic adventure of the West, is limited in space and time and limits itself even as it is in the process of imposing its laws upon the cultural areas that had escaped it. But this nonfortuitous conjunction of cybernetics and the “human sciences” of writing leads to a more profound reversal.

The Signifier and Truth

The “rationality”—but perhaps that word should be abandoned for reasons that will appear at the end of this sentence—which govems a writ-ing thus enlarged and radicalized, no longer issues from a logos. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the desedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of truth. All the metaphysical determinations of truth, and even the one beyond metaphysical onto-theology that Heidegger reminds us of, are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos, or of a reason thought within the lineage of the logos, in whatever sense it is understood: in the pre-Socratic or the philosophical sense, in the sense of God’s infinite under-standing or in the anthropological sense, in the pre-Hegelian or the post-Hegelian sense. Within this logos, the original and essential link to the *phonè* has never been broken.