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Adorno’s Other Son: Derrida and the Future of Critical Theory

Jean-Philippe Deranty

Fichus published as a book the speech that Jacques Derrida delivered in Frankfurt in September 2001 in acceptance of the Theodor-W.-Adorno Prize. This little autobiographical text might seem to be of interest only for those who care about Derrida’s person. Notably, it can be read as a surreptitious announcement by the philosopher of his imminent death. However, Derrida made this announcement through a complex discursive strategy that suggested a strong identification with the individual destinies and intellectual projects of Adorno and Benjamin. The personal turns out to have tremendous philosophical importance as it gives Derrida the opportunity to engage in an astonishing reassessment of the relationship between deconstruction and Critical Theory.

Keywords Derrida; Adorno; Benjamin; Habermas; deconstruction; critical theory

Can the personal be philosophical? Can an autobiographical anecdote, a personal memory, the statement of a subjective preference, count as philosophical arguments, as having philosophical worth? In the last years of his life, Jacques Derrida more and more frequently talked in the first person, talked about his own person to discuss philosophical problems. What was the philosophical reason behind this apparent breach of one of philosophy’s most basic rules?

There are of course good Derridean reasons for this autobiographical turn. If there is no metalanguage, if any particular discourse, including one belonging to the philosophical genre, resonates with all other discourses in an infinite number of ways, through an indefinite regress of correspondences, reminiscences, equivocations and connotations, then no hard distinction can be drawn between the universal and the individual, the global and the local. Personal events, individual histories, have a significance beyond their idiosyncrasy when it can be shown how they intersect with other individual events and stories and with more general forms of discourse, and thus reveal, from a specific perspective—but there are only specific perspectives—something that is shared by more than one.
The erasing of the hard dichotomy between the personal and the universal becomes even more pressing if one adds that the personal enounces itself in a language that is shared by many, that the individual voice would not be heard if it did not speak the words of the others, and the language that is used by the many can be a language only when it is used by individual voices. As a consequence also, philosophy cannot isolate itself from other types of discourse that appear less bent on reaching universal truths via objective modes of argumentation. Derrida has always confronted philosophy to other forms of discourse. His late autobiographical turn is just one among many other strategies to do philosophy differently, as he was convinced that the ethical and political challenges of the time demanded a deconstruction of metaphysical frameworks that could not leave untouched the way philosophy is concretely done.

The following article verifies these Derridean strategies by reading an anecdotal piece as providing crucial philosophical information. The piece in question is the text of the speech that Derrida delivered in Frankfurt on 22 September 2001 when he was granted the prestigious Theodor-Adorno Prize of the city of Frankfurt. The prize was founded in 1977 and is awarded every three years. Jürgen Habermas was a recipient in 1980. Derrida's speech was first published in *Le Monde diplomatique*, under the title “La langue de l'étranger” (“The Language of the Stranger”), and later on as a book under the title *Fichus* (Derrida 2002). It is crucial to note at the outset that “fichu” has a number of different meanings in French: as an object, it designates a small female scarf (smaller than that other infamous scarf, the “ foulard”); but as a colloquial adjective, it means “foutu” (f***, but also “finished”, as in “broken”, “dead”, “gone”, “condemned”, etc.). Finally, in the past tense of the reflexive verb, it means that someone has made fun of someone else. All these meanings are at stake in Derrida’s speech.

I focus on this text because it seems to me to provide a remarkable opportunity to celebrate Derrida’s *oeuvre* at the moment of his death. This is a most appropriate text to enable us to do this, because in it Derrida himself took a mournful yet future-oriented stance towards himself and his own work. In two eloquent passages, we now retrospectively hear him announce the imminence of his death to come. In a sense, in this speech Derrida wrote the contribution he might have made to all the events that were to celebrate his work, in nostalgic yet hopeful fashion.

Beyond the retrospective glance over his whole career, a turn to the autobiographical that is warranted and indeed expected at an acceptance ceremony, Derrida launched also, as in all the texts of his last decade (Derrida 2004a), into a passionate exhortation to confront in common, both theoretically and politically, the emerging forms social and political violence. And it turns out that, speaking in Frankfurt in front of the most famous representatives of the Frankfurt School, he revisited his work and envisioned the future of politics by rephrasing them within the framework of Critical Theory, more specifically by stating his closeness with two of its prominent thinkers, Adorno and Benjamin. The more obviously philosophical intention behind this article is to highlight the
proximity that Derrida, in one of his last published texts, thus revealed between his thought and Critical Theory. In this anecdotal, autobiographical piece, Derrida presents himself as one of Adorno’s sons, or rather he presents Adorno as an “adopted father”. This revelation obviously has important philosophical ramifications.

An Adornian Epitaph

In the beginning of his speech, Derrida covertly announces his near disappearance, and announces to his listeners one of his possible epitaphs:

I address myself to you in the night as if in the beginning was the dream. What is the dream? And the thought of the dream? And the language of the dream? Is there an ethics or a politics of the dream which does not end up in the imaginary and the utopian, which in other words neither gives up nor is irresponsible or indecisive? I use Adorno’s authority to start in this way, and more specifically I use a phrase by Adorno which touches me all the more since, as I do myself more and more often, too often perhaps, Adorno talks literally about the possibility of the impossible, of the “paradox of the possibility of the impossible” (vom Paradoxon der Möglichkeit des Unmöglichen). In Prisma, at the end of his “Portrait of Walter Benjamin”, in 1955, Adorno writes this, which I would like to make a motto, at least for all the “last times” of my life: “In the form of the paradox of the possibility of the impossible, he (Benjamin) unites for the last time mystique and Aufklärung, the emancipatory rationalism. He banished the dream without betraying it and without making himself the accomplice of the permanent unanimity of the philosophers, without which this is impossible.” (Derrida 2002, 18)

We now ponder this “for all the last times of my life”. As we recall, the paradox of the possibility of the impossible, the possibility that there might no longer be a being that “can”, is one of Being and Time’s formulations to describe the ontological precondition for an authentic being-towards-death. When Derrida said to his listeners in Germany and gave to read in French—that, like Adorno, he himself, “more and more often”, at “all the last times of his life”, talked about the possibility of the impossible—it is clear that he was preparing himself and us with him, to the approaching event of his no longer being there. At the same time, of course, the aporetical scheme of the possibility of the impossible captures more generally the specificity of Derrida’s understanding of dialectic; it encapsulates the driving “logical” inspiration behind all his writings, from the grammatological period until the last ethical and political interventions. It is the logical name of deconstruction itself: “deconstruction [...] is possible as an experience of the impossible” (Derrida 1992a, 15).

In Frankfurt, it is as if Derrida chose his own epitaph. It was to be a quote, but interestingly enough a quote by Adorno; more precisely, in a textual complication equally symbolic of Derrida’s oeuvre, a quote from a text that Adorno wrote about Benjamin. Further below, we will come across another passage where Derrida’s announcement of his own death is more explicit. In this next passage,
Derrida unmistakably identifies, personally and philosophically, with Walter Benjamin. But already in the passage just quoted, it is clear that Derrida takes for himself what Adorno writes of Benjamin. He himself could be described as an heir of “emancipatory rationalism”, a mystic and Aufklärer, someone who tried to banish the dream without betraying it, someone finally who all his life refused to make himself the accomplice of the permanent unanimity of the philosophers. There would be quite a few other similarities between Benjamin’s and Derrida’s personalities and destinies.

Adorno’s Other Son

If Derrida identifies with Benjamin, this means that he somehow also identifies with being Adorno’s son. Later on in his speech, Derrida asks the following rhetorical questions:

For decades now, I hear voices, as in a dream, as one says. [...] They all seem to say to me: why don’t you recognise, clearly and publicly, once and for all, the affinities of your work with that of Adorno, in truth your debt towards Adorno? Are you not an heir of the Frankfurt School? (Derrida 2002, 43)

The first “debt” (Derrida 2002, 44) is the one created at and by birth. Derrida asks himself in Frankfurt to publicly and clearly state that he is an heir of Adorno’s, or rather that Adorno is a “père d’adoption”, not a natural father, but a father who had been adopted by a later generation (Derrida 2002, 36).

There is a parallel with Foucault’s trajectory. In the last years before his death, besides all the reciprocal conciliatory gestures between Habermas and himself, Foucault more profoundly made an important rediscovery of the first generation of Critical Theory (Foucault 1988, 26). This is true of the other great contemporary French theorists of the time: Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard—each in their own retraced, in the last years of their lives, the long ignored genealogical line that linked their works to Adorno.

The different steps of Derrida’s reconciliation with Habermas are well documented (Derrida 2002, 35; 2004b). This rapprochement was initiated by the joint efforts of Simon Critchley and Axel Honneth, who wanted to establish a bridge between their traditions out of the conviction that each needs the other in the face of contemporary ethical and political challenges (Critchley 1992; Honneth 1995). When the war started in Iraq in 2003, Derrida and Habermas were both in New York and met (Borradori 2003). Derrida added his signature to one of Habermas’ interventions condemning the war and wrote the introductory paragraph (Derrida and Habermas 2003). In it we read some of the themes that he had broached in Frankfurt a year earlier, in particular the political call to resistance. After his death, Habermas’s and Honneth’s thoughtful reflections on Derrida’s life and work were testimonies to the respectful dialogue that had been established between them. Interestingly, the two German philosophers both
referred to Adorno and Benjamin to characterise and emphasise the irreplaceable contribution made by Derrida to contemporary ethics (Habermas 2004; Honneth 2004).

As in Foucault’s case, however, despite the appeased relationship with Habermas, Derrida’s true affinity lies with Adorno’s type of Critical Theory. If that is the case, however, if Derrida sees himself as one of Adorno’s sons, then he and Habermas cannot really “get married”—they must remain close but competing thinkers vying for Adorno’s heritage. Critchley’s famous proposal that the project of Critical Theory should make room for the concerns of deconstruction might therefore work better with Adorno’s understanding of the tasks and tools of Critical Theory, than with its contemporary representatives.

Theoretical genealogies of adopted fathers and natural sons thus form the central concern in Derrida’s Frankfurt speech. In one particular passage they are approached in a powerful, pathetic mode, mixing once more the personal and the general-philosophical. In it, Derrida’s real, “natural” father appears as an equivalent in the flesh of the other metaphorical, intellectual fathers he later “adopted”, those of first generation Critical Theory, and, as always in Derrida, the indefinite regress of associations crystallises in a material mediating object, here, obviously, in the *fichu*: “one day in September 1970, as he saw his death approach, my sick father told me: ‘Je suis fichu’ (I am finished)” (Derrida 2002, 36). But the book states the *Fichus* named by the title are many, as if to indicate that the passing generations of natural and intellectual fathers is a series of dying figures, and of figures through whose inspiration Derrida attempted to think (of) death.

### Derrida’s Dream in Frankfurt

Derrida used the opportunity of addressing an audience of philosophers in Frankfurt to publicly declare his Adornian filiation. He did this, however, in ways that were infinitely complex, nigh impossible to fully reconstruct, as he uncovered endless *mises en abyme* through which his own concepts, words and personal circumstances were reflected in the lives and texts of Adorno and Benjamin.

This is how Derrida started his acceptance speech:

> I must beg for your forgiveness, as I am about to greet and thank you in my own language. Language, it turns out, will be my subject: the language of the other, the language of the host, the language of the stranger, or even of the immigrant, of the emigrant, of the exiled. (Derrida 2002, 9)

We recognise, of course, the problems—language, one’s own language, the language of the other, hospitality and the host, thankfulness, etc.—that occupied Derrida throughout his life and most explicitly in his last decade. In
particular, Derrida mentions the language of the exiled. This is another one of the themes that constantly returned in his last writings, in connection with his complicated relationship with the French language and the French culture, a language and a culture in which he was both at home and a stranger (Derrida 1998). The parallel with Adorno and Benjamin, two eminent figures of European exile, is explicit. Derrida emphasises it a few moments later when quoting Adorno's dedication of *Minima Moralia* to Horkheimer: “reflexions from damaged life [...] whose starting-point is the narrowest of private sphere, that of the intellectual in migration” (Derrida 2002, 15). One could say that Derrida too has written about ethics and justice during his tribulations as an intellectual in migration; his reflections, like Adorno’s, arose from the damaged life of a modern expatriate (Derrida and Malabou 1999).

Derrida continues the introduction with the question that occupied him most in his writings since *Other Heading* (Derrida 1992b), the political question, which for him was essentially linked with the utopia of a new Europe, as a bastion of political resistance against the combined violence of global capitalism and sovereign States:

> what will a responsible politics do for the plural and the singular, starting with the linguistic differences in the Europe of tomorrow, and following Europe's example, in the current globalisation? In what is being termed in more and more dubious fashion globalisation (“mondialisation”), we find ourselves at the brink of wars that are, since the 11th of September less than ever, certain of their language, of their meaning and of their name. (Derrida 2002, 9)

The introduction to his speech is then placed under the figure, not of Adorno, but of Benjamin. If Derrida reveals himself as the son of Adorno, his equal is Benjamin:

> as a subtitle introducing this modest and sober mark of recognition, allow me to read first of all a sentence that Walter Benjamin, one day, one night, dreamt, and that he dreamt in French [Derrida underlines “*en français*”]. He confided in French [*“en français”*, Derrida emphasises again] to Gretel Adorno in a letter addressed to her on the 12th October 1939, from the department of Nièvre where he was imprisoned. At the time, this was called in France a “camp of voluntary workers”. In his dream, which was, according to him, euphoric, Benjamin said the following to himself, in French: “*Il s'agissait de changer en fichu une poésie*” (it was about changing a poetry into a female headscarf). (Derrida 2002, 10)

This paragraph starts to explain why Derrida announced that the topic of his speech was going to be language; more specifically, the language “of the other, the language of the host, the language of the stranger, or even of the immigrant, of the emigrant, of the exiled.” This language is first of all the language that Benjamin spoke, that German language that was for Derrida's generation the language of philosophy itself, but also the language of Benjamin's dream, namely
the French language, the idiom that Derrida in many autobiographical passages called his “home”.

In later years, Derrida always started his conferences by announcing that he would not speak in the language of his host, but in his own “idiom”. Of course, this idiosyncratic twist has a general, philosophical significance. It points to the difficulty of dealing with the irreducible contextuality of language. In *Fichus*, Derrida continues to be aware of the idiomatic nature of all speech, including the philosophical one. In the specific Frankfurt context, this demands that special attention be given to Adorno and Benjamin and their own relationships to language.

But then, abruptly, after these initial announcements, Derrida asks the following questions and makes the following statements: “Does one always dream in one’s bed, and at night? Is one responsible for one’s dreams? Can one be responsible for it? Suppose I dream. My dream would be happy, as was Benjamin’s” (Derrida 2002, 11).

All this makes for a puzzling start for an acceptance speech. First asking for forgiveness for speaking one’s language and not the host’s; then using this apparently rhetorical beginning to lead straight into the topic of future political struggles and their language; then quoting a letter relating a dream to then ask apparently naive questions about dreaming, sleeping and night.

Why Derrida suddenly asks these apparently naive questions about where and when one dreams is understandable at a superficial level. He is literally saying to his audience: “here, today, in front of you, I am literally dreaming, I must be dreaming that you should be giving me such a prize. This is also because of all the past disagreements between me and that other famous philosopher who taught at, and has indeed been honoured by, the university and the city of Frankfurt. Here I am in Frankfurt, and I must be dreaming!”

But Derrida’s text points to more profound and complex links between dreams, language, politics, the Frankfurt School and his own work. These links evolve of course around the figures of Adorno and Benjamin.

The theme of the dream is borrowed from *Minima Moralia*. Derrida quotes the following passage:

> Waking in the middle of a dream, even the worst, one feels disappointed, cheated of the best of life. But pleasant, fulfilled dreams are actually as rare, to use Schubert’s words, as happy music. Even the loveliest dream bears like a blemish its difference from reality, the awareness that what it grants is mere

1. He started one of his last speeches in Paris in the following way: “Paris, France, speaking one’s own language, and France in Europe” (Derrida 2004a). Recall also the beginning of “Force of law”: “C’est ici un devoir, je dois m’adresser à vous en anglais. This is an obligation, I must address myself to you in English”.

2. See also a later passage (Derrida 1992a, 23).

3. Throughout his speech, or response, Derrida uses the polysemy of “répondre”: to respond and be responsible for. *Répondre* is also present in “correspond”, which constitutes one of the central themes in his speech: the correspondence—i.e. the communication, the dialogue, and the “correspondances”, the (Baudelairian) similarities—between French and German critical theory.
illusion. This is why precisely the loveliest dreams are as if damaged. (Derrida 2002, 16)

As Derrida remarks, Adorno uses the same word, *beschädigt*, to talk about damaged dreams and the damaged life under the conditions of modernity. What happens to dreams, even the loveliest, when confronted with reality is the same as happens to the figures of vulnerability when confronted with the violence of identity domination. The first instance of a power of identity exerting its violence over the non-identical is that of reason in relation to dreams. Philosophy has been the typical agent of the identical in its relationship to dreams, demanding that one stand outside of dreams to talk about dreams, defining rational discourse as waking up and being awake. Can one talk about dreams while dreaming?, Derrida asks. The “permanent unanimity of philosophers” has always said “no”. Others, like the poet, the writer, the essayist, the musician, the painter, the screenwriter, would say: “yes, sometimes”, or “yes, maybe”.

Derrida’s admiration for Adorno must clearly be taken as the statement of a strong inspiration, if not of a partial identification:

I admire and I love Adorno for being someone who never stopped trying to hesitate between the “no” of the philosopher and the “yes, maybe, it happens sometimes”, of the poet, the writer or the essayist, of the musician, the painter, the playwright or screenwriter, or even of the psychoanalyst. By hesitating between the “no” and the “yes, sometimes, maybe”, he has inherited both. He took into account what the concept, dialectic even, cannot conceive of the singular event, and he has done everything he could to endorse the responsibility of this double heritage. (Derrida 2002, 13)

Of course, this is what the Theodor-Adorno Prize itself is about, recompensing creators who have transgressed the boundaries of their disciplines. This is what Adorno was about, in his detestation of academic philosophy as a typical institution of the repression of difference, and the Adorno Prize is also a celebration of Adorno, and Derrida also wants to pay homage to Adorno. But Derrida also suggests that this hesitation between philosophy and its others is what he himself has always been about, that he shares a deep similarity of inspiration with Adorno. Implicit is therefore also an ironic swipe at Habermas, the public son of Frankfurt and the leader of the Frankfurt School, whose rationalistic, “non-dreaming” philosophy seems so at odds with the spirit of both Adorno and the Adorno-prize.

Later on in the essay, Derrida again discusses Adorno in terms that suggest an extensive identification between negative dialectic and deconstruction:

If time had been granted to me, I would have explored the logic of Adorno’s thought which attempts in quasi-systematic fashion to withhold all these weaknesses, these vulnerabilities, these defenceless victims from the violence and even cruelty of traditional interpretation, that is to say the philosophical, metaphysical, idealistic, dialectical even, and capitalistic “*araìsollaìment*”. The exposition of this being-without-defence, this deprivation of power, this
vulnerable *Ohnmachtsigkeit* [“Powerlessness”, Derrida uses the German word], can be just as much the dream, language, the subconscious, the animal, the child, the Jew, the stranger or woman. (Derrida 2002, 29)

The word *arraisonnement* is symbolic of the strong identification with Adorno’s project. The word’s literal meaning designates the police action by which a boat is arrested and boarded to be inspected, and metaphorically it then denotes any violent form of arrest. But of course, the word also contains “raison” (reason), suggesting that the violence in question is primordially the violence of reason. 4

There is indeed a “quasi-systematic” aspect to Derrida’s own work, one very similar in its motivation and aims to Adorno’s, and one that gives his work its unity and coherence: to deconstruct the violence of the traditional rationalistic language in order to save what lies at the margins, the repressed elements in the hierarchical binaries. A critique of philosophy for a fundamentally ethical aim; a critique and an ethical duty made all the more pressing after the “nightmares” of modern history (Derrida 2002, 19).

A Poetic and Premonitory Hieroglyph of Death

But what about Benjamin? After all, if Adorno represents the intellectual father figure, Benjamin is the one in whom Derrida recognises himself. The dream that is at the heart of the text has been well described by Adorno, but it is one of Benjamin’s dreams that is really at the centre.

Of course, it is Benjamin who gave dreams a central epistemological function in the philosophy of history, with the idea that: “Every epoch not only dreams the next, but also, whilst dreaming, pushes towards its own awakening. It carries its own end in itself and develops it, as Hegel recognised, with cunning. With the destabilisation of the commodity economy, we are starting to see the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins before they even collapse” (Benjamin 2002, 4-5). In dreams, the truth of the time can be seen, because, as the surrealists had shown, a truer, richer level of reality is reached in dreams, but also, and this time in contrast to surrealism, because only in dreams can one see the real deleterious forces that make an individual or a community prisoner of the myth. This is why the most important moment is the moment of waking up, when the forces at play in an epoch, the very historical figures that the dream had put on the scene, finally meet their fate and come to their own destruction. Every epoch dreams its own end as the resolution of its own contradictions in the form of a catastrophe. This is probably what Adorno meant when he wrote that Benjamin had banished the dream without betraying it.

4. The term translates in French Heidegger’s Gestell, “enframing”. The relationship to Heidegger is probably the most substantial point of disagreement between Derrida and Adorno (Derrida 2002, 47). But Derrida does not characterise it as a choice between acceptance and rejection. On the contrary, “his strategy” to address Heidegger is at least “as reticent” as Adorno’s.
After endorsing Adorno’s hesitation between rational and artistic discourse, and in particular Adorno’s continued reliance upon psychoanalysis, one of the discourses that is most threatened by professional philosophy, Derrida goes one step further and endorses Benjamin’s oniric methodology. The dream signals for Derrida the locus where the possibility of the impossible can be approached, that fundamental scheme that captures the paradoxical structure of deconstruction:

To banish the dream without betraying it, this is what must be done, according to Benjamin [. . .]: to wake up, to cultivate the wake and the vigilance whilst remaining attentive to the meaning of, faithful to the teaching and lucidity of, a dream, concerned with what a dream can give to think, especially when it enables one to think the possibility of the impossible. The possibility of the impossible can only be dreamt, but thinking, an entirely different thinking of the relationship between the possible and the impossible, that other thinking after which I have been breathing for such a long time, and after which I sometimes lose my breath in my courses or in my races (“cette autre pensée après laquelle depuis si longtemps je respire et parfois m’essouffle dans mes cours ou dans mes courses”), that thinking has perhaps more affinity than philosophy itself with that dream. In waking up, we should continue to take care of the dream. From this possibility of the impossible and from what one ought to do in order to think it differently, to think thinking differently, in an unconditionality without indivisible sovereignty, outside of what has dominated our metaphysical tradition, I try in my own way to draw some ethical, juridical and political consequences—whether I am writing about time, the gift, hospitality, forgiveness, the decision, or democracy to come. (Derrida 2002, 21)

Derrida thus puts his entire work inside the framework of Benjamin’s dream philosophy. In a final step, he then returns to a particular dream of Benjamin’s, and this is where the final identification takes place. For those who could listen on that day, Derrida was plainly, ironically yet not without pathos, announcing his imminent death and the image of his own death in Benjamin’s dream.

In the dream that Derrida recounts, Benjamin is writing to Adorno’s wife of a dream “of such beauty that I cannot resist the urge to tell it to you”. In his dream, Benjamin approaches a woman who is a graphologist and holds something that he has written. (We can imagine how Derrida’s attention was attracted to this particular dream!) He comes closer and the following happens:

What I saw was a piece of material covered with images. The only graphic elements I could distinguish were the superior parts of the letter d whose narrow lengths concealed an extreme aspiration towards spirituality. Moreover, this part of the letter had a small sail with a blue edge and the sail billowed on the drawing as if it had been under a breeze. It was the only thing that I could “read”. At some point in time, the conversation evolved around this writing. At one stage I said textually this: “Il s’agissait de changer en fichu une poésie” [It was about changing a poem into a fichu]. (Derrida 2002, 39)
Derrida interprets the dream as follows:

one can always speculate over the d that Benjamin discovers on the *fichu*. It might be the initial of Dr Dausse who once cured him of paludism and who, in this dream had given to one of the women something that B said to have written. In his letter Benjamin puts in inverted commas the words “write” and “read”. But the d can also be, amongst other hypotheses, amongst other initials, the first letter of Detlef. Benjamin sometimes signed his letters in familiar fashion with Detlef. It was also the first name that he used as one of his pseudonyms [...]. He always signed his letters to Gretel Adorno in this way and sometimes more specifically “dein alter Detlef” [“your old Detlef”]. Simultaneously read and written by Benjamin, the letter d would thus figure the initial of his own signature, as if Detlef wanted to imply to himself: “*je suis le fichu*” [“I am the scarf/the dead one”], or even, from the camp of voluntary workers, less than a year before his suicide, and like every mortal who says I in the language of his dream: “Moi, d, *je suis fichu*” [“I, d, I am finished”] Less than a year before his suicide, a few months before thanking Adorno for having wished him his last birthday from New York, which was also, like mine, a 15 July, Benjamin would have dreamt, knowing it without knowing it, some poetical and premonitory hieroglyph: “Moi, d, *je suis dorénavant ce qui s’appelle fichu*” [“I, d, I am now what one can call finished”]. (Derrida 2002, 40–41)

It is difficult not to read another name behind the “d” in Benjamin’s dream. The signs left by Derrida in his interpretation of this dream are too many and too strong to not think that he himself had found the trace of himself in this “hieroglyph”, that the letter of death, or the dead letter was also his own. It is as though Derrida himself, thanking Adorno in Frankfurt, and speaking in French, also wanted to say: “Moi, d(errida), *je suis fichu*” (“I am finished”). In the context of the prophetic function of dreams in Benjamin theory of history, in the context also of Derrida’s thesis of the primacy of the signifier over the signified, Derrida seems to be implying that when B was announcing D’s death in writing to Gretel Adorno, it is as though he was announcing his own and someone else’s. And so with this text, if we recall the famous analysis of the Egyptian monuments in *Marges*, as with many of his last texts, Derrida might have wanted to return to his beginnings, to show the continuing spirit living in his writings, from beginning to end.

The Future of Critical Theory

Autobiographical musings are fully warranted, indeed expected, in an acceptance speech. That they might actually also matter greatly for philosophical practice, we have already seen with Adorno and Derrida himself. What is the more general relevance of Derrida’s self-eulogy at his own wake, on the occasion of the acceptance speech in Frankfurt. What is the philosophical and political relevance of his explicit biographical and intellectual identification with the famous German Jewish immigrants?

Through the intricate logic of his text, Derrida seems to suggest that the future of critical theory is open. He seems to be saying to Habermas, in cryptic,
friendly, yet insistent fashion, that a bifurcation might have opened, a parting of the ways, in the wake of Adorno. In this text, Derrida clearly presents deconstruction as sharing the spirit of Adorno’s negative dialectic, and Benjamin’s mystical enlightenment. He seems to imply that his own way of doing philosophy is a viable Adornian alternative to the other Adornian heritage, the rationalistic, academic style of Critical Theory as it is now conducted in Frankfurt. Indeed, paradoxically, and Derrida’s speech in Frankfurt made this particularly evident, Adorno’s inspiration survives intact rather in the remnants of French post-structuralism (e.g. in the writings of Giorgio Agamben) than in contemporary Critical Theory with its harsh criticism of the previous generation.

The contrast between the two receptions of Adorno should not be exaggerated, as should not be exaggerated the differences between deconstruction and Critical Theory in light of the recent efforts towards reconciliation. In this year’s Tanner Lectures, for example, Axel Honneth has reinterpreted the theory of recognition in Adornian terms (Honneth forthcoming). The important Adorno-conference in 2003 gave the opportunity to the representatives of German Critical Theory to revisit their position towards Adorno and soften their former critical stance (Honneth 2005). In any case, despite the ironical implication that his project was the most faithful to the letter and spirit of the first generation of Critical Theory, what interested Derrida most was the common goal that the two traditions of post-Adornian French and German Critical Theory now had to take upon themselves in common, the task of renewed critical thinking in the name of emancipation. Even if Derrida himself did not seem to believe that he could quite get married to Habermas, he saw his reconciliation with his once hostile critique as an important step towards forming a united resistance against coming catastrophes. For him, the past debates, although they still harbour important philosophical lessons, had to be overcome in light of the present and future dangers that a politically united critical theory must confront:

If these misunderstandings [...] seem today to have appeased if not to have dissipated, in an atmosphere of friendly reconciliation, we must not only pay homage to the work, the reading, the good faith, the friendship of all involved, often of the youngest philosophers in this country. We must also take into account the growing awareness of political responsibilities towards the future that will have to be shared. (Derrida 2002, 49)

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References


