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Life as Writing in Derrida's La vie la mort

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Jacques Derrida's *La vie la mort* has not yet been translated into English, but when it is the title would have to be *Life Death*, with these two substantives on a par, both equally capitalized by virtue of the typographic rule for titles in English, and of course without definite article, precisely because of the insistence in this literally seminal work on the glorious indefiniteness of whatever these two words denote. The loss of the French "*la... la...*" will be a pity, poetically speaking, because we shall lose the sheer musicality of the lallation, the babble of baby talk and the "lalala" of lullabies sung to lull infants to sleep. The beauty of it is that the French definite articles, which in this case have a purely generic, categorial function (*la vie* is life: the general concept) are here made to become precisely the textual locus of the reverse of categorical definition, the merely sonorous signal of Lacanian "*lalalangue*", an intimation of the *khôra* whence drives (*Triebe*) keep pulsing, pulsating, *là... là...*The functional destruction of — the reversal of — the semantic effect produced by these words is occasioned by the sheer juxtaposition, the absence of any logical connector or disconnecting punctuation mark between the two concepts suffices to deconceptualize them, to make them resonate as signifiers before they are understood as conceptual notions, and the neat result of this "musication" of the tongue is exactly what prevents, or at least delays, their operating conceptually.

Derrida's point of departure is Hegel's considerations on life at the end of *Wissenschaft der Logik*, and the point is that there is no opposition, or rather that Hegel's oppositional

logic (between life and death) conducts to its reversal, or is ultimately supplanted by the opposite statement that there is no life death border, or rather that there is no solution of continuity between the two.

> The blank dash between life and death does not come in place of an *and* nor of an *is*. In Hegelian dialectic logic, the *is* of judgment comes here as the locus of contradiction and its *Aufhebung*[1] to state that life is death, that is to say: it posits itself in its syllogism through the mediation of death, that *is* is, in the dynamic and productive sense of the word *is* the process of death (death of natural life as birth of the life of the spirit) [...]. The *is* of life is death is *of life*, being is life, death is unthinkable as something that be. Here is what oppositional logic leads to, in the greatest attention it pays to death (that is the case with Hegel): to the suppression of the opposition, to its superseding (*Aufhebung*) in the elevation of one of the terms and the process of its own re-appropriation. Life is this *re-appropriation* of being, it is being: the idea alone is being, alone it is imperishable life (non-death).[2]

With these considerations, Derrida is re-reading these passages at the end of the *Logik* where Hegel reflects that “the idea of life has thrown off not some one particular and immediate ‘This,’ but the first immediacy as a whole. It thus comes to itself, to its truth: it enters upon existence as a free Kind on its own behoof. By the death of the merely immediate and individual vitality, the spirit comes forward” (Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel* 313).[3] Derrida works on this from three directions successively, approaching the problem via commentaries on François Jacob’s *La logique du vivant*, Martin Heidegger’s *Nietzsche*, and Sigmund Freud’s *Jenseits der Lustprinzip* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). His non-oppositional approach to the “life death” question — which incidentally was the programmatic question for the 1976 session of the *agrégation de philosophie* in preparation to which Derrida was giving this seminar at the *École normale supérieure* that year — is corroborated to a certain extent by two statements of Nietzsche’s, on which Derrida works more particularly to vindicate their author from the reproach of “biologism” waged against him by Heidegger. One of these apophthegms is taken from *The Gay Science*: “Let us guard ourselves from saying that death would be opposed (*entgegengesetzt*) to life. The living is only a genre of what is dead, and a very rare

genre"; the other is cited from *The Will to Power* : "Our world as a whole is the ashes of innumerable living beings; and although the living is such a small part of the whole, nevertheless once already everything has been converted to life and will go on to be".[4]

On one matter-of-fact level, these saying of Nietzsche's may be understood as meditation derived from God's words to Adam in Genesis 3:19: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return," in so far as this reflects the biological truth that human bodies, like all living organisms, are made of the same elements as all other objects on the earth, their cellular tissues renewing themselves constantly via the food they have to take in to maintain themselves. On this strictly material plane, it may rightly be said that there is on the whole no solution of continuity between the living and the dead, or in other words between life and death. However, that is not exactly what Hegel is speaking about in the "Life" (*Das Leben*, §§ 216-222) section of the *Logik*, where his reasoning includes "*das Hervorgehen des Geistes*": the "coming forward", that is to say literally the pro-duction of the spirit, which his early French translator Auguste Véra rendered as "*la vie de l'esprit*", "the life of the spirit" — "*La mort de l'être individuel et immédiat est* la vie de l'esprit". We are touching here upon a crucial border or another order — one has to say of a *metaphysical* order, since it is a step beyond (*ein Tritt weiter*, as Freud will say in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*), from the biological to what we would do well to call the ideological in the sense of Destutt de Tracy.[5] This border between organisms and ideas might be called a frontier, which Derrida keeps working at *par la bande*, marginally, from beginning to end in this *La vie la mort* seminar. It is a topical *syllogism* — Hegel's original German word is "*Schluß*": "*Das Lebendige is der Schluß* […]" (*Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, p. 186, § 217) — "Whatever lives is a syllogism" (*The Logic of Hegel*, p. 311).

This word *Schluß*, the semantic root of *Schlüssel* (key), defines a position, that is to say both a positing, or a problem posed, and a place, a post, a *locus*, a *topos*. Moreover, it is a problematic position, a knot, so to speak, on which Derrida keeps working all that year, in circumlocutory and iterative ways that are both idiosyncratic of his style, and a putting into practice, or an acting-out of his philosophical hypothesis. It is tempting to point out, proleptically, that another key attempt to think this knot will be the "one-three-terms structure" — "*structure à un-trois termes*" that Derrida discovers in Freud's *Beyond the*

Pleasure Principle, in which the three terms — the Pleasure Principle, the *Umweg* or *différance* (with an a), the Reality Principle — like the rings R., S. and I. in Lacan's Borromean knot, are in such interdependence that if one of them goes in overdrive the whole structure falls to death : "*c'est la mort*" (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 292). With absolutely no semantic equivalence between the terms of these two notional trinities, we realize retrospectively that they point out to the syllogism, the *Schluß,* which for Hegel defines the living, at the point of departure of Derrida's investigation.

> If you followed the great syllogism of life at the end of Hegel's great *Logic* (perhaps we shall do so latter) you would see how life, which is essentially a position (*Setzung*), position of the Idea which posits itself through three oppositions: "the living individual (*das Lebendige Individuum*), the life process (*der Lebensprozess*), and the species (*die Gattung*), reappropriates itself as life through the opposition of death and is born as life of the spirit in natural death, according to a movement which marks itself everywhere in Hegel (let us call it the Phoenician movement) on which we shall naturally have to return.[6]

Why has Derrida chosen to call this movement (of natural life going though death to produce the life of the spirit) "the Phoenician movement" (*le mouvement phénicien*)? The witticism hinges upon the fact that in French the adjective *phénicien*(always without a capital) refers to the Phoenician people (*les Phéniciens*, but *le peuple phénicien*), whereas here it also refers to the myth of the phoenix, used by Hegel as a metaphor of the passage from the Life of Nature to the Life of the Spirit. For instance, in the introduction to the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel speaks "of the Phoenix (*der Phönix*) as a type of the Life of Nature; eternally preparing for itself its funeral pile, and consuming itself upon it; but so that from its ashes is produced the new, renovated, fresh life" (76). The connection between the phoenix and the Phoenicians is perhaps only that of a common etymon: *φοῖνιξ*, meaning red. Moreover, this acceptation of the word, that is to say of *phénicien* as meaning "*du phénix*", is so rare as to be perhaps a *hapax legomenon* in the language, as it is often the case in Derrida's writing, and certainly the ironical quip elicits a degree of facetious irreverence. Hegel goes on to explain: "Spirit consuming the envelope of its existence does not merely pass into another envelope, nor

rise rejuvenescent from the ashes of its previous form; it comes forth exalted, glorified, a purer spirit" (76). Hegel also evokes the Phoenicians (*die Phönizier*), for instance in his chapter on Judea where he compares them to the Jews, as if, schematically, these two historical peoples stood respectively on the hither and the thither sides of a demarcation line between Life of Nature and Life of Spirit: "While among the Phoenician people the Spiritual was still limited by Nature, in the case of the Jews we find it entirely purified; the pure product of Thought" (203). The Phoenix is the mythical parable of the idea, of which the Phoenicians are a historical declension. By a crucial incidence, since the Phoenician civilization is traditionally mentioned among the examples of the emergence of the first city-states, the "*phénicien*" wordplay poetically underlines the thematic linkage, however tenuous at this stage of the seminar, between the production of the life of the Spirit and the emergence of the State.

Derrida returns to what he calls now "*le motif phénicien*" (the figure) in the second seance, saying: "First of all what I called last time the classical Phoenician motif: the destruction of life is primarily a destruction of what is already dead so that living life can be reborn and regenerate itself",[7] by which time he is engaged in a commentary on the notion of cultural degeneracy (*Entartung*) in Nietzsche's *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*. The allusion to the Phoenicians, which may find a contextual explanation in the historical contingency that in the 1970s they were being re-described no longer as a lost civilization, utterly destroyed, but as a culture which had seminal influence after, and perhaps thanks to, its final destruction, with the fall of Carthage in 146 BCE. Be it as it may, with this "Phoenician" reading of Hegel's *Logic*, Derrida has leapfrogged the fence between biological life, or what Hegel called the Life of Nature, and the Life of the Spirit. Today, perhaps this stylistic allusiveness may be viewed as a sign of the time when Derrida was teaching these courses. In the interval of year, the *Übergang* — for "Between scientific questions and metaphysical questions there is a leap, Heidegger says. No transition, no reciprocal transformation, the passage (*Übergang*) is a leap between the two".[8] — has been tentatively bridged by the transdisciplinary work of Edgar Morin, at the cost of obstinate battling to trespass at will over the "essential borders, at bottom, impassable by right" erected between then "determined domains" (271) of the established sciences and disciplines, and starting rather from a study of cybernetics and system theories like Bertalanffy's, in a long-winded work that spans all the forms of life,

from its first biological tremors to a materialist vision of ideas in the place of Hegelian *Geist*, as is made very clear, for instance, by the title of volume 4 of *La méthode: Les idées. Leur habitat, leur vie, leurs mœurs, leur organisation*).

However, what gives Derrida's speech its drive is the leap, not the bridge, and for this reason he draws his strongest inspiration from Nietzsche as against Hegel, or from Nietzsche as the anti-Hegel, whose example as intellectual scandal enables him to think the programmatic question "*la vie la mort*" in non-academic, that is to say in non-dialectic term. The rebound is made clear as early as the second session, with the reflection on "degeneracy", (*Entartung*): "The degenerate is hostile to life, is a principle of life hostile to life".[9] From the Basle conferences (to which *On the Future of our Educational Institutions* pertains) onwards, Nietzsche voices a radical antagonism to "academic culture", as a state apparatus of social reproduction, dominated by an all-encompassing dialectical historicism operating as mechanically as any program.

> […] Nietzsche […] diagnosticates behind so-called "academic freedom" a ferocious constraint all the more efficient because it is concealed. And this constraint is exerted by the State, which by means of so-called "academic freedom" controls everything. The State is the principal accused of these conferences, and Hegel, thinker of the State, the principal culprit. The autonomy of universities, of teachers and students, is in fact a ruse of the State, "'the most perfect ethic organism'" (Hegel quoted by Nietzsche). The State wants to attract to himself, Nietzsche says, docile, unconditional civil servants, through rigorous examinations and constraints. […] the criticism of the State […] down to the fragments of *The Will to Power*, and *Zarathustra* ("The New Idol" and : "The State: the place where all slowly commit self-destruction" — "and that is what is called 'life'"; or "Great Events" where "the State is a hypocritical dog that speaks and pretends that its voice comes out of the bowels of things themselves" [Hegel]. The State — this hypocritical dog — whispers in your ear through its educational systems that are acoustic or acroamatic systems. You are long-eared bats (*Langohren*) in the sense that, instead of obeying, of being obedient (*gehorsam*) with small ears to the best master or the best guide, you think you are free and autonomous

> whereas you are only lending long ears to the discourse of the State [...] Once you are all ears for the State, the ear starts taking a disproportionate place in your body (as in this apparition of a body almost entirely reduced to an ear in *Zarathustra*).[10]

The metaphor, or as T. S. Eliot might have said the "objective correlative" (Eliot, p. 48), of which the vehicle is the long-eared bat (*Pletocus*) and the tenor the academic (*Homo academicus*) (see Bourdieu) relates to the figure of "*hauntologie*"[11] in *Spectres of Marx*, or the operation of "*a tergo*" "philosophical machines"[12] in *Margins*. The image of the long-eared bat and its parabolical import are also indispensable to understand both the title and the argument of *Otobiographies*, which is the text of a conference given in 1976 at the University of Virginia (Charlottesville).[13] Derrida's writing itself can be characterized as a hauntology, since, as the longer citation above exemplifies, his text is haunted by the texts of others, which are themselves inhabited by yet others, quotation within quotation, so that the line between the different enunciators is not always clear, or more exactly as a *counter-hauntology*, since Derrida haunts back his predecessors and their texts, turning round on them so that they can no longer "think" him "*a tergo*" — from behind or unawares —, but constantly engaging with them, either frontally, or from one side or another, repeatedly changing track, trying out different angles. Nevertheless, I would like to comment more particularly on three of the points Derrida made in this passage: (1) that the State is defined by Nietzsche (speaking for Hegel) as "the most perfect ethic organism"; (2) that the State is, according to Nietzsche, the place where all commit suicide and that this is called life; (3) that "educational systems that are acoustic or acroamatic systems" have a transforming impact on the "body" of the listeners.

The State, says Nietzsche, is described by Hegel as "the most perfect ethic organism" — "*den Staat, etwa, wie dies Hegel gethan, als „absolut vollendeten ethischen Organismus" bezeichnet*'" (Nietzsche, "*Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungs-Anstalten*" 292). Leaving aside the detailed question of what is meant here by "ethic", it is striking that the State is defined as "absolutely accomplished organism" — "*absolut vollendeten Organismus* —, which, for Nietzsche as well as for Hegel, operates like a subject, a dog perhaps, but a dog that speaks, and that interacts with, and exerts a power over, human subjects. This necessarily entails the question whether the State is a *living* organism. It is a question to which, although Derrida stops short of examining it in *La vie la mort*, Edgar Morin started

answering in the affirmative shortly afterwards, in *La Méthode*. In his materialist philosophy of life, which owes very little to the tradition of *Lebensphilosophie*, Morin describes three degrees of life defined as “auto-eco-organization” (Morin, *La Méthode 2. La vie de la vie*, p. 67): “micro-subjects” or “micro-individuals of the first degree” (296) include the live elements that compose the “individuals of the second degree”, including human beings, who in their turn produce “individuals of the third degree” (205). The city-states (Phoenician for instance) are typical examples of this third category, among other *ideas*, which constitute what Teilhard de Chardin called the “noosphere”, which corresponds to Popper’s “World Three” (Morin, *La Méthode 4*, p. 159), and which can be equated, pending further analysis, to the “superstructure” of Marxism, or to put it differently still, to a redescription of Hegel’s *Geist*as a strictly man-created realm, whose inhabitants “retroact” on their creators. The study of ideas, which Destutt called “ideology”, Morin proposes to redescribe as “noology” (163).

In *Otobiographies*, Derrida says that “a new problematic of the biographical in general and of the biography of philosophers in particular must mobilize other resources, including, at the very least, a new analysis of the proper name and the signature” (5). And indeed, the field of “biography” as a genre has extended, in the course of the twentieth century, to include, on the one hand, “biographies of objects”, or “factographies” (Tretyakov), which are writings of the lives of “individuals of the first degree”, and, on the other hand, to biographies of “individuals of the third degree”, among which must be ranged the biographies of cities — like Simon Sebag Montefiore’s *Jerusalem*, or Peter Ackroyd’s *London*, for instance —, and the biographies of “corporate personhoods” — see for example Herbert Lottman’s *The Michelin Men*. The borderline between these “degrees” of organization, like the “blank dash” in “*la vie la mort*” is a frontier-like and apparently paradoxical continuum, for the way in which humans relate to the macro-individuals of the third degree is comparable to the constant death and renewal of cells in the life process of a complex organism. This is one way to understand, by a transposition to the upper level, what Hegel means by “the death of the individual produces the life of the spirit”, or Nietzsche when he says that the State is “the place where all slowly commit self-destruction — and that is what is called ‘life’”.

Derrida begins *La vie la mort* by studying François Jacob’s *La logique du vivant*, and one crucial point is reached when he quotes Georges Canguilhem saying “Life has always

done without writing […]. But it looks like grammar, semantics and syntax" (Canguilhem, p. 362; *La vie la mort*, p. 44). Examining the border between biology and biography, Derrida underlines that with the discovery of the DNA and its double helix, and the development of genetics, the object of biology is henceforth already text: "there is nothing any more, in the object of his science […] that is meta-textual. […] its ultimate referent, the living, and the productive-reproductive structure of the living is now analyzed as text. Its constitution is that of a text".[14] Some organisms, like certain unicellular ones for instance, reproduce themselves a-sexually by meiotic cloning or by the intervention of a virus, others reproduce themselves sexually by mixing the genomes of two individuals to produce a third one, and between its birth and its death every organism has a history. In any case, already from its biological level, the living is textual, and life is writing: as *bios* (*βίος*), and already in its less specific, infra-human form as *zoe* (*ζωή*), life is a form of writing, a graph (*γράφειν*) — "it is always a gram (engram or program)".[15]

Around the fifth seance of *La vie la mort* Derrida is working on this edge, so to speak, between *zoe* and *bios*, on this threshold on which, for the ancient Greeks, says Agamben, the slave stands: "And if, for the Greeks, the human defines itself by a dialectic between *physis* and *nomos*, *zoe* and *bios*, then the slave, like the naked life, stands on the threshold which separates and conjugates them".[16] Derrida implicitly poses the question of whether this naked life, this *vita nuda*, is the be-all and end-all, and he strives to answer it at length by turning to the authors of *Beyond Good and Evil* and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For indeed, says Jacob, "One no longer interrogates life in the laboratories today. […] One seeks only to analyze living systems, their structures, their functions, their histories".[17] And thus we fall back on the dialectic, the historicism, and the scientism against which the Nietzsche of *Über der Zukunft...* directed his satire, and certainly on the systematic logocentrism of Hegelian philosophy from which it is Derrida's intent to find a get-away that is his *marque de fabrique*: that makes his *proper name*. What is "the proper of the living, the *livance* itself, its *ousia* and its *aitia*, its being-alive, its essence-existence, the moving and final cause, the final becoming of the moving cause"?[18]

In other words, Derrida is working on the outer limit of "[since] what we call the end of philosophy, since the textual indicator called Hegel".[19] Surprisingly perhaps, the mental

fight the author of *La vie la mort* is waging is evocative of this aphorism of Wittgenstein's: "What is your aim in philosophy? — To shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (103, § 309), where the fly-bottle is systematic thinking perceived as the enclosure, the closing down of philosophy into science, or a vision of the world aptly rendered, as in the case of Jacob's biology, by "the analogy of the calculator and the analogy of the factory".[20] And he finds an indicator of the way out of the fly-bottle in Nietzsche, from whose perspective the blank dash in "*la vie la mort"* opens up as a chink in the wall of "*lavielamort*", a strait through which it is possible to "drift" out. In this third phase of the seminar, after having discussed Jacob's *La logique du vivant*, then Heidegger' *Nietzsche*, Derrida is working of Freud's *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*:

> […] the selective, the riddling (*criblante*) [*cribler* means both to riddle with holes, arrows, or bullets, and to sift as with a sieve] reading that I shall make of it will tend to show essentially the non-positional, non-thetic structure of this text; to show – against so many readings – the impossibility to stop at a thesis, at a conclusion of the scientific or philosophical type, at a theoretical conclusion generally speaking, an impossibility which entails the text towards a drift (*dérive*) [leaving the riverbank (*rive*) or seashore (*rivage*)] of a fictional type – I do not say literary – that we shall try to interrogate as such, in its relationship to the theoretical thesis in general, to the theoretical decidability and to the logic of *lavielamort* […].[21]

The passage, the *Übergang*, the leap — "No transition or reciprocal transformation, the passage (*Übergang*) is a leap between the two"[22] — as Derrida says with Heidegger of the "essential" and "impassable" borders that metaphysics assigns to the several sciences, which here is a leap over the circumscriptions of all thetic and theoretical discourses, that is both Freud's (psychoanalysis is neither philosophy nor science) and Derrida's, has found a point of departure in Nietzsche, and especially his reflection on degenerecy (*Entartung*). That is when Derrida mentions what he calls Hegel's "Phoenician motif: the destruction of life is first a destruction of what is already dead to allow a rebirth or regeneracy of living life (*la vie vivante)*".[23]In one of those passages of his discourse when the philosopher practises what in narratology is called "internal focalization", voicing Nietzsche's point of view, he writes: "The degenerate is hostile to

life, is a principle of life hostile to life".[24] To sum it up schematically, there is a "principle of life hostile to life", or *dead life*, as opposed to a "*living life*". Derrida announces in advance that in order to go further in his thinking he will have to bring in "the 'graphic' of the supplement".[25] The English translation misses an important detail: the feminine article "*la*" — Derrida does not write "*le graphique*" (the design, the chart, etc.), but "*la graphique"* — the graphing, the writing, of the supplement (which can be understood objectively or subjectively, either as the supplement being graphed or as the supplement graphing), and in this he is understandably pointing towards the *différance*, a hypothesis he will reach in the eleventh seance with the discovery in Freud's text of the "structure in one-three terms", "(Pleasure Principle, Reality Principle, *Différance*)", where the *différance* as the *Umweg*, the *Aufschub*, the detour, translates the drift or *dérive* (*dérivation* is also the branching out):

> Therefore there is no opposition between the pleasure principle and the reality principle as it is sometimes believed. It is one and the same principle in differant exercises or manifestations, the absolute master being the pleasure principle. But the logic of the differant detour [...] the logic of the *Umweg*, what does it mean? As pure pleasure as pure reality are ideal limits, by the way equally destructive and mortal, as ideal limits, the one and the other, the rapport between the two as detour or as differance is, I would say, the effectiveness of the process, of the psychic process as living process. It is the common root – the differant root – of both. But an effectiveness necessarily impure, structurally bound to compromise.[26]

At this point the other, methodological "leap", that Derrida has been problematizing throughout *La vie la mort*, between material life and the "life of the spirit" has been made, even though at the cost of a slippage from life of the spirit to psychic life: "the rapport between the two as detour or as differance is, [...] the effectiveness [...] of the psychic process as living process." The facilitation, the *priming* (*Bahnung, frayage*)[27] of this passage has of course been made by "the textualisation of the scientific object".[28] The definition of what he calls elsewhere the *livance* of life (*la vivance de la vie*) as differance as the *effectiveness* of the psychic process as living process is clearly related to the figure of "life effects" (*effets de vie*),[29] which is the locus of an epistemological

departure, that Derrida attributes to Nietzsche, precisely at the point where Derrida wages him main criticism of Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche. In the Seventh seance, he writes: "And if truth (la *vérité*) was an effect of life (la *vie*), it would be too easy to speak of life (la *vie*). There are truths, effects of truth, and lives, effects of life. […] but what is the life of life, the livance of life […]?"[30] In the tenth seance, on the question of the "schema" of the rapports between science and philosophy, of which he says that it is "at its most traditionally metaphysical", "at its most Hegelian even" at the very moment when "Heidegger, reading Nietzsche, claims to step beyond it", in other words: "To take things at their most schematic, at the barest point of fulcrum, […] all this systematic potency supposes that knowledge or scientific truth has a proper object and that this object gives itself in the form of being (*l'étant* [*das Seiende*]). Otherwise the schema collapses".[31]The Nietzschean moment is the collapse of this schema entailed by this redescription of life:

> […] if what Nietzsche calls life […], if he suspects the form "being" of being itself an effect of "life", if therefore being, beingness and the Being of beingness were nothing but effects of "life", which itself, therefore, were neither a being nor the totality of being, then not only the philosophical schema I have just drawn would be seriously damaged, but it would even be the main target, the main accused of Nietzsche's discourse.[32]

Therefore, certain conclusions can be drawn from this reading of *La vie la mort* concerning the "new problematic of the biographical in general and of the biography of philosophers in particular" that Derrida asked for in *Otobiographies*, saying that it "must mobilize other resources, including, at the very least, a new analysis of the proper name and the signature" (5).[33] This reflection on the proper name and the signature rejoins Proust's remark, in *Contre Sainte Beuve*, that "a book is the produce of another me that the one we manifest in our habits, in society, in our lives", and that this other me, "this truth, we must create it entirely", and it cannot be discovered empirically: "it is too easily to believe that it will come to us, one fine morning, in our mail, in an unpublished letter […] or that we shall cull it from the mouth of someone who knew the author well".[34] This proper name, this other me, is a "noological" creation, that has a life of its own as an "individual of the third degree" (to borrow Morin's vocabulary). To quote Derrida pointing

at the same idea in yet another vocabulary, there is an interesting variation in a particular sentence: in *La vie la mort* Derrida says that “The future of Nietzsche’s text is not closed”, and when he repeats it in *Otobiographies* he writes: “The future of the Nietzsche-text is not closed”[35]. The “Nietzsche-text”, or the Proust-text, etc. is the proper name or the signature as what Proust called the “other me”, created by the human subject, which now lives autonomously in the realms of ideas, which in Hegel’s word is the Life of the Spirit: a living idea, whose life has been produced by the human subject — Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, or Marcel Proust, etc. —, who has thus, in this sense, *reproduced* himself, but which henceforth goes on producing and reproducing himself, with each new biography, with each new reader, or with each new *ephebe*, so to speak like Harold Bloom. This is applicable to philosophers and other writers, but also to artists, scientists, politicians, and personalities of all other social categories, for whether the subject’s work (*œuvre*) is a printed text or some other kind of text is a mere contingence. If it was indispensable to quench an incoercible yearning to conceptualize the livance of life (*la vivance de la vie*) that a biography writes, one approximation would consist in using Heidegger’s “facticity” (*Faktizität*, passim in *Sein und Zeit*), which characterizes the *Dasein*: “*Facticity is not the factuality* [*Tatsächlichkeit*] *of the factum brutum of something present-at-hand, but a characteristic of Dasein's Being-one which has been taken up into existence, even if proximally it has been thrust aside.”* Facticity in an interesting word for several reasons. Firstly, because Heidegger adds that “The ‘that-it-is’ of facticity never becomes something that we can come across by beholding it” (*Being and Time*, p. 174)[36]. Therefore facticity can neither be the object of empirical science, nor the subject of mimetic art. Secondly, because by a quirk of the habitual translation into English, as into French (*facticité*), “facticity” introduces the connotation of the factitious (*le factice*), and therefore the notion of fiction — and this corroborates Derrida’s insistence that “the impossibility to stop at a thesis, at a conclusion of the scientific type […] entails the text towards a drift of a fictional type”[37] — which it superimposes upon the “philosophical” sense of facticity as the quality of a contingent fact. And indeed, the proper name, or signature, is of the order of fiction, but as fiction it has an effectiveness, or it is an effect, of factual contingency. The limit of relevance of “ *Faktizität*” to Derrida’s point about life in *La vie la mort* is readable in its ending “-ity” (*-ität*, *-ité*) which makes it a predicate, or a characteristic of being [*Seinscharakter*], so that it remains attached to ontological thinking. By contrast, Derrida emphasizes “the

dynamis of that borderline between the ‘work’ and the ‘life,’ the system and the subject of the system”: a “divisible borderline traverses two ‘bodies,’ the corpus and the body, in accordance with laws that we are only beginning to catch sight of” (*Otobiographies*,p. 6). Certainly, what these laws are — if indeed there are any such “laws”, either in the scientific, systematic sense of the study of facts, or in the sense of the narratological categories of literary science analyzing fictions — remains to be discovered. However, Derrida’s “philosophy of life” in *La vie la mort* has shown that they are rather to be looked for in the direction of a drift, a *détour*, an *Umweg* outside the limits of empirical investigation, and that biographies that aim at tracing the rounded off trajectory of a given life, or to draw the portrait of a human subject, or seek to discover “the figure under the carpet” via “the violation of all chronology” (Edel, p. 29, p. 200), like Leon Edel’s, who claimed to be in this a disciple of Proust (quite paradoxically so, for he was rather on the side of Sainte Beuve), run the risk to “murder to dissect” as Wordsworth used to say in “The Tables Turned”, and thus to miss the livance of life as writing.

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1 See Derrida's proposal to translate *Aufhebung* be "*relève*" (or *aufheben* by "*relever*", a verb from the same root as "relieve") in "Qu'est-ce qu'une traduction relevante?" (Derrida).

2 “*Le trait blanc entre la vie et la mort ne vient pas à la place d’un* et *ni d’un* est*. Dans la logique dialectique hégélienne, l’*est *du jugement vient ici comme lieu de la contradiction et de son* Aufhebung *énoncer que la vie est la mort, qu’elle se pose dans son syllogisme à travers la médiation de la mort, qu’*est *est, au sens dynamique et producteur du mot* est *le procès de la mort (mort de la vie naturelle comme naissance de la vie spirituelle) [...]. Le* est *de la vie est la mort est* de la vie*, l’être est vie, la mort est impensable comme quelque chose qui soit. Voilà à quoi conduit la logique oppositionnelle, dans la plus grande attention qu’elle accorde à la mort (c’est le cas de Hegel) : à la suppression de l’opposition, à sa relève dans l’élévation d’un des termes et le procès de sa propre réappropriation. La vie est cette* réappropriation *de l’être, elle est l’être : seule l’idée absolue est l’être, seule elle est vie impérissable (non-mort).*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 22) My translation.

3 “*Der Tod der nur unmittelbaren einzelnen Lebendigkeit ist das Hervorgehen des Geistes*” (Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, p. 187, § 222) First French translation : “*La mort de l’être individuel et immédiat est la vie de l’esprit*” (Hegel, *Logique de Hegel*, p. 357).

4 “*Gardons-nous de dire que la mort serait opposée (entgegengesetzt) à la vie. Le vivant n’est qu’un genre de ce qui est mort, un genre fort rare*.” [“*Hüten wir uns, zu sagen, daß Tod dem Leben entgegengesetzt sei. Das Lebende ist nur eine Art des Todten, und ein sehr seltene Art*” (Nietzsche, *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, p. 139, § 109)]. “*Notre monde tout entier est la* cendre *de d’innombrables êtres vivants [*cendre *et vivant soulignés] ; et si peu de chose que soit le vivant par rapport à la totalité, il reste que une fois déjà* tout *[* alles *souligné] a été converti en vie (ist alles schon einmal in Leben gewesen) et continuera de l’être ainsi*.” [“*Unsere Welt is die Asche unzähliger lebenden Wesen: und wenn das Lebendige auch noch so wenig in Vergleich zum Ganzen ist, so ist alles schon einmal in Leben umgesezt gewesen und so geht es fort*” (Nietzsche, *Der Wille zur Macht*, p. 333, § 254)] (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 225). On the question of the ash, see also Derrida’s *Feu la cendre*, where he also plays on the “la” definite article, sounding like “*là*” as in “*Être-là*”, as in the title of *La vie la mort*: “*La cendre n’est pas ici mais il y a là Cendre*” (17), and see also, of course, the (disseminated) theme of the ashes in Jacques Derrida’s own autobiographical writings in the “*Envois*” of *La carte postale*.

5 “*C’est là un emploi tout-à-fait nouveau du mot* métaphysique *; et ce mot est si cruellement discrédité, que je verrois avec peine qu’on s’en servît pour désigner la science de la pensée. [...] Je préférois donc de beaucoup que l’on adoptât le mot d’* idéologie*, ou science des idées*.” (Destutt de Tracy 323-24).

6 “*Si vous suiviez le grand syllogisme de la vie à la fin de la grande* logique *de Hegel (peut-être le ferons-nos plus tard), vous y verriez comment la vie qui est essentiellement une position (*Setzung*), position de l’Idée qui se pose elle-même à travers ses trois oppositions, que sont l’individu vivant (*das Lebendige Individuum*), le procès de vie (*der Lebensprozess*), et l’espèce (*die Gattung*), se réapproprie comme vie à travers l’opposition de la mort et naît comme vie de l’esprit dans la mort naturelle, selon un mouvement qui se marque en tous lieux chez Hegel (appelons-le le mouvement phénicien) sur lequel nous aurons naturellement à revenir*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort* 20).

7 “*Tout d’abord ce que j’ai appelé la dernière fois le classique motif phénicien : la destruction de la vie est d’abord une destruction de ce qui est déjà mort pour que renaisse et se régénère la vie vivante*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 67).

8 “*Des questions scientifiques aux questions métaphysiques, il y a un saut, dit Heidegger. Pas de transition ou de transformation réciproque, le passage (*Übergang*) est un saut entre les deux*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 271).

9 “*Le dégénéré est hostile à la vie, est un principe de vie hostile à la vie*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 68).

10 “[...] *Nietzsche* [...] *diagnostique derrière la prétendue “liberté académique” une féroce contrainte d’autant plus effective qu’elle est dissimulée. Et cette contrainte est exercée par l’État qui, à travers ladite liberté académique, contrôle tout. L’État est le grand accusé de ces conférences et Hegel, penseur de l’État, le grand coupable. L’autonomie des universités, des enseignants et des étudiants est en fait une ruse de l’État, ‘organisme éthique le plus parfait’” (Hegel cité par Nietzsche). L’État veut attirer à lui, dit Nietzsche, des fonctionnaires dociles, inconditionnels, à travers des contrôles et des contraintes rigoureuses.* [...] *la critique de l’État* [...] *jusque dans les fragments de* La Volonté de puissance*, et dans* Zarathoustra *(‘La nouvelle idole’ et : ‘État, le lieu où tous lentement se donnent eux-mêmes la mort — et c’est ce qu’on appelle “la vie”’; ou ‘De*

*grands événements' où 'l'État est un chien hypocrite qui parle et veut faire croire que sa vois sort des entrailles des choses mêmes' [Hegel]. L'État — ce chien hypocrite — vous parle à l'oreille à travers ses appareils scolaires qui sont des appareils acoustiques ou acroamatiques. Vous êtes des oreillards (*Langohren*) en tant que, au lieu d'obéir, d'être obéissant (*gehorsam*) avec de petites oreilles au meilleur maître ou au meilleur guide, vous vous croyez libres et autonomes alors que vous ne faites que tendre de grandes oreilles au discours de l'État, vous vous transformez en une grande oreille, l'oreille se met à occuper dans votre corps une place disproportionnée (comme dans cette apparition de corps presque totalement réduits à l'oreille dans* Zarathoustra*)*" (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 73-74).

11 "[...] that which in general assures and determines the *spacing* of public space, the very possibility of the *res publica* and the phenomenality of the political), (his element Itself is neither living nor dead, present nor absent: it spectralizes. It does not belong to ontology, to the discourse on the Being of beings, or to the essence of life or death. It requires, then, what we call, to save time and space rather than just to make up a word, *hauntology.* (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 51). See also p. 10, p. 161.

12 "[...] for as long as these two types of mastery [whether it is a question, finally, of Heidegger's hermeneutical circle or of Hegel's ontotheological circle] will not have been destroyed in their essential familiarity—which is also that of *phallogocentrism* and *logocentrism*—and for as long as even the philosophical concept of mastery will not have been destroyed, all the liberties one claims to take with the philosophical order will remain activated *a tergo* by misconstrued philosophical machines, according to denegation or precipitation, ignorance or stupidity. They very quickly, known or unknown to their 'authors,' will have been called back to order." (Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. xx-xxii)

13 Another version of this paper was given in 1979 at a conference at the University of Montréal, of which the acts were edited by Claude Lévesque et Christie V. McDonald and published in French as *L'oreille de l'autre, autobiographies, transferts, traductions* (Lévesque et McDonald), a book which then appeared in English translation as *The Ear of the Other*, where Derrida repeated parts of his longer lectures at the ENS, which are now published as *La vie la mort*.

14 “[…] *il n’y a plus rien, dans l’objet de sa science […] qui soit méta-textuel. […] son ultime référent, le vivant, et la structure productive-reproductive du vivant est maintenant analysé comme texte. Sa constitution est celle d’un texte*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 109-10).

15 “ […] *il s’agit toujours d’un gramme (engramme ou programme)*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort* 113).

16 “*E se l'umano si definisce per i Greci attraverso una dialettica fra physis e nomos, zoe e bios, allora lo schiava, lcome la nuda vita, sta sulla soglia che li separa e congiunge*” (Agamben 43).

17 “*On n’interroge plus la vie aujourd’hui dans les laboratoires. […] On s’efforce seulement d’analyser des systèmes vivants, leur structure, leur fonction, leur histoire*” (Jacob 320, *La vie la mort* 116).

18 “[…] *le propre du vivant, la vivance même, son,* ousia *et son* aitia*, son être-vivant, son essence-existence, la cause motrice et finale, le devenir final de la cause motrice* […]” (Derrida, *La vie la mort* 120).

19 “*Il en va ainsi depuis toujours mais singulièrement depuis ce qu’on appelle la fin de la philosophie, depuis l’indicateur textuel nommé Hegel*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort* 72).

20 “*Il y a par exemple l’analogie de la calculatrice et l’analogie de l’usine*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort* 112).

21 “[…] *la lecture sélective, criblante que j’en ferai tendra à y faire apparaître essentiellement la structure non positionnelle, non thétique de ce texte ; à y faire apparaître — contre tant de lectures —l’impossibilité essentielle de s’arrêter à une thèse, à une conclusion de type scientifique ou philosophique, à une conclusion théorique en général, impossibilité qui entraîne le texte vers une dérive de type fictionnel — je ne dis pas littéraire — que nous essaierons d’interroger comme telle, dans son rapport à la thèse théorique en général, à la décidabilité théorique de lavielamort* [sic] […]” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 275-76).

22 “*Pas de transition ou de transformation réciproque, le passage (*Übergang*) est un saut entre les deux*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 271).

23 “*Tout d’abord ce que j’ai appelé la dernière fois le classique motif phénicien : la destruction de la vie est d’abord une destruction de ce qui est déjà mort pour que renaisse et se régénère la vie vivante*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort* 67 cf. p. 20 : “*le mouvement phénicien*”).

24 “*Le dégénéré est hostile à la vie, est un principe de vie hostile à la vie*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 68).

25 “*La graphique du supplément*» (Derrida, *La vie la mort* 125), (cf. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 165).

26 “*Il n’y a donc pas d’opposition entre le principe de plaisir et le principe de réalité comme on le croit parfois. C’est un même principe dans des exercices ou des manifestations différantes, le maître absolu étant le principe de plaisir. Mais la logique du détour différant […] la logique de l’*Umweg*, que signifie-t-elle ? Comme le plaisir pur et la réalité pure sont des limites idéales, d’ailleurs aussi destructrices et mortelles, en tant que limites idéales, l’une et l’autre, le rapport de détour ou de différance entre les deux est, je dirais, l’effectivité du processus, du processus psychique comme processus vivant. Il est la racine commune — différante — des deux. Mais une effectivité nécessairement impure, structurellement vouée au compromis*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 291-92).

27 On the question of priming or “*frayage*” (*Bahnung*), see also “*Freud et la scène de l’écriture*” in *L’écriture et la différence*.

28 “*La textualisation de l’objet scientifique*” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 268).

29 See also “The Life Effect. Literary Studies and the Biographical Perspective” (Moulin).

30 “*Et si* la *vérité était un effet de* la *vie, il serait trop simple de parler de* la *vie. Il y a des vérités, des effets de vérité, et des vies, des effets de vie. […] mais qu’est-ce que la vie de la vie, la vivance de la vie* […] ?” (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 185).

31 “*Pour prendre les choses au plus schématique, au lieu du levier le plus nu, vous voyez que toute cette puissance systématique suppose que la connaissance ou la vérité*

scientifique a un onbjet propre et que cet objet se donne dans la forme de l'étant. Sans cela tout le système s'effondre" (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 267).

32 "[…] *si ce que Nietzsche appelle la vie* […]*, s'il suspecte la forme «étant» d'être elle-même un effet de «vie», si donc l'étant, l'étantité et l'être de l'étantité n'étaient que des effets de la «vie» qui donc, elle, ne serait ni un étant ni la totalité de l'étant, alors non seulement le schéma philosophique que je viens de dessiner en prendrait un coup, mais il serait même la principal cible, l'accusé principal du discours nietzschéen*" (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 268).

33 On the question of the proper name and the signature, see also more particularly *Signéponge* (Derrida, *Signéponge*).

34 "*Un livre est le produit d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vies.* […] *Cette vérité, il nous faut la faire de toutes pièces et il est trop facile de croire qu'elle nous arrivera, un beau matin, dans notre courrier, sous forme d'une lettre inédite, qu'un bibliothécaire de nos amis nous communiquera, ou que nous la recueillerons de la bouche de quelqu'un, qui a beaucoup connu l'auteur*" (Proust, p. 27).

35 "*L'avenir du texte de Nietzsche n'est pas clos*" (Derrida, *La vie la mort*, p. 71), "*L'avenir du texte-Nietzsche n'est pas clos*" (Derrida, *Otobiographies*, p. 98).

36 "*Faktizität ist nicht die Tatsächlichkeit des factum brutum eines Vorhandenen, sondern ein in die Existenz aufgenommener, wenngleich zunächst abgedrängter Seinscharakter des Daseins. Das Daß der Faktizität wird in einem Anschauen nie vorfindlich*" (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 135).

37 "[…] *l'impossibilité essentielle de s'arrêter à une thèse, à une conclusion de type scientifique* […] *entraîne le texte vers une dérive de type fictionnel* […]" (Derrida, *La vie la mort,* p. 275).