

Going Postcard: The Letter(s) of Jacques Derrida

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To produce this signifying structure obviously cannot consist of reproducing, by the effaced and respectful doubling of commentary, the conscious, voluntary, intentional relationship that the writer institutes in his exchanges with the history to which he belongs thanks to the element of language. This moment of doubling commentary should no doubt have its place in a critical reading. To recognize and respect all its classical exigencies is not easy and requires all the instruments of traditional criticism. Without this recognition and this respect, critical production would risk developing in any direction at all and authorize itself to say almost anything. But this indispensable guardrail has always only *protected*, it has never *opened*, a reading—Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 158.

On the same page of *Of Grammatology* as the most quoted (and most misunderstood) phrase in all of the works of Jacques Derrida, “*there is nothing outside of the text*” (158), he talks about what he means by commentary which is, for him, nothing less than the “task of reading”. And, for Derrida, this task both is and is not commentary, at least not in the traditional sense of the word. Glossing a text, attending to its passages, its passageways, what passes in and out of it, is a task which should not take the form of straightforward exposition and explanation. Rather a gloss involves what Derrida in *On Touching* calls “the closure of a combinatory play around a vacant center” (16). Going into the text is not commentary Derrida says. But it is also *not not* commentary since he goes on to write that our reading “must be intrinsic and remain within the text” (*Of Grammatology*, 159). Commentary is not understood here as a licence to say absolutely anything because we must remain with(in) the text but it is also *not not* a licence to say absolutely anything we want to about the text we are reading because elsewhere for Derrida there is a special relationship between deconstruction, literature and democracy. Unconditional reading which bypasses the “indispensable guardrails [s]” which seeks to protect the text from readings which open and reopen it again and again, gives us *carte blanche* to say just about anything, to bring the texts unprivatizable secrets out into the open. This reading without condition is a task, an obligation, and it brings out the ways in which Derrida’s writing itself is a kind of “double commentary” which deploys modes of thinking singularity and difference together, constantly looking for ways in which the text is *always already* other than (and to) itself. After Geoffrey

Bennington we might call this *autro*-reading, reading which has an ear for Derrida, for the other (*le tout autre*), and for the future.

This special issue invites loving attentions to all three texts (“Envois”, “To Speculate—on ‘Freud’” and “Le Facteur de la Vérité”) gathered together in Derrida’s *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* and solicits a series of glosses which *open* a reading of its words, lines, sentences, phrases, images, passages, paragraphs, pages in order to help us to get to an understanding of this text’s reach and richness. In reading *The Postcard*, the commentarial limitations and limits mentioned above are very much at work. Each of these three texts is well known outside of the context of this book, on their own, and yet, collected here, they address themselves to each other. So, in glossing *The Postcard* we recognize the singularity of each text but also how they relate to each other in a way which is non-systematizable. A postal principle is *always already* at work as we read these texts and a full understanding of the *The Postcard* (which would seek out a coherent, systematic reading of it in as complete a way as possible) is *impossible*. To read *The Postcard* is to experience the impossible (a phrase Derrida often used to describe deconstruction), to render the very act of commentary itself deconstructible, as we go into every line, link, reference, quotation, space, or margin of the book. On the back jacket of the book Derrida writes that he abuses “dates, signatures, titles ... references, language itself” and these abuses, the reprises and repetitions which structure the text, demonstrate how iterability makes impossible any individual reading of or engagement with it. If the mark, like the I, is always already divided then the intention of Jacques Derrida as author of these postcards, missives, textual fragments, anonymous love letters, is perverted and one cannot anticipate the destination of reading, of writing. “Here is the master of the perverformative, he writes to you” (*The Post Card*, 136) Derrida says but the postal principle is also in operation here since the master of the perverformative sends his *envois* in the knowledge that there is the possibility of their non-arrival. The many authors of the correspondence in *The Postcard* address letters to many addressees but this communication is always haunted by non-arrival, non-return, *destinerrance*. But, perhaps all reading and all writing is conditioned by these breaks in presence, by undecidability and is always, we might say, in the post.

This issue consists of a number of short but close readings of *The Postcard*’s three texts but is not limited to this trio because, as we have seen, Derrida depropriates the very idea of the masterful author. So, we need to ask if Alan Bass’s “Translator’s Introduction” and “Glossary” are inside or outside the text? And also, the back jacket of the book which I cited above: is it marginal or supplemental to the text or is it indispensable? The work itself, like the written mark which is haunted at its origin by iterability and repeatability, is punctuated, interrupted and repeatedly divided. These glosses, which offer readings of selected words, themes, sections, or chapters of *The Postcard* do not gather it up into a unity. They keep this text in play, open and reopen its spaces by visiting and revisiting well known and dimly remembered passages. If each of

these commentaries is a passport into the *Postcard* then hopefully this will convey the sense that we are only now beginning to read and rediscover this text and that everything is out in the open, still in the post.