

---

# There Are No Truths, Only Texts

John D. Caputo  
*Villanova University*

---

The statement we have taken as our theme for today's discussion is either false, if "texts" is taken literally to mean the written word, books and articles, say, or incoherent, if "texts" is understood in a more sophisticated sense of "textuality" in post-structuralist philosophy, since truth and falsity are functions of what is meant by textuality. I simply dismiss the first sense and concentrate on the second sense. I presume that the background for this statement Derrida's famous *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. Since that statement is widely mistaken as implying some sort of denial of the real world, a way of locking us inside the "prison house of signifiers," the first half of my paper concerns the question of realism and textuality in Derrida. Then in the second half of the paper I discuss the sense of "truth" in Derrida's thought. "Truths" in the plural-multiple, revisable, competing and pragmatic—there are aplenty in deconstruction; they are just what deconstruction provides for. But there is an important sense in which deconstruction takes place in a field that is "otherwise than truth," or "without truth," where truth is an entire order or domain, and that goes to the heart of deconstruction, to its quasi-Augustinian heart, its *cor inquietum*.

## I. Textuality and Realism, Quasi-Transcendental Hyper-Realism

My argument is that in Derrida, the critique of truth and presence ought not to be conceived as an attack upon the real, a rejection of the real, a flat out anti-realism, but as a work of love in which the real is

redescribed in terms of the real beyond being which draws us out of ourselves and our attachment to the present order in order to affirm the order of the “event,” of something unforeseeable. That is why Derrida is able to see his way clear to accepting Christopher Norris’s description of his work as a form of “transcendental realism,”<sup>1</sup> although not in the sense derided by Husserl, where that phrase referred to the error of converting the currency of consciousness into the coin of a *res* or transcendent soul-thing.

Let us take each word in turn. The sense in which Derrida is most certainly a “transcendental” philosopher is not the straightforward sense (nothing ever is!) that it has in Kant. He has in mind the more bent and oblique sense of his life-long preoccupation with the question of the conditions of possibility but with the unusual or particular twist of seeking a spectral quasi-transcendental. That is to say, Derrida sees the enabling conditions to be “haunted” from within, as he likes to put it, by a disabling element. The very conditions that make something possible also make it impossible, that is, delimit it and expose it structurally to risk, failure, undoing, error and errancy, even if it in fact succeeds, which is why these conditions are at best quasi-transcendental.

That much his readers are used to hearing. But the interesting thing is that Derrida also finds it no less easy to make his peace with “realism.” Although I personally think that Norris goes too far in stressing the transcendental side of deconstruction and not far enough with the quasi-transcendental, Derrida is, and I am with him, grateful to Norris for the incisive way he rebuts the “prejudices” against deconstruction. Deconstruction is widely regarded as a form of relativism, scepticism, irrationalism, nihilism, and in general as a standpoint imprisoned within language, locked inside texts and cut off from truth and the “outside world,” from “reality.” (It is my own hypothesis that reality must be red, or at least favour the colour red, given the way realists get so red in the face in defending realism against Derrida and other impudent doubters of their canon law of realism—which would mean that realists come vested in College of Cardinal red—not to mention the way the name “Derrida” is a red flag that provokes their instant charge, like a *Blitz* in the National Football League.) “I am not shocked,” Derrida says, “even if it makes me smile, to see myself de-

fended by Norris in a deliberately provocative and ironic manner as a transcendental realist.” Referring to his lifelong critique of logocentrism, the notorious deconstruction of the “metaphysics of presence,” on the one hand, and to his recurrent affirmation of the impossible, on the other hand, Derrida says:

...these are always advanced *in the name of the real*, of the irreducible reality of the real, not of the real as the objective, present, perceptible or intelligible *thing (res)*, but of the real as the coming or the event of the other, where it resists all reappropriation, even ana-onto-phenomenological appropriation.

The last phrase, intelligible mostly to Parisian insiders, refines what he means by the “real.” In using the word real he intends to dissociate himself from both the classical metaphysical realism of the *res* (or *chose*, from *causa*) of substance ontology and also from the way that the classical thing has been redescribed in terms of the manifestness of beings in their Being in phenomenology. For by the real he means not being but beyond-being, which supports a kind of hyper-realism, with the result that we would transcribe Norris’s “transcendental realism” as a “quasi-transcendental hyper-realism.”

But if the “real” for Derrida does not mean *ousia* (Aristotle), *substantia* (medieval philosophy), objects (Descartes to Kant) or even the things themselves (*die Sache selbst*), beings in their Being (onto-phenomenology), then just what does it mean? What is left?

The real is this non-negative im-possible, this im-possible coming or invention of the event whose thought is not an onto-phenomenology.

Just in case that is not clear, let us gloss it briefly. The force or bite of the word “real” for him is twofold, so the real represents for him not only a double bind, but also a double bite. It is found (a) in its irreducible “alterity,” for the real is the other, or wholly other (*tout autre*), what is irreducible to the same or the self, and (b) in its irreducible “futurity” (*l’à venir*), in the in-coming (*l’invention*) of the wholly other. We should take “incoming” with the force it has in the military where if someone shouts “incoming” the only sensible thing to do is to head for cover. If the wholly other (real) is “incoming” then it comes

from without, from the outside, *dehors*, from beyond being (*au delà de l'être*), from "outside being" (*en dehors de l'être*). So the force of the real/outside lies not only in being outside the mind, *extra mentem*, which means outside the same, the self, the self-same, be it a soul-substance or a self-consciousness, as in classical realism, but also outside being. These conditions, the conditions of the "real," are met pre-eminently by the coming of the unforeseeable, the coming of something (*ce qui*), or of someone (*qui*) which or who shatters our horizons of expectations, who comes against every expectation, exceeding the measure that has been set for what it is possible for us to think or imagine, which is what he means by the coming of the im-possible. Such an im-possible, which is not the simple logical contrary of a purely logical possibility, is unanticipated, unprecedented, coming by way of keeping a promise in which the *pro* does not compromise the *mise*, in which the anticipation cannot project in advance what is coming. Such an unprecedented coming is what Derrida means by the "event," the out-coming (*é-venir*) of what is to come (*à venir*). The event is something that *really happens*, that happens with the shock of reality, with a force and reality that blind-sides us with the shock of something that we did not see coming. Such a lack of foreseeability, such a surprising lack of precedence, which strains against the sensitivities of good Anglo-Saxon precedent-seeking legal practice, is not a lack but an excess, an outside and a going beyond, which in deconstruction is called "singularity":

Here it is a matter [*il s'agit là d'une*] of the thought of the event (singularity of the other, in its unanticipatable coming, *hic et nunc*), that resists its own reappropriation by an ontology or phenomenology of presence as such.

So the bite is actually a tripartite bite: alterity, futurity—and singularity. The real (*le réel*) is the *hic et nunc*, subsisting in the singularity of singular things. *Sola individua existunt*, as the medieval deconstructionists used to say, who were way of the eagle of overarching *universalia*. The real is above all the singularity of something singularly unforeseeable, which seems to come from nowhere, from beyond being.

It is important in such a realism, or ultra-realism, or hyper-realism, to see that the real does not mean presence, and that there is a difference between *presence* and *event*, for the event is *sans l'être*: *without being* or *without being it*, without being (merely) real (*le*), without being presence (*la*). As Derrida says, "I am attempting to dissociate the concept of event and the value of presence." The present is what passes for real in garden-variety, standard form, reifying realisms; the present covers both the thing of classical ontology and the things themselves of contemporary phenomenology. But the real for Derrida would never be merely or simply present, for the present would never reach as far as the real and the real would reach beyond the real in the sense of the present. For the real for him is what happens, what really happens, *l'événement*. The event is without being, without presence, because it rumbles within the present like an approaching storm, having the power to disturb what is present in the name of what is coming. The whole idea is partly Jewish, like the Jewish idea of the wholly other, where whatever poses or sets itself up as present is an idol to be smashed (which is the negative side, the how-to-deconstruct-with-a-hammer side) of deconstruction. But such idolo- and iconoclasm is obviously not relativism or nihilism but represents a familiar, even traditional, even rabbinic way of rendering service to the wholly other; it is a way of drawing a circle of absolute respect around the wholly other which forbids and strikes down anything merely present from doing service for it. That is why it can take on a slightly messianic look, on a certain reading of the messianic, where the constant deferral of Messiah's arrival is precisely what keeps the future open, precisely what keeps the horizon of expectation open-ended and alive, precisely what, beyond being, keeps being not on its toes but off balance, exposing it to a future that exceeds it.

This is not easy, but I am trying to demonstrate this necessity, like that of thinking the event without being. Nothing is more "realist," in this sense, than a deconstruction. It is (he who) or what arrives [*(ce) qui arrive*].

What would or could be relativistic about that? Deconstruction does not mean that "anything goes" (relativism) but that anything could be

*coming*, that what is coming could be anything, above all, if the coming is really an event, that what is coming comes like an absolute surprise:

Is it empiricist or relativist to take seriously into account that which arrives, and the difference in every order, beginning with the difference of context?

In a word or two, then, *le réel* for Derrida means what disarms our powers of comprehension and inclusion, of assimilation and appropriation, of control and mastery, of foresight and anticipation, of generalization and universalisation; the real is what disarms our powers of advance in advance, what leaves us vulnerable, exposed, our guard down. The real is the “event” that takes us by surprise, that over-takes us, that comes to us from the other shore, from out of the blue (which I would oppose to classical realist red). *Le réel* is what is more than present, beyond-the-real-as-present, beyond being, outside, *au delà de l'être, en dehors de l'être*, the singular, unforeseeable, the im-pro-visible, the im-possible. “The real,” then, as Derrida put it in this hitherto difficult sentence, “is this non-negative im-possible, this impossible coming or invention of the event whose thought is not an onto-phenomenology.” What could be clearer than that?

Another way to see the sense in which Derrida can live with the word “realism” is to follow the distinction Derrida observes between what is “outside discourse” and what is “outside the text.” In his “Silkworm” dialogue, Derrida says that Cixous’s essay “*Savoir*,” which is a beautiful and poetic narrative of the laser surgery which corrected her severe myopia, is “stitched upon” or attaches itself “to a ‘real’ (*réelle*) operation, ‘in the world,’ right on one body.” “*Savoir* indebts itself,” he says, “recognizing its debt, to an event that remains unique, forever unique, forever heterogeneous to every language.” This sort of talk about reality makes the interlocutor in the dialogue nervous:

When you refer thus to the irreducible reality (*la réalité irréductible*) of the event (outside discourse but not outside text) (*hors discours mais non hors-texte*) I am really worried. It looks so unlike you, you look so unlike yourself, it looks so unlike the image of you that circulates in these regions” (V, 75/79).

Then the interlocutor is told not to worry so much about images (presumably as opposed to reality!). The surgery that Cixous underwent, “in reality,” happened only once, in her body, but in the text of *Savoir* it becomes infinitely reiterable in the “body” of her work, where it stitched into a network of traces. “That reality exceeds *Savoir* but that excess remains caught, even as an overlap, a hem,” in the text of language, the operation of language. *Savoir*, writing in general, then, is a movement transpiring in the space between the “real” operation (the surgery) and the poetic operation of writing, which allows the real operation to be operated upon by writing, passed on and on, again and again, in an iterable text. That allows the real operation is operated upon by the operation of the other, that is, by the counter-signing of her text, of any text, by others. That means that the poetic corpus of Cixous is passed along to readers who know *Savoir* “elsewhere” (*d’ature part*), rendering it anew, magnifying and amplifying it in new readings and commentaries, which in principle have no limit. The difference between Derrida and Cixous and the rest of us, we might observe in passing, is their ability to move between the particular things that happen to them, which also happen to the rest of us, and their ability to transform it into a text. Derrida’s circumcision and Cixous’s laser surgery—two real incisions in two real bodies, but, when you think about it, not very uncommon procedures—become “events,” assume larger than life proportions, and become the occasion for two dense, lush and gorgeous texts that send the rest of us to our word processors to work up a commentary. Her real once and only once surgery in her flesh is certainly “outside discourse”—it took place in her body, not in a dream, an hallucination or a poem—but it is not “outside the text” (*mais non hors-texte*). The real surgery is stitched into the textual systems of the French language in general and into the complex networks of her own poetic discourse in particular, not to mention the technico-textual scientific systems that make laser surgery possible. There it acquires meaning and is expanded to infinity in a chain or network of poetic texts and philosophical and literary commentary, which feed upon the excess of its reality and stitch it into the complex poetic cloth the poet weaves.

If something were *hors-texte* in Derrida's sense, it would lack contrast, context, differentiation, articulation, structure, sense and intelligibility. It would be neither real nor unreal, true nor untrue, known nor unknown, but a blank screen on which nothing appears, a blank page on which nothing is written. So to say "there are no truths, only texts" is not false; it just makes no sense, since truths and untruths are "textual" operations, that is, pragmatico-epistemic effects of differentiation, of perceptual and conceptual contrasts, of propositional and argumentative chains. But if something is *hors discours* then it is real, and its reality is the excess upon which discourse feeds, but it would not be *hors texte*, since we clearly differentiate a real surgery from an imaginary or poetic surgery. The mark of reality is its excess over discourse, words, and language—to deny that is to embrace the error of what Derrida calls "linguisticism"—because of the excess of singularity and of irreducible alterity that marks the real, the event.

Still, no matter how much Cixous comes to see (*voir*) and to know (*savoir*) by having her real myopia cured, the more important thing will always be a more incurable blindness, which is linked by Derrida to what I am calling the hyper-real. The thing itself always slips away just in virtue of its excess; that is the mark of the things themselves. That is why Derrida is attracted to one of the most interesting turns taken in *Savoir*, when Cixous expresses a kind of nostalgia or mourning for the "loss" of her myopia, her old friend and constant companion, which gave her privacy and allowed her to shut out an all too intrusive show of colour and light, an all too buzzing blooming world. However much of a song *Savoir* sings to *voir* and *savoir*, our more intractable condition is to be, as Derrida says in *Parages*, "*sans voir, sans avoir, sans savoir*"—and we might add, from *Veils*, "*sans s'avoir*" (V). So while *Veils* may be about the lifting of the veil of myopia, what is ultimately unveiled in *Veils* is that there is no final unveiling, no unveiled truth, which is what Derrida had called in an earlier essay, the apocalypse *sans* apocalypse. What we are finally free to see in *Veils* is that the excess of the real over discourse is at the same time a recess, an inaccessible withdrawal of the hyper-real, for which "truth," whether it is taken metaphysically as *adequatio* or onto-phenomenologically as *aletheia* is no match. No correspondence and



no adequation, no fulfilling intuition and also no unconcealment is able to catch up with what withdraws, with what has always already transpired, always already taken place, before we even arrive on the scene, textual systems in hand, ready to take it all in, to take it all down. We are always too late.

But this structural tardiness of truth is not to be construed as a lack or a fault, but as a mark of respect and even love, as an indication that the more engaging matter is to be found elsewhere, in a different order. For in the end, the work of deconstruction does not transpire as a work of truth and knowledge but as a work of love. It does not take place in the order of truth, whether of adequation or unveiling, but in another order, "another figure," "neither a history of a veil, a veil to be lifted or torn, nor the Thing, nor the Phallus, nor Death," "another unfigurable figure," that comes to "strike dumb the order of knowledge" (V, 34/31). The things themselves will always already elude us and withdraw from vision, which does not issue in some aimless, fruitless scepticism but serves instead as the occasion of a certain shift or transformation into praxis. The transformation can be marked as a shift *within* truth itself from knowing the truth to doing it, *facere veritatem*, where truth becomes something to be done or made, or it can be marked as a shift into an order that is "without truth," the way a confession is made "without truth." That does not mean with falsity or dissemblance, but in an order that is otherwise than truth. That is why Derrida says in *Veils*, "By virtue of this strange verdict, without truth, without veracity, without veridicity, one would never again reach the thing itself, one would above all never touch it" (V, 26/23). The entire problematic of his work, of deconstruction, shifts from the order of the thing itself, veiled or unveiled, the order of being and truth, to the order of justice, of ethico-political judgment, of the verdict, where the verdict, *vere dictum*, is *sine veritate*, *sans vérité*. By this he means that what is finally at stake is a judgment about justice and injustice, the works of justice and injustice, not the truth of propositions or the ontological truth of unconcealment. The essential operations of "confession," "forgiveness," or "prayer," for example, do not take place in the order of truth. We may all know, the guilty party included, what the facts are, what the truth is, what must be confessed

or forgiven. But the essence of the confession is not the locution but the allocution, the humbling of the confessor before his witnesses in which he or she “owns” his actions, takes ownership or “owns up” to what he does, even as the essence of forgiveness does not have to do with “forgetting” or concealing the wrongdoing, sending it into hiding, but with dismissing the debt of the offender. By the same token, a prayer is neither true nor false, but a transforming shift by which the self sets aside all self-possession (*s’avoir*) and calls upon the other “I pray you.” Similar sorts of things could be said about the gift and hospitality.

Truth is not good enough in deconstruction. Truth is not as good as the Good; it is not as good as love. On this point, Derrida stands with the Augustinians and Franciscans in the middle ages, who argued the primacy of love and the good over the true, whereas the Aristotelianism of the Dominicans inclined them to love truth and knowledge more.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am commenting on each sentence of the second half of the paragraph to be found in Derrida 2001, 315-16.

## Works Cited

Derrida, Jacques. 2001. “*Comme si c’était possible, ‘within such limits...’*,” *Papier Machine*. Paris: Galilée; ET: As if it were possible, “within such limits.” In *Questioning Derrida: With replies on his philosophy*, edited by Michael Meyer. Burlington: Ashgate.