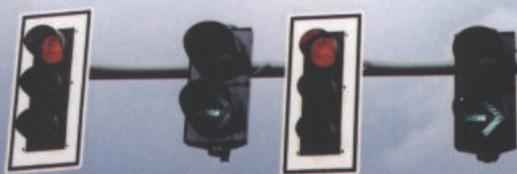


Starting with

# Derrida

Sean Gaston



## **STARTING WITH DERRIDA**

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# **STARTING WITH DERRIDA: PLATO, ARISTOTLE AND HEGEL**

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## PROLOGUE:

### PALINTROPES

On 2 October 1994 Jacques Derrida participated in a discussion to mark the opening of a new doctoral programme in the philosophy department at the University of Villanova. On two occasions Derrida tells his audience that the next day his latest work, *Politics of Friendship*, will be published in Paris: it is the day before the politics of friendship. Derrida goes on to say that his new work is 'mainly a book on Plato and Aristotle' and adds, 'I think we need to read them again and again and I feel that, however old I am, I am on the threshold of reading Plato and Aristotle. I love them and I feel I have to start again and again and again. It is a task which is in front of me, before me'.<sup>1</sup> Derrida reiterates not once but five times that when it comes to Plato and Aristotle one must *start again* – and again and again. At the same time, in *Of Spirit: Heidegger and the Question* (1987), written the year before he began his seminars in Paris on the politics of friendship, Derrida also insisted that 'it is already too late, always too late'.<sup>2</sup> One cannot, and must not, be beguiled by the possibility of a pure 'recommencement', by a 'return' that would 'signify a new departure . . . or some degree zero'. It is always *too late* to start again. The gesture of starting again is itself already part of the tradition of metaphysics: metaphysics always starts again – *and always with itself*, with Plato and Aristotle.

One of the ways that Derrida responded to the dilemma that to challenge or resist Western metaphysics one must somehow start again *and* recognize that it is always too late to start again was through the movement of what he calls a *palintrope*.<sup>3</sup> In Greek, *pálin* means to move back, to go backwards, *and* also to do something again, to do something once more. The word is perhaps best known today as a palindrome, a word or phrase or number that reads the

same backwards and forwards. A palindrome starts and ends the same way. But a palintrope has a slightly different rhetorical flourish: it starts differently, with a start, it *startles* itself as it starts again.<sup>4</sup> It startles itself and, as Derrida says, loses the *logos*. Rather than moving backwards and forwards through the same word, or over the same ground, it suggests a turning backwards that happens *more than once*, a turning backwards that – already – repeats, splits, doubles and exceeds itself.

This book is divided into two parts. The first part, ‘Histories – of Literature’, explores Derrida’s *palintropic* rereading of Plato and Aristotle through the question of the *possibility* of a history of literature. At the beginning of *Of Grammatology* (1965–67), Derrida had written of the importance of a reading that ‘gets away, at least in its axis, from the classical categories of history: from the history of ideas, of course, and from the history of literature, but perhaps above all from the history of philosophy’.<sup>5</sup> But for this very reason, he was preoccupied with philosophy’s difficult relationship *with* literature and history, and with the relationship *between* history and literature. One can see this in his summary of a seminar from the early 1980s on Kant and Kafka:

I was concerned with the ‘as if’ (*als ob*) in the second formulation of the categorical imperative: ‘Act as if the maxim of your action were by your will to turn into a universal law of nature.’ This ‘as if’ enables us to reconcile practical reason with an historical teleology and with the possibility of unlimited progress. I tried to show how it almost introduces narrativity and fiction into the very core of legal thought, at the moment when the latter begins to speak and to question the moral subject. Though the authority of the law seems to exclude all historicity and empirical narrativity, and this at the moment when its rationality seems alien to all fiction and imagination – even the transcendental imagination – it still seems *a priori* to shelter these parasites.<sup>6</sup>

It is from his early readings on exceeding or resisting the ontological inheritance in Plato, and his redefinition of the concept of history (which I explore through that remarkable quasi pre-Socratic, Herodotus), that Derrida begins to sketch out the problem of a relation between history and literature that is not simply mediated or predetermined by philosophy. In his reading of Plato in ‘The Double

Session' (1969), Derrida uses the phrase the 'history – of literature'. It is by taking the graphics of this line (or hyphen or dash) between 'history' and 'literature' seriously that one can follow his later retranslations of Heidegger in the 1970s to get a sense of the *trait* (the line, the trace) that is always *en retrait*, with-drawing or retreating from itself *as* itself, which Derrida places and dis-places in the ceaseless negotiation between history and literature.

The first part of the book ends with a possible 'history – of literature', by reading the entrance of TIME in Act Four of *The Winter's Tale* in relation to Britain's tortuous 170-year time lag (1582–1752) in changing from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar, which began in Shakespeare's lifetime. It is through Derrida's important differences with Heidegger over how to read Aristotle on the relation between time and space that one can get a sense of Shakespeare's own strange turning back, once more, to Aristotle.

The second part of the book, 'Histories – of the Senses', is concerned with Derrida's palintropic rereading of Aristotle and Hegel. In his long engagement with Aristotle's treatise *On the Soul* Derrida gestures to a 'new' history – of the senses. It is through that great reader of Aristotle, Hegel, that Derrida reads the irreducible gaps (*écarts*) of and *as* contact, and the reverberating *blows* from the outside (*les coups du dehors*) that challenge the history – of the senses as no-more-than-five, as always five-in-one. As he suggests in *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy* (1992–2000), there are blows *and* caresses, always somewhere in between, that exceed the Aristotelian inheritance of the diaphanous as the unseen origin of seeing, as a hearing that only hears itself, and the not *x* but the possibility of *x* at the heart of the legacy of Husserlian phenomenology.

It is from tracing the reliance of Husserlian phenomenology on Aristotle that Derrida turns back, once more, to Hegel. He begins *Glas* (1974), his remarkable reworking of the problem of a history of philosophy (on Hegel) in relation to the possibility of a history of literature (on Genet), with an unpublished seminar in 1967 devoted to the first chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* on sensible certainty (*sinnliche Gewißheit*). Hegel opens the *Phenomenology* by defining sensible certainty as a simple, pure and undeveloped *being*. In his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* Hegel keeps turning away, again and again, from this simple being of sensible certainty in his attempt to start again and to reach Plato and the beginning of philosophy.