



**Rodolphe Gasché, Anders Lundberg**  
"Saving the Honour of Thinking"

Anders Lundberg spoke with Rodolphe Gasché about why deconstruction turned into a media "story", about developments in politics and ethics, about Europe and about the importance of a future for philosophical thinking.

**Anders Lundberg:** To begin with I would like to pose a question of institutional nature. You are by profession a philosopher educated in Germany and France, but working for over 20 years as a professor of Comparative Literature at the State University of New York at Buffalo. In a certain sense this seems to reflect a situation that strikes you as a visitor at a comparative literature department at an American University; they seem to more or less have become places for theory or even philosophy. Is it so that the departments of comparative literature actually have come to provide a place for what you, for lack of a better term, might call the "continental philosophy" that has been shut out of the regular philosophy departments, predominantly adhering to an "analytical" tradition?

**Rodolphe Gasché:** Perhaps. But let us not lose sight of the fact that the main split between 'continental' and 'analytical' philosophy divides the very academic institutions of philosophy in this country. The split is one between philosophy departments that are primarily analytical, and those departments, especially in Catholic American universities, which are more continentally, say phenomenologically oriented, as well as between those professional philosophical organisations whose main objective is to promote analytical philosophy (such as the *American Philosophy Association*) and others, for example, the *Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy*, which uphold continental thought. The divide is also found in the area of professional philosophy journals. Undoubtedly, some departments of comparative literature, but certainly not all, have increasingly turned philosophical, with some including straightforward instruction in the discipline "philosophy." But I think it is safe to say that with some exceptions, of course, such instruction remains framed by the requirements and expectations specific to students whose main concerns are literary. I should add, however, that with the inclusion of a number of subspecialties in the literary curriculum such as gender studies, psychoanalysis, cultural studies, and so forth, the spectrum of the issues that philosophy can and must address in comparative literature has expanded dramatically. With this, new opportunities have arisen for anchoring philosophy in comparative literature departments. Evidently, if the philosophy taught in these departments is 'continental' it is for good reasons. The students are literary students, and analytical philosophy has nothing to offer them. The causes for this transformation of the discipline, and the institution of comparative literature in this country, is complex. It is a development that

started with the discovery in the sixties and seventies by the literature departments of French structuralism, and, particularly, poststructuralism, that is, a mode of thinking that seemed to offer an alternative to dominant methodologies, or conceptions (such as New Criticism, Formalism, and even the Geneva School of phenomenological literary criticism which had been quite influential especially in foreign language departments), but which also exposed literary scholars with the need of familiarising themselves to some extent at least with the thought of Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others. Literary critics took to poststructuralism for a number of reasons, no doubt, especially, because the philosophers among the poststructuralists showed a hitherto unseen concern with issues of interest to the literary critics. Indeed, I would say, a main reason for which literary critics embraced poststructuralism was the belief that with poststructuralism, philosophy had finally come to acknowledge its status as a literary genre. Suddenly literary criticism saw before itself undreamed-of possibilities for expanding its competence to a whole new discipline. This is the frame of mind with which many literary critics assimilated philosophy, in other words, as a body of texts that could be read like any other piece of literature. Now, if this development engaged departments of comparative literature in a privileged fashion, and led to the creation of numerous new comparative literature programs and departments, it is also, as I have tried to show in an essay, because the theoretical turn of comparative literature is inscribed in the very nature of the comparative project, and ultimately represents a solution to the permanent crisis of this discipline's self-understanding.

However questionable, and reductive, the treatment of philosophical texts in the process of assimilating French structuralism has been, a number of literary scholars have not contented themselves with equating philosophy to literature. Be it, because they had a more substantial background in philosophy to begin with, or because, over the years, they acquired more of a philosophical culture and a sense for the history and the technicalities of philosophical thought. It is thanks to these new voices that philosophy is alive, in some case, quite alive, in certain departments of comparative literature. It remains, however, that, as I said before, most of the teaching of philosophy takes place with a special eye toward the issues that are vital to literary students even though these issues now exceed a narrowly literary, or aesthetical horizon.

**A.L.:** You have in your writings, ever since your essay *Deconstruction and Criticism* (1979), on several occasions delivered a severe critique of literary criticism and theory in America, and especially of the so-called American deconstruction. What does this 'deconstruction' represent, and how do you situate yourself in relation to it and its disputes with more traditional formalist, humanist or historical criticisms, as well as more recent theories like "new historicism" and "postcolonial studies"? And, against the backdrop of what you are saying in *On Responding Responsibly*, what is the task of literary criticism, if it's possible to speak of a such thing, and how would a responsible literary criticism look like?

**R.G.:** The deconstructive literary criticism that I targeted in "Deconstruction and Criticism," and which critique also frames my exposition of Derrida's thought in *The Tain of the Mirror*, rests, or rather rested, on the assumption that the literary text is constituted by an integral, and flawless, mirror play on all levels of the text ranging from the thematic to the one of the signifier. The critical operation of bringing the text's self-reflection to light, this is what this criticism understood by deconstruction. No doubt the Yale School and its disciples were the prime representative of this conception of literariness.

However, and ironically, de Man, many of whose students adopted the deconstructive literary theory, does not easily – rather, does not fit at all – into this scheme, as I have argued in my last book. But the Yale School was not the only spokesman for this approach to the literary text. Deconstructive literary criticism was a much broader phenomenon, it diffused easily, whether as the result of a progressive dilution of the tenets of the Yale School, or as the specific form in which New Criticism became capable of survival. From my criticism of deconstructive literary criticism it is clear that I do not buy its conception of the text, nor its understanding of the task of criticism. It is a reductive approach to textuality. But in order to demonstrate that any literary text worth the name, achieves full, all inclusive specularly, this kind of criticism had to draw on aspects of language – established by linguistics, semiotics, and pragmatics – neglected by the traditional thematic, humanist, historical criticisms, but also formalist poetics. Its objections against the traditional modes of criticisms are well founded, and need to be recognised as such. In many ways, deconstructive literary criticism had a sobering effect on literary studies. I would add, however, that deconstruction in literary studies based itself on a conception of the text that is as narrow, and as questionable as the ones at the foundation of the more traditional conceptions of criticism. Let me explain myself. Since what counts in deconstructive literary criticism is the demonstration that in a text everything mirrors everything, and, hence, that no single position, statement, theme, or truth, can prevail, its criticism of other positions is limited to the accusation of disregarding certain aspects of the text which when brought into play, would debunk the claims made by singling out one of its items, or levels. Its conception of the text is speculative in essence even though the absolute speculation that animates it, serves to demonstrate that there is no absolute knowledge. From this notion of the text, deconstruction in literary studies has levelled its criticism against all the other forms of criticism. It has rarely questioned the philosophical underpinnings of the more traditional forms of criticism, and has never inquired into what it owes to Hegelian thought, for instance. In spite of declarations to the contrary, deconstructive literary criticism has remained just as philosophically naive as the positions it attacked. New historicism and postcolonial studies have arisen in reaction to deconstructive literary criticism. Some of the concerns broached by these criticisms are legitimate, no doubt. But the strange, eclectic, above all, unreflected mix that they represent – of quite conservative positions, and positions originating in the criticism that they supposedly replace – makes them not very different from any previous positions, except that, perhaps, they make a more opportunistic, at the limit, a dishonest, if not cynical, use of theory.

This brings me then to your final questions concerning a responsible literary criticism. There are different facets that such responsibility can, and must take. In order to be responsible literary criticism must become more philosophical in the sense that it must expose itself critically to a relentless reflection on, and interrogation of, its own presuppositions. Further, to be responsible, it must seek to do justice to its object. This requires, to be brief, what de Man called, though in a different spirit, a return to philology. But to be responsible to, and for, its object literary criticism must not hide behind general conceptions such as genres, periods, oeuvres, the creative process, the author, etc. Though these conceptions have their place and role in doing justice to the object, to be responsible literary criticism must also represent a response to the object in its singularity. Rather than a science – of the singular there can be no science – it must be a praxis, a praxis that engages the object in its quality as an event, as a happening that claims its beholder, or reader, not in the shape of an ideal beholder, or reader, but as *this* reader and beholder.

**A.L.:** Since you mention de Man's "return to philology," I wonder to what extent such a responsible criticism draws on the work of de Man, and to what extent his work can be of use today? In your recent book on de Man, *The Wild Card of Reading*, you seem to defend de Man by taking him seriously, by attempting to respond to his "idiosyncratic critical idiolect" and by bringing it into the theoretical discourse as a singular voice, quite distinct from the "deconstructivist" positions in general. But you also seem somewhat ambivalent faced with his radical positions, for example vis-à-vis his notion of the "undecidable" – as you write, his notion of the undecidable or *aporia* is not, as in the case of Derrida, the condition for an ethical decision, for responsibility – or vis-à-vis his notion of language. In short, what are we to make of de Man today? Is it possible to go further on the path of what you call the "radical empiricism" and the "linguistic materialism" of de Man, or is it a dead-end, something that will inevitably end up in a monotony, which you describe, paraphrasing Stein, with "language (is) language (is) language"?

**R.G.:** In *The Wild Card* I have tried to figure out, as precisely as possible, what exactly the de Manian project is about. What is singular about de Man's thinking, I argue, is the idiosyncratic way in which de Man conceives of, and also practices singularity. For example, the way in which he elaborates his own position is by critically cutting all possible theoretical influences or allegiances. If notwithstanding this attempt at radically demarcating his own thought from that of others, one tries to situate de Man, the tradition of antic atomism (Democritus), medieval reflections on singularity (Ockham), and contemporary philosophical and theological efforts to rethink the notion of singularity (Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida), come to mind. Indeed, by defining the materiality of the signifier, or language, in terms of an absolute opaqueness to meaning and as radically arbitrary, that is, as undercutting any possible relation to meaning, de Man seems to have sought to take the philosophical notion of singularity to an ultimate extreme, to the point that is, where the singular becomes so singular as to no longer admit any relation whatsoever, and where it is thus constituted by sheer unintelligibility. This peculiar conception of singularity, I suggest in the book, is a dead-end. Even though this conception builds philosophically on possibilities inherent in the tradition, and therefore cannot simply be disregarded, it also reduces the notion of singularity to an absurdity. A singular that is wholly unintelligible, because defying all possible relation to it, is no longer something singular, it is barely a "something" anymore. It would thus seem that de Man's thought has nothing to offer to a criticism that seeks to responsibly relate to texts, or any other events. This is certainly a possible conclusion that you could draw from my exposition of de Man's understanding of language, text, and reading, in *The Wild Card*. But as a singular conception, de Man's work remains open to the future, to readings to come, for readings which facing different contexts and critical horizons, could recast another light on what in the present context may appear to be an, however impressive impasse. A responsible criticism must do justice to the singularity of its object. You ask me what I think de Man's work could contribute to the development of a responsible criticism. My answer would be the following: Even though the singular must be recognisable as singular, the singular is also singular on the condition that it is not entirely intelligible, transparent, knowable, etc. Perhaps, the challenge of de Man's idiosyncratic conception of singularity consists in drawing our attention to this irreducibly opaque moment constitutive of all singularity, and which a responsible criticism must under no circumstances ignore.

**A.L.:** You also mentioned the necessity of approaching the object of criticism as a value that "claims the beholder or reader." Am I wrong to interpret this as

a reference to the Kantian notion of the sublime? Since I know that you are working on a book on Kant's aesthetics and since the sublime has been somewhat of a *topos* common to recent French philosophy (Lyotard, Nancy, Lacoue-Labarthe, Derrida) and American theory (de Man, Hertz, Fry, Guerlac), I would like to relate this to some other current concerns. Is it possible to talk about a relation between the interest in the ethico-political and the interest in the sublime; with the notion of the sublime, Kant opened up a relation between aesthetics and ethics and Lyotard also seems to want to connect the notion of the sublime with the demands of ethics? And, since the *aporia* often is related to the sublime, is it possible to read Derrida's interconnecting of *aporia* and ethico-political decisions in this light? And why has this notion, which is usually connected with aesthetic formalism or some kind of aesthetic romanticism or mysticism, acquired such attention?

**R.G.:** Before I try to answer your question about the sublime, let me first say that I think that it would be necessary to distinguish between the reasons for which philosophers like Lyotard, Derrida, Nancy, and Lacoue-Labarthe have become interested in the sublime, and the reasons behind literary critics', including de Man's, interest in the sublime. As you know, romanticism, especially British, but also American, is an essential area of teaching and research in English departments throughout the US, and the sublime has therefore the status of a perennial academic subject. De Man's treatment of the sublime, even though it focuses on the sublime in Kant and Hegel, is to be read against the backdrop of the English departments, intent on siphoning all aestheticising, or moralising implications out of the sublime, and on thus undercutting any edifying or devotional meaning of the issue, rendering it truly unfit for any humanist oriented pedagogical program. The philosophers' interest in the sublime, at least of those French philosophers you mentioned, has been a more modest, circumstantial, even, strategic interest aimed at clarifying and furthering certain philosophical problems: *Darstellung* in the case of Nancy, the possibility of clear-cut distinction – *coupure pure* – for Derrida, the inner limits of the aesthetics of beautiful form, for Lyotard, and so forth.

Yes, certainly, when I spoke of the need to conceive of the object of a responsible criticism as a singular event that, because singular, claims the beholder, or reader, the question of the sublime was on my mind. But it was not so much the Kantian sublime, but Lyotard's interpretation of the sublime in his essays on post-modern painting, that I was thinking of. In these essays, he understands sublimity in terms of the feeling that something occurs rather than nothing: Happening, occurring, that there is something, is always for, that is, addressed to someone, and thus solicits response. The sublime in a Lyotardian sense has thus clearly an ethical thrust. To recall, as you did a moment ago, that already in the "Analytic of the Sublime" a relation between the aesthetic feeling of the sublime and morality is sketched out, is entirely in order, especially if one wishes to evaluate the specificity of Lyotard's ethical thrust. Indeed, in Kant, this relation between the aesthetical and the ethical is grounded on the fact that the feeling of the sublime is a feeling that arises through the sacrifice of everything sensible – the aesthetic feeling of the sublime is a resistance to the aesthetic itself – and hence the sublime is only a formal and aesthetic anticipation of the entirely different order of reason, or morality. By contrast, for Lyotard the feeling of the sublime is inherently ethical. I should say, proto-ethical, because conceiving of the sublime as he does, Lyotard does not simply link aesthetics and ethics as already constituted domains or orders. With the sublime, he gestures toward a feeling that precedes the divide in question, and that is more elementary than the

aesthetical and the ethical taken separately. In Lyotard's sublime, the aesthetical is only present in the quality of the artworks' event-character (as singular occurrences in time and space), and the ethical in so far as *qua* occurrences, that is, *qua* singularities, they claim their beholder. His notion of the sublime is thus also proto-aesthetic. Derrida, no doubt, shares Lyotard's concerns. As far as ethics is concerned, he too has been interested in mapping out the minimal structures of ethicity. His inquiries into the notions of *aporia*, the impossible, or undecidability, are aimed at elaborating on the conditions under which alone it is possible to speak, rigorously, of decision, rather than merely an execution of pre-programmed, or pre-calculated reactions. Derrida's concern with *aporia* thus would seem to indicate a stronger interest in the political. But let us not forget that he too has consistently explored the proto-ethical notions, or structures, of address, solicitation, invitation, response, saying Yes, etc. On the other hand, Lyotard too, in *The Differend* for instance, gestures toward a political philosophy.

**A.L.:** Where lies your own principal interest in the sublime? Is it primarily the Lyotardian interpretation of the notion, which maybe is more concerned with Edmund Burke (and Barnet Newman) than with Kant, or is it a more general interest in the term? And where do you locate the importance of the notion of the sublime today?

**R.G.:** My interest in the sublime is first of all linked to my work on the *Third Critique*. Right from the start, however, I should say that I believe that the *Analytic of the Beautiful* is the more important part of Kant's work on aesthetics. I am fully aware that with this I am at odds with some trends in contemporary Kant scholarship, contemporary reflections on art and aesthetics, including Lyotard's. Indeed, I hold that the Kantian notion of the beautiful has still a lot to tell us today as far as aesthetics is concerned. I would argue that Kant's notion of beautiful form is neither subservient to the classical notion of beauty (after all Kant had little experience of great, classical art), nor the announcement of an aestheticist cult of form. The reason for this is, precisely, that what Kant calls "mere form" has little to nothing to do with art, and aesthetics in a common sense. In the book on the *Third Critique*, which I am in the process of completing (and you might be interested to know that I waited to write the chapter on the sublime until I was finished with everything else), I call it a proto-epistemological concept. The mere form judged beautiful in judgements of taste extends well beyond the realm of art. Essentially, it does not concern objects of art, but objects of nature in the first place. And, paradoxically, for this very reason, the Kantian notion of beauty has, I believe, a largely untapped potential for thinking about contemporary art, which is deeply concerned with the nature of the "object", with the minimal condition under which something can be apprehended as a "thing." (In the case of Burke too, the beautiful, I think, and not the sublime, is the richer concept). So, I deal with the sublime because I am writing a book on Kant's so-called aesthetics.

But how can one not be interested today in the sublime given that everyone takes a mouthful of it, literary critics in particular, especially, if one tries to remain in touch with developments and trends in the profession. Lately, there has even been some talk about a return to Kant just as if a new wave of Neo-Kantianism was in the making! Needless to say, such a claim has no substance whatsoever. All it means, is that some literary critics concerned with romanticism read for the first time, and some, perhaps, reread, the *Analytic of the Sublime*. Lyotard encouraged this trend as well by suggesting that the category of the sublime could, or rather had to be put to use to make sense of contemporary art. Lyotard's recourse to the sublime in connection with the

contemporary arts, arises from the insight that the inherited conceptions of the beautiful, and form, are of little help in coming to grips with art today. Given that the stock of our conceptual tools is limited, Lyotard proceeds on the assumption that the "other" inherited aesthetic concept – the sublime – distinct from the aesthetical concept of form, offers possibly a new avenue. But as you pointed out, when dealing with contemporary art, Lyotard is not primarily referring to Kant's sublime. His, in my eyes, admirable book on the "Analytic of the Sublime" is further testimony to this because what it establishes about Kant's notion of the sublime has little bearing on Lyotard's own attempt to make the concept of the sublime fruitful for his understanding of what contemporary art is about. Burke's sublime, not Kant's, is linked by Lyotard to the concern with the event, the happening, the occurrence of Being, that prevails in his understanding of post-modernity, and post-modern art. By resorting to Burke's notion of the sublime, Lyotard implicitly acknowledges that only by transforming the inherited conceptual tools, we have a chance of doing justice to what is happening today in the arts.

If the sublime is important today, it is thus, first, because it is viewed as a means to rethink art, and aesthetics in general. But the sublime is significant today from still another angle. In *The Differend*, Lyotard speaks, but only in passing, of the task to save the honour of thinking. As one can show, for Lyotard the problematic of the sublime is somehow linked to this task. It is a task that arises from a differend caused by philosophical thinking itself. What I consider important, and original, as far this book by Lyotard is concerned, is that it shows, at its deepest moments, that the legitimate exigencies of philosophical thinking, exigencies that can only be rescinded at the price of a falling back into barbarism, tribalism, racism, etc., inevitably silence and wrong the subjects, positions, experiences to which they seek to do justice. To save the honour of thinking consist in the effort to find ways to phrase the differends, or unsolvable conflicts, that philosophical thinking itself causes by way of its legitimate, justified, necessary positions. This is the context, I believe, in which the problematic of the sublime, finds today its broadest, and most significant expression.

**A.L.:** Since we have already touched upon the reception of deconstruction and since deconstruction can be said to have played a major role in your work it would be of interest to approach the reception of the thinking of Jacques Derrida from a more philosophical perspective. The tradition of interpretation and commentary on Derrida – in which your books *The Tain of the Mirror* (1986) and *Inventions of Difference* (1994) marks a turn towards a more rigorous and philosophical reading of his work – seems in many crucial ways to differ from the reception of philosophers in general. His work has acquired an astonishing amount of attention (since the late 80s there has been a literal explosion of studies on Derrida) at the same time as it has been attacked with an extraordinary aggressiveness. There are two things that are particularly striking about this: Firstly, the apparent lack of an informed and substantial critique, which seems to have been replaced by a hostility that defies even the most minimal standards of philosophical debate. Secondly, almost all appreciative studies seems be on the defensive, repeating the same things over and over again. They defend Derrida against basic reading errors, against accusations of relativism, nihilism, etc. without adding anything new to the picture. Instead we are offered pious paraphrases of exactly the same readings and analyses Derrida himself offers in his books. Of course this does not mean that there are no good works on Derrida, but there nevertheless seems to exist an unwillingness to think further, to open a dialogue with other readings and open up his thinking to contexts he himself has not already provided. Why do

you think it has turned out this way?

**R.G.:** I think I will have difficulties with this question. I am afraid that I will not be able to add anything substantial to the picture that you have drawn. Now, to say something general from a philosophical perspective would require one to include in the picture the ways in which "deconstruction" has been portrayed in the various media. For Derrida's reception is not only an academic issue: the media have caught hold of his weight in academia, and contributed to shaping his reception in significant ways. From rather early on, the newspapers have considered "deconstruction" a "story" worth reporting. This is not accidental, I believe. There is something about Derrida's work that gives it a public quality. It exposes itself without reserve to being welcomed, rejected, ignored. And any discussion of his reception would have to define, and take off from this dimension of his work. I would say that, indeed, from the early work on, the basic thematic concerns of Derrida – I name only the notion of the trace, writing, and their relation to voice and speech – have to do with the inscription of the exterior in the interior, the public in the private. Moreover, Derrida, in the aftermath of Husserl and Heidegger, has systematically reflected on the intentional structure of texts, writings, works, etc. Indeed, all his work is – explicitly or not – conceived as a response. All his texts are addressed, and signed. They are, what he calls, *des envois*. But in distinction to Husserl and Heidegger, no one also has pondered more than Derrida on the chances and risks that one takes in sending a message or in offering a view. From the very beginning, his work has understood itself as being about sending and reception, and, performatively speaking, it has taken the form of addresses and responses. If the reception of Derrida, with all involuntary or deliberate misreadings, is largely the empirical exemplification and verification of the quasi-transcendental laws that he has pointed out, namely, that it is always possible, hence a necessary possibility, that a message may not be understood, that a missive may not reach its addressee, or that a meaning can always lend itself to a deforming repetition, this is not simply an irony. Above all, it is because the public nature of Derrida's work radically exposes it to the distortions that all reception is fraught with.

This leads me to offering a footnote to your analysis. You have referred to the extraordinary aggressiveness of the opponents of deconstruction. Indeed, they don't hesitate to abandon themselves the very principles which they claim have been deconstructed by Derrida, in order to be able to better, and more aggressively, attack his thought. You also pointed to the piety of so many of the proponents of deconstruction, who not only abandon any critical sense, but ruminate over and over again an impoverished version of Derrida's thought. In both cases, one can, of course, argue that for different reasons they don't get it right. But if you consider that the main thesis that informs Derrida's thought is that the very condition that makes it possible for something to come into its own, also limits the identity, the propriety, the meaning of what it makes possible, and inscribes in it the very possibility of distortion, errance, nonsense, Derrida's thought is clearly unsettling in a fundamental way. I would say, it leaves its opponents and its proponents bewildered and insecure. Aggression and piousness are two forms shielding oneself against the threat that this work poses.

**A.L.:** Today there seems to exist an increasing wish to address issues of politics within theory and philosophy and for some time there has been a lot of talk about a "political turn" within deconstruction as well (even if it seems that ethico-political dimension has been of central importance in the work of Derrida from the very beginning). But as the relation between deconstruction

and politics have been thought in terms of aporetic impossibility, an undetermined relation between undecidability and decision, *aporia* and judgement, it seems that from within these strategies a politics of deconstruction would be impossible, since it would require a determination of the law of the law. In this context, claims have been made for a need to alter certain positions and make room for a politics of deconstruction. What is your attitude toward such projects, as for example Bernard Stiegler's attempts to overcome the impossible logic of *aporia* by regarding it as determined by the material invention or technicity? Or to bring up other examples; Ernesto Laclau's suggestion that deconstruction requires a theory of "hegemonie", a theory of decisions taken in an undecidable terrain; or Simon Critchly's more astonishing suggestion that deconstruction actually should be grounded in a Levinasian ethics.

**R.G.:** Let me first express my general suspicion of all so-called turns. For me "turns" signal unfinished business, an evasion of difficulties, a lacking dedication, a failure in endurance, and so forth. Historically speaking, what you refer to as the "political turn," – I would add the turn towards ethics – is in my eyes, to a large extent, an effort to escape the demanding nature of theory and philosophy. I consider it a way to avoid what Hegel called the work, if not hardship, of the concept. When the demands of theory and philosophy to deepen issues beyond a certain level of sophistication become too strenuous, a turn is an easy way out. Moreover, such turns have the blessing of good consciousness since they are made in the name of concreteness, real life, reality, etc. But any rigorous theoretical or philosophical work does not have to make turns, especially no turns toward the ethical or the political. Even if not always fully spelled out, implicitly all philosophical thought is involved, intimately tied up, to the question of the ethical and the political. Obviously, this involvement of philosophical thought as such with the political and the ethical can take shape in different ways. Distinct from the philosophical thinking of the past, according to which thinkers, whether systematic or not, sought to do justice to the intimate connection between the different facets or dimensions of thought, by developing comprehensive departmentalised philosophies that besides an epistemology and aesthetic, included an ethics and a politics, contemporary philosophical thought, beginning with Husserl, and the early Heidegger, no longer seeks to expound the inner connections of thinking to the ethical and political in this way. The reason for this lies with the changed task of philosophical thinking in the aftermath of the emancipation of all the traditional domains of knowledge from philosophy, and their establishment in shape of more or less autonomous "sciences" or, simply, "discourses." Ethical and political discourses have become institutionalised independently of philosophy. They abound, *on a l'embarras du choix*, as the French say. Faced with this situation, the prime task of thinking cannot consist anymore in adding one more ethical code, and one more political program to the existing ones. Rather, thinking has become interested in what constitutes the political and the ethical. It seeks to determine the strict conditions under which one can speak of ethics or politics to begin with. The task is no longer to propose determined rules for action, or definite horizons, but to spell what must obtain for an action to meet the criteria of ethicity (for political action I am at loss for a corresponding word). Philosophy from Husserl and Heidegger on to the present is therefore concerned with what I would call the proto-ethical, or proto-political. Most, if not all, of the thinkers you have referred to are involved in projects that fall into this line of thought, although some, no doubt, have been tempted by selling a determined politics and ethics as well. Now, though this kind of research constitutes the primary objective of philosophical thinking at the cutting edge, this does not mean, of course, that

philosophers and philosophies could not also intervene ethically and politically in determined ways. However, when, and where this happens, and it happens all the time, philosophers today, in order to remain faithful to the rigor of their own insights, must measure their own actions against what they have established with respect to the strict conditions under which an action is, indeed, ethical or political, or not. In other words, they cannot proceed naively, based on firm beliefs, or held opinions, common-sense, or not so common-sense values, evidences, in short, of all kinds. An unrelenting critical vigilance about the implications and limits of their interventions must accompany them at all times.

I will not speak to the different positions in contemporary thought on both sides of the Atlantic that you have evoked, this would take us too far. To do minimal justice to the work of the thinkers that you have mentioned, would require me to look at each one of them individually. I wish to limit my remarks to your question whether a politics of deconstruction is possible. According to a widespread belief, deconstruction is incompatible with ethics and politics, because it puts all values and evidences in question. Yet the point of deconstruction is that where given values and unquestioned evidences dominate thinking and action, thinking and action are not ethical or political, but merely execute pre-established programs. Values and evidences prevent any action from meeting the criteria necessary for it to be ethical or political action. They relieve the subject of the responsibility to the singular other or events without which no action is ethical or political. Between parenthesis, I note that with this we also touch upon the essence of the subject. In any case, an action, in the same way as a thought, is ethical and political only on condition that they arise from the impossibility, or *aporia*, to decide, or to execute a program. Rather than precluding ethical and political action (or thought), undecidability, impossibility, or *aporia*, are the very conditions without which no such action, or thought, is possible. Differently phrased, if ever there has been, or will be an ethical or political action or thought, it must have been an action or thought that faced a total impasse of decision. With this concern about undecidability, impossibility, *aporia* in the face of which alone it is possible to speak of a decision, an intervention, or invention, be it theoretically or practically, deconstruction is imminently ethical and political. It is situated on the very edge of the ethical and political. But it is so only, and remains so only, on condition that it resist itself the temptation to become a program – in the shape, for example, of a determined method, or a set of precepts.

**A.L.:** At the moment you are working on a book about Europe. The actuality of a discussion on Europe is of course obvious today, when the rapid changes that are taking place make it seem as unstable as it was earlier in the century. What I want to ask is: First, which questions interest you in such a project? And further, what would a philosophical conception of Europe look like today? Is it possible to talk about Europe as something other than a geographical convention? Is a speculative geography – as for example the one Edmund Husserl elaborated in *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*, where he writes about Europe in terms of a "spiritual community," – still possible? And how can we deal with the violence of such a definition? Is it still possible to talk about a European tradition of thought?

**R.G.:** Indeed, I have begun work on a book about the notion of Europe, more precisely, on Europe as a philosophical concept. Europe is a notion that has always meant more than a geographical entity, or zone. It has always been a speculative concept. But rather than taking on the long history of the notion,

my main focus are the attempts that have been made during the last twenty years especially in France, Italy, and to a lesser extent in Germany, to probe the concept of Europe, and test whether this old, and discredited concept still has some untapped critical potential. Of the thinkers who have intervened in this debate let me only mention Massimo Cacciari, Rémi Brague, Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida. Now it is interesting to note that all of these thinkers are in one way or another indebted to phenomenological thought. Yet, Husserl, as you just pointed out, but also Heidegger and Patocka, have intimately tied the notion of Europe to the phenomenological concept of philosophy. Thus, the attempts in question aimed at recasting the notion of Europe, have profound implications for our understanding of phenomenology, and more generally, for philosophy. So, in short, I am interested in working out what the critical potential the concept of Europe could still harbour, and how such a potential impacts, or transforms the concept of a phenomenological philosophy.

To measure the significance of the attempts currently made at revamping the concept, it is, of course, necessary to see how Husserl, Heidegger, and Patocka have put the concept of Europe to work. For Husserl, it is synonymous with the Greek idea of a universal science, for Heidegger, with the Greek notion of philosophy as being attuned to the wonder of Being, and for Patocka, with the Platonic project of a tendance of the soul. All three conceptions have their inherent problems, needless to say, the gypsies you mentioned with respect to Husserl, are a point in case. But I hold that the idea of a universal science, of the thinking of Being, and of the tendance of the soul, articulate a demand that can only be relinquished at the cost of a lapse into the worst – nationalism, racism, tribalism, barbarism, you name it. Undoubtedly, the demand to overcome, and abandon, the nation, the peoples, the race, the tribe, in the name of a universal mankind implies violence. Undoubtedly, this demand to recognise, and accept, the other as other is felt as a violent imposition, and so is the demand to account for all the claims one makes according to universally shareable rules, and not on the basis of customary, traditional, or religious believes. But this is a violence of a lesser degree than the violence that originates with the peoples, the nations, the races, and the tribes. Or, on that account, with customs, traditions, traditionalisms, religious believes, and so forth. But let me say right away that in this debate about Europe, I am not interested in those attempts that simply try to reanimate and reaffirm the old, classical phenomenological conception of Europe however refined. Rather, I am interested in those projects that critically explore, and complicate, the difficult relation between the universal and the singular, between the idea of Europe and the others of Europe. It is in the context of these complexifications, I believe, that the notion of Europe can still reveal a critical potential, more precisely, as a name for a way of thinking and feeling with a universalist thrust that is open to the other, open to what is singular and wholly unpredictable about the other – a thinking and feeling no longer responsible to and for humanity in general, but responsible to and for the other even where and when the other defies all conventional and unconventional categorisation, or transcends given horizons of expectation.

As to the "anti-Europeans" you brought up, I limit myself to a brief observation. If they seek to make a case against Europe argumentatively, they will have to play by the rules that they claim to resist. In this sense, they are as eurocentric as any one can be. Like the eurocentrists, they lack a critical attitude with respect to the foundations from which they think.

**A.L.:** Finally, I wonder how you conceive of the role of philosophy today? And how you conceive of the future of philosophy?

**R.G.:** In fact, I think that the future of philosophy is intimately (not exclusively, needless to say) tied to this debate about Europe. But let me add, immediately, this concern with the future of philosophy is what philosophy is to be about today. It is first of all the concern with assuring that philosophical thinking does not become extinct. I do not speak here of philosophy as an academic discipline. As such a discipline, it can continue eternally without being alive. What is stake, rather, is philosophy as an active mode of critically questioning what is the case, and of relating, be it in wonder or in horror, that something is the case. But this is not all. To remain within the frame of what we have discussed here, I would define the future of philosophy as a philosophy that remains open to the future, to what cannot be anticipated, to that which it is impossible to predict, and which thwarts all categorisation. Taken to its full consequences, such openness to the future, to the unnameable to-come, prohibits thinking from closing upon itself, of remaining by and within itself. Everything that is taken up by and in thought is affected by this relation to the future. Nothing is allowed to rest anymore in its essence, and to shield itself from possible change. A philosophy open to the future is thus a philosophy that is alive, constantly at unrest. The role of philosophy today is to be this philosophy *of* the future, a philosophy whose most elementary gesture is openness to otherness, including, unpredictable otherness, and whose ethicality and political thrust, is unsettling – unsettling to the point of unsettling philosophical thought itself. On this condition alone can philosophy ward off the complacency, good consciousness, and self-righteousness, that inhibit thinking's obligation to reach out.

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