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Playing into Derrida's Hands A Teacher's Report on 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'

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Traveller, there are no roads. The road is created as we walk it.

— Antonio Machado

No one teaches Derrida in either sense. If anything, we play into Derrida's hands in a delectable sense while discussing his classic 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences'. For the exercise, as readers find it, is both manipulative and exploitative as are all fun and games involving language. This seems rather exceptional for English in India, when Derrida reaches us in belated translation from the French, and disseminated by some of us across a multitude of languages and dialects in an Indian classroom, across predictably wide gulfs of incomprehension, ours and others'. The translation of this difference is perhaps what students in a class understand as play in their variously interpreted cultures. This article will gather some moments and patterns of discussion and discovery in an English classroom where young readers figure out how or why they are apt to play into Derrida's hands. It will also briefly reflect on monstrosity, the last word of Derrida's essay and what it was meant to suggest for readers through the 50 years of its progress. The courses to which the author refers now and then are "Just Reading," "Literary Criticism and Theory-II," and "Writers at Play"— all IV Semester MA courses he has been teaching at the UoH over 20 years or so.

I shall begin with the two assumptions that generally guide my teaching at advanced levels. First, even for the most accomplished readers, texts play insistently upon their vanities and professions of faith rather than make for the ideal conditions and values that ought to affect them as readers. In simple terms, no text ever changed or challenged the world completely for readers whose history of reading, far too deeply subliminal and complicatedly private to gauge, has already determined the world they would have made or transformed by the texts they read. (How else would you account for the homicide across the world by believers who religiously read the scriptures?) Second, texts that take this assumption to be axiomatic (like the most powerfully complex texts like Derrida's) cannily set their own protocols for reading. Caught unawares, the most naïve

and unsuspecting among us play into the hands of theorists, mostly with surprising gains and life-long confidence in negotiating grimmer and grimmer texts.¹

‘Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences’ (SS&P) and my English classes

The courses where I have read SS&P with M. A. students are mainly three: a core/compulsory four-credit ‘Literary Criticism & Theory’ course, and two electives at the III or IV semester called ‘Writers at Play: Fun and Games in Literature’, and ‘Just Reading’. The compulsory survey reads texts in criticism and theory of the mid- and late twentieth century. Derrida appears there among the canonical English writers and critics, major representatives of movements, styles, and ideologies. The contrast in style and address is striking, for translation from the French is what translation does in English. Derrida makes my students think for example, why playing in French might be far more serious than playing in English. (No one ever thought words would be this serious when you played with them after Derrida.)² In the electives, however, SS&P is often cited in parts and drawn upon to illustrate a method, a style, a strategy, or someone’s ‘take’ on a time-worn theory or stance. Very rarely do students focus here on Derrida sharply to the total exclusion of other critics or positions. In other words, SS&P is selectively read in order to follow an argument or logically support a method such as *bricolage*. As a matter of fact, students are fascinated by the idea of *bricolage* which they somehow interpret to their advantage as little ‘theorists’ who are happy to work with odds and ends and so position themselves on the margins of larger playing fields of expert theorists. In the Fun and Games course students love Derrida playing on and off ‘centre,’ his making and unmaking structures by destabilizing them even as they begin to stabilize in our thinking. Cross-referencing this to Jorge Luis Borges, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Lewis Carroll, Emily Dickinson, William Blake, Raja Rao, or Stevie Smith saves them a few steps in their assigned reading and writing. The Just Reading course samples unusual texts (short and long) where SS&P’s digressions and asides compare favourably with philosophically probing texts that talk to/ among themselves: Gertrude Stein, William Gass, and a less known but enormously fascinating entry in a writer’s diary called ‘Myself Upon This Earth’ by William Saroyan. I have often marvelled at the

¹ “Playing into someone’s hands” means to end up doing what your opponent wants you to do, or having to do things unwittingly to your opponent’s advantage rather than yours. The adversarial implication in this phrase is not to be taken seriously although powerful rhetorical manoeuvres are undoubtedly agonistic. That readers often tend to lose this game is a foregone conclusion in theory; the more *suspicious* they are as readers, the more adept they become in losing gracefully.

² We have not quite seen or heard about the perils of imagining monolingual Anglo-American communities reading theorists like Derrida, although in *The Monolingualism of the Other* he suggests that language does not merely name and convey meanings but it *calls* us as speakers/addressees: “Like the hospitality of the host even before any invitation, language summons when summoned. Like a charge, it remains to be given, it remains only on this condition: by still remaining to be given” (67). I cannot imagine what *charge* Derrida’s language commands in its English translation— what *charge* it is given or taken in a monolingualist English transaction within a class rich in Indian linguistic traditions.

resourcefulness of our better students in answering an exam question on the play on just reading and Derrida's SS&P. Inevitably they understand this to be an invitation to ponder what we seem to be reading when we read a paper like SS&P— texts in tandem or in dialogue; writers in conference; the worlds so made by them; or just ourselves; and how just might our just readings be. Just so?

Real Questions

Two details of class behaviour strike me to be extraordinary when students exercise their minds differently— especially while reading texts like SS&P. First, no student ever seeks simple information/ mere clarification of details while discussing Derrida. Second, they seem to feel a sudden sense of having grown up, or having realized the urgency to respond maturely to ideas and topics at hand. In short, I have found few texts more challenging and motivating at once, more exacting and provoking scholarly insights than SS&P. Stages of growth in reading (beyond comprehension) among students have fascinated me always as a teacher. Reading SS&P, students shed scales of adolescence as it were. They graduate into responsible partners in a search when questions begin to sound deeper and more probing, particularly about language and how inadequately they have perceived it. This self-discovery is somewhat elegiac as well, both in the celebratory and revealing senses. As Joan Didion once put it, “when we mourn our losses we also mourn, for better or for worse, ourselves. As we were. As we are no longer. As we will one day not be at all.” The innocence we (our students) have lost *after* SS&P is not a bad thing at all. It is good to cherish such innocence however because Derrida's SS&P is itself an elegy of sorts on the masters of pre-Structural and the Structural he has outgrown, but has not quite either. At the heart of Derrida's elegy is a philosophy of mourning (after) —loss of selves you once were, selves now hardly reclaimable or restorative.³ It is all about relationships when a writer from the past enters conversing.⁴

SSP and Difference

In each of these courses, as I have indicated, SS&P is a different text, its *difference* brought home to students by the hourly-altering angles and approaches from which, or within which, a class looks at a problem, or depending upon the persistence of questions the class puts to it. Week by week, we seem to turn our conceptual kaleidoscope for newer and newer figures and patterns. “The quality and fecundity of a discourse,” cautions Derrida in SS&P, “are perhaps measured by the critical rigor with which this relation to the history of metaphysics and to inherited concepts is thought. Here it is a question both of a critical relation to the language of the social sciences and a critical responsibility of the discourse itself. It is a question,” adds Derrida, “of explicitly and systematically posing the problem of the status of a discourse which borrows from a heritage the resources necessary for the deconstruction of that heritage itself” (93).

³ I quote Joan Didion from Megan Mayhew Bergman's column in *The Paris Review*.

⁴ This indeed is the gist and pith of another course I have often given, “Reading Relations”. As far as I can recall, the idea and inspiration for this work are Bernard Sharratt and his eponymous book.

As often as I can, I underline for students Derrida's "inherited concepts", "resources", and "heritage", and where/ how we position our immediate texts and ourselves vis-à-vis what we take to be our inherited conceptual resources and heritage. Given that all of us bring along completely different histories of reading, nothing remains static or centrist as *the* text before us. The following questions, with appropriate modifications, now seem natural for the class to consider. What is SS&P good *for* in reading texts and their worlds in this course? How illustrative are the passages of SS&P in thinking through relations involving new concepts and old habits of assimilating them? How closely aligned or how divergent are the discourses of the *human* and *social* sciences? Suppose we read SS&P only (or chiefly) in the light of Derrida's epigraph from Montaigne (*We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things*) what do we read *in* Derrida, and how open they think the key terms of his title to be amenable to interpretation?

Another word is in order about 'the histories of reading' of which we are ineluctable bearers. It has been remarked of the intellectuals who had fled Nazi Germany and migrated to the US institutions during the 1950s that they were not so much inventing new disciplines for the American universities as crossing borders and closing gaps in 'disciplining' their understanding of religion. The best example cited is that of Joachim Wach (1898– 1955) who could not study religion without looking up those shelves marked history, psychology, sociology, phenomenology, etc. while consulting his own phenomenal *bibliographical* self whose history of reading afforded him glimpses of not only the West's others outside its social borders but of the innumerable others inside the West's borders. No wonder Derrida is fascinated by Lévi-Strauss's ethnography because of the history of the great ethnologist's reading including the histories of individual and tribal myths.

Mapping Wilderness

There are occasions when the readers of SS&P go back to passages (or feel it necessary to revisit interim assumptions) regarding the paper's key terms: *structure*, *sign*, and *play*. This is rather exasperating for students because they feel as though they have been asked to map some wilderness with hardly any marking tools at their disposal. Take for example, such clauses as "that the center is, paradoxically, *within* the structure and *outside* it" (90) or the following elaboration of this paradox, "The center is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality *has its center elsewhere*. The center is not the center. The concept of centered structure— although it represents coherence itself, the condition of the *epistēmē* as philosophy or science— is contradictorily coherent" (90). It is perhaps unreasonable to expect young students to hold and withhold ideas of centre and periphery before they are allowed even provisional fixity of these terms in their comprehension. I am not sure, again, that the parenthetical concession granting the "centered structure" absolute *coherence* is accurately translated. I do however remind students that SS&P always seems to raise for me the question (for Derrida as well as for his readers) of coherence itself. Do we seek and find coherence in what we are reading? Or is coherence inherent,

and always there for us to recognize, in what we are reading? What is coherent, or emerges as coherent, in our reading? (My ‘Just Reading’ classes have returned to this question while confronting texts— as varied as *The Waste Land* and *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveller*— addressed directly to readers.)

Now *totality* raises as many troublesome questions for students as does *coherence*. Since totality has its centre elsewhere, the prevarication of what belongs to what other makes for some ambiguity. The point simply, as I put it to the class, is to disavow the centre whenever a structure (including an institution or its vocal presence) begins to act centrally or assume an absolute centrality. I am of course rather ingenuous to be sure because students must after all write papers and exams and I ought to correct and mark them assuming centrality. But they have certainly no difficulty once the sting of prevarication is taken off the passage. For the organization of any structure, centre is a provisional compulsion but having fulfilled its purpose, the structure might well wither away leaving the centre now to be elsewhere. Of course there is no dearth of examples students recall from our earlier discussions. While reading Virginia Woolf’s Time Passes section of *To the Lighthouse*, I urge them to think about time, consciousness, and the live body that recognizes the scientific clock. Woolf, like Derrida here, might have been alerting us to consider what orients the structure of consciousness by centralizing it as *Time* in its *passing*, where as in time’s *movement*, consciousness registers *our* passing rather than *Time’s*. This is Upanishadic wisdom as well: it is not time passing but it is human consciousness recording passing progressively toward the end of being. Having signified once, the transcendental signifier must move on to other things awaiting signification. Imagine an endless queue, waiting to be served.⁵

If the class has reached at least this far, the wilderness they have been trying to map is not so much about *structure*, *sign*, and *play* as about the *voices* in the wilderness we call *language*. Haven’t we missed a very crucial comment of Derrida’s when he discusses “the concept of play” (99)? We have, indeed. What could be more transparent and direct in the whole of this essay than Derrida’s description of “the nature of the field— that is, language and a finite language— excludes totalization” (99)? This gives me an excellent opportunity to disabuse the class of their imprecise if entirely obsolescent notions of language (and their concomitant instrumentalisms) purveyed by our Structuralized Language classes. A completely nonessentialist view of language is hard for them to command overnight but the class could now begin to see how silly we might be in supposing that all of us spoke the same language *in extremis*; and further, see how language erects a permanent barricade between the states and writers even in the most monolingual regimes.⁶ Given that contradiction and difference are assumed

⁵ We have of course heard something closely resembling this in Kenneth Burke. “Let us try again,” begins an overture in his *Rhetoric of Motives*. “A direct hit is not likely here. The best one can do is to try different approaches toward the same centre whenever the opportunity offers” (137).

⁶ The best single chapter on this subject is Karol Janicki’s in *Language Misconceived* entitled “Viewing and Studying Language in a Nonessentialist Way.” The problem with essentialism is like the bad habits one picks up in adolescence— easier to recognize but harder to give up entirely.

when we begin to speak, the Whitmanian assertion “I am large, I contain multitudes” was not spoken in the usual imperialistic hubris of modern America but in the unusual American spirit of linguistic/cultural pluralism celebrating difference and diversity, singing the people into a nation. For this philological imperative is neither old nor new; it has remained insistently real and true for all philologists and poets who know that the relations between the social and the individual is never closed or complete. People argue and agree. Meanings that may so emerge are all we have. And we ignore this philological imperative at our peril.

If someone in the class remembers that it was W. B. Yeats, a poet from the first British colony, who lamented that “the centre cannot hold,” I do not have anything more to add except read out Derrida’s passage on play once again: “The field is in effect that of *play*, [...] that is to say, because instead of being too large, there is something missing from [the field]: a centre which arrests and grounds the play of substitutions. [...] One cannot determine the centre and exhaust totalization because the sign which replaces the centre, which supplements it, taking the centre’s place in its absence — this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*” (99). In short, in order to appreciate this contradictory logic, one must get rid of an essentialism that insists that words have singular meanings and they point toward one direction no matter where they are found and who uses them. Not only Derrida but anyone in the business of language can only watch when the play begins, and how it proceeds, especially when we try to close off play, restrict or control it, imagining a centre. How easily do we play into Derrida’s (or into his language’s) hands when we entertain centrist notions and coherent structures. Are we saddened or embarrassed by this discovery? If we are, says Derrida, we are in Rousseau’s company (“the saddened, *negative*, nostalgic, guilty...”). If we are not, we are on the other side with Nietzsche (“the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin...”) (102).

Reading readers reading...

I haven’t quite figured out myself what I have learnt by watching students wrestle with giants larger than themselves, trying to lemon-squeeze ‘meaning’ where possibly none exists. Derrida is by far the best text I have had in a class however that tantalizes students in right proportion for attending to rhetorical manoeuvres interspersed with commentary and critique. It is easy for me then to encourage a class *not* to read texts for what they are/ what they seem to be saying (which though important, cannot be the be-all and the end-all of our reading) but *how* the class understands them to be saying this, that or the other. Reading differently in this manner slows down their dash for quick results, and while attention to details (emphatic words / phrases; coordination, subordination, and sequencing of clauses; repetitions and revisions; parenthetical asides and hedging, etc.) obliges them to be guarded in responses and cautious in judgements. In other words, nothing pleases me more than watching students turn their attention on themselves *as readers*. They are self-conscious rather than self-reflexive inexpertly at first, but then they begin to notice that SS&P is besides other things an account of someone turning an acute and sensitive reader of masterful readers as diverse as Montaigne, Lévi-Strauss, Nietzsche, Mauss, Rousseau, Genette and others. All reading, in this loose sense of

having to work with bare hands and following tracks by hints and guesses, is *bricolage* upon which Derrida charmingly speculates at some length. And what splendid lessons does he leave for us in the end! “Lévi-Strauss will always remain faithful to this double intention [.]” comments Derrida, “to preserve as an instrument something whose truth value he criticizes” (95). This, surely, the class could take home to guide them along with their day’s assignment. The simplest, and perhaps the most discriminatingly drawn, nature-culture distinction Derrida draws while reading Lévi-Strauss’s *Elementary Structures* owes its point to reading a *reader* rather than a text. For the cultural part of the incest taboo is also naturally comprehended when they learn (from a casual observation I once made) that incest flourishes where the roads are bad. The ‘scandal’ so called is scandalous only when no circumstantial logic (which no text delivers on a platter) underpins the nature-culture logic Lévi-Strauss presents. The next step for young readers is still shorter. They need not go very far in realizing that “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (94), much like the spirit that informs my epigraph from Antonio Machado.

Writing in “Passions: ‘An Oblique Suffering’, ” Derrida insists that “to *play a role* wherever it may be, one must at the same time be inscribed in the logic of ritual and, precisely so as to perform properly in it, to avoid mistakes and transgressions, one must to some extent be able to analyse it. One must understand its norms and interpret the rules of its functioning. Between the actor and the analyst, whatever the distance or differences may be, the boundary therefore appears uncertain. And always permeable. It must be even crossed at some point not only for there to be analysis at all but also for behaviour to be appropriate and ritualized normally” (16). This, I take it, is Derrida’s best account of himself in the role of a reader, of his role in reading himself as well. Reading SS&P, if students practise this art unawares, as ritualistically as Derrida fancies it, they have won hands down. If nothing else, they would have learnt that they couldn’t possibly let their cognitive selves to go on sabbatical when Derrida reads his masters

Simplicities

Getting used to Derrida’s ‘simplicities’ if one has enough patience with his ‘complexities’ is a lesson in itself. Students of English are used to such turns and counterturns by developing, rather instinctively, a fascination for Keats’s *negative capability*— the capacity of a creative writer to negate in own self all purely personal conceptions, prejudices, habitual ways of seeing things, etc., and so be able to perceive and describe the reality of a different order.⁷ In any case they understand ‘play’ as something

⁷ At this point, I often remind students of a piece of advice Richard Hoggart offers young readers of cultural theory. “It is useful to read (in more than one sense),” remarks Hoggart, “the whole thing right through at least twice, in a condition of ‘negative capability’, suspended attentiveness, not straining for any kind of articulated response; reading but not skimming. An expressive, not instrumental or operational, reading; a search for what Weber called ‘empathic understanding’; and all the time in the knowledge that such a work is a form of play, a fiction, a carnival of sorts, an ‘imaginary garden’ (though with real toads in it), a contraption” (180). It is a pity that Hoggart (a perfect guide through much of our theoretical fog) is rarely found among suggested readings for a course in Criticism and Theory.

undecidable because it is advantageous to leave it undecided. (Does it really matter that the tree on a stage in Becket is a cross, or an emblem of conduct, a highway sign, or mere stage-prop upon which the eternally patient, the eternally suffering lean?) Finally, when students reach one of the most lucid summations in SS&P, all revelation is theirs (as in a Frost poem):

There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology— in other words, throughout his entire history— has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and end of play. The second interpretation of interpretation, to which Nietzsche pointed the way, does not seek in ethnography, as Lévi-Strauss does, the ‘the inspiration of a new humanism’ ... (102).

Even those young readers by whom this distinction is likely to go past with no evident puzzlement cannot but recognize some *presence* in one and some *absence* in the other, but neither assuredly there or here forever. Play ensures that mindless exercises in the human or the social sciences do not last long; if they do, as they seem to be doing from time to time in our own schools of learning, *humanism* earns a bad name. (It already has, besides *humanities*, in my experience.) Derrida’s approbation of the Nietzschean adventure, mystery and romance is hard to miss especially when he frowns at the Rousseauistic pursuit— all sadness, nostalgia, guilt, and negativity. Derrida’s distinction, as Ian Almond has noted, is “between the dull, penitent, monologic dreariness of the rabbi, which seeks to *end* play, and the thrill-seeking, adventurous hermeneutics of the poet which desires to play on, which never wants to stop playing” (79).

Derrida’s Choice?

And yet, we cannot be sure that Derrida chooses the Nietzschean against the Rousseauistic. “I do not believe,” he says, “that today there is any question of *choosing*” (102) and it is unclear to us what complexities might be involved in plain interpretive choices. We ought not to miss here *différence*, the celebrated French word upon which so much depends if we are reading Derrida in English and are reminded by his annotators that it puns on the senses of to *differ* and *defer*. How long might our students be lodged precariously, as Derrida says, “in a region ... where ... we must first try to conceive of the common ground, and the *différence* of this irreducible difference” (102)? As long, I guess, as they get used to innumerable Derridean *spells and spills* where etymologies and word-histories make up for forensic analysis and logical conclusions. Here again *play*’s the thing. If they are willing to play into Derrida’s hands (and not into his smart interpreters’), they will be able to see how a *spell* is both incantatory and magical, and *spill* an overflow and uncontrolled spread (semantic and structural) involving fun and games with language. This is the ultimate spell/spill of *différence* as well when they realize that unless play becomes second nature, they still are apt to suspect that the centre holds, and it does not alter when alteration finds. What spell weaves as illusion,

the spill *unweaves* as reality, neither of which could be seen as plain difference or limited deference. The hardest part for anyone to see while reading Derrida is to appreciate this weird logic, a point Denis Donoghue had made so well many years ago. “There are other philosophers who like using both hands [,]” observes Donoghue: “on the one hand, and yet on the other. Derrida uses both to say the same thing: no[w] the situation is neither this nor that but the play between them. And he says this in a spirit of post-Nietzschean tragic joy, pitting the mind against itself for the energy the pitting engenders” (159).

Two, among other immediately unrecognizable lessons students are sure to benefit from by playing into Derrida’s hands are the facility with which they begin to read texts relationally; and the ‘suspicion’ with which they begin to engage texts. In the courses called “Reading Relations” and “Just Reading” what they experience as most rewarding are the innumerable relations (social, interpretive, human, collaborative and even adversarial...) to which reading commits them. While this is perhaps easier to assume in any course, I have often wondered how ‘suspicious’ our young readers tend to become after sampling Derrida’s passages in SS&P. As Paul Ricoeur has noted in *Freud and Philosophy*, both suspicion and faith are legitimate in affective hermeneutics. While the former rips masks off a text to reveal its real face, the latter reforms, reshapes and affords clearer views of it in roomy explicatory light. I cannot be sure, however, that all readings by students I have had the patience to consider in these courses were ‘suspicious’ in the most helpfully benign sense, but Derrida certainly has been great help for my class to reconsider its work as *finishing* rather than finished. I presume that it was Derrida’s consistent effort in SS&P to show us this difference— what it means to take Lévi-Strauss, for example, primarily as already read and done with, and what it might take to re-read Lévi-Strauss all over, all afresh, playing handy-dandy with absences and presences of the now and ever.

Co-existence with the monstrous...

Like critical forebodings of which readers remain in puzzled awe, does SS&P continue to be the “terrifying form of monstrosity” (103) that Derrida called it in 1966? If Derrida’s paper 50 years ago rang apocalyptic bells, calling his *monstrosity* “a birth ... in the offspring, only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form...” (103), his ideas of the monster since then seem to have sounded less minatory or hortatory. In Maurice Blanchot’s ‘Literature and the Right to Death’ (which Derrida is likely to have recalled in writing his “monstrosity”), we are told that “Ordinary language is not necessarily clear, it does not always say what it says; misunderstanding is also one of its paths.” While so much is now a commonplace, Derrida is likely to have borrowed Blanchot’s analogy of the two-faced word-monster: “[Misunderstanding] is inevitable. Every time we speak,” observes Blanchot, “we make words into monsters with two faces, one being reality, physical presence, and the other meaning, ideal absence” (59). Blanchot’s essay is dated 1949.

In 1990 Derrida conceded that “Monsters cannot be announced. One cannot say: ‘Here are our monsters,’ without immediately turning the monsters into pets” (“Some Statements and Truisms...” 80). More helpfully in 1992, as though in expiation of an old sin of monstrosity apropos SS&P, Derrida told his interviewer that a monster is

“a composite figure of heterogeneous organisms that are grafted onto each other. This graft, the hybridization, this composition that puts heterogeneous bodies together may be called a monster” (Derrida 1995 ‘Passages’, 385). Of course the monster now seems less abhorrent, albeit still as rather unfriendly as a person with whom one has had a terrible tiff. The “monstrosity” of SS&P will always strike one as its most singular tenor, its pronounced address as it were, because Derrida’s reading of Lévi-Strauss is unqualifiedly an “event” he calls “a rupture, the disruption” (91) that will still remain relentless as his motive and method. No lessons are lasting in this exercise; lessons learnt are soon unlearnt. No harm if, at least for a time, “the disruption of presence” is not immediately seen as “play,” but like the monstrous, one gets used to an unfamiliar and awkward object in our presence over time. The abnormal writing of grafts and cuts will seem less odd, the Derridean turns less abrupt and unpredictable, when the writing *shows* (demonstrates) as a monster will, in time. When it does, as in SS&P, “as soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it, one begins [...] to compare it to the norms, to analyze it, consequently to master whatever could be terrifying in this figure of the monster” (Derrida 1995 ‘Passages’ 386). That perhaps might even augur well because the readers will begin to see how such a “monstrosity” as Derrida’s SS&P releases them from the routine insularities of thought and feeling to which some of them are inured. That is the time for the teacher to take leave of the class.⁸

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⁸ I am tempted to believe that Geryon, the monster of Dante’s *Inferno*, had crossed Derrida’s mind, at least once, in writing the last sentence of SS&P. Geryon is perhaps the ultimate emblem of fraudulent conduct in western mythology. But Dante’s Geryon, as S. Hammerschlag’s penetrating analysis of this episode shows, is indispensable for the poet in his infernal interlude. He must ride on Geryon’s back (as Derrida must court the monstrosity of his interpretive foray) to plumb the depths— metaphorically, to resort to deception and mendacity to get at the truth which appears sometimes in false guise. The apocalyptic suggestions of this passage in Derrida, again, are not lost on students who recall W. B. Yeats’s rough beast in ‘The Second Coming’.

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