

Article

Jacques Derrida: The Double Liminality of a Philosophical Marrano

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Received: 28 December 2018; Accepted: 19 January 2019; Published: 22 January 2019



Abstract: There is an analogy between two types of liminality: the geographic or cultural ‘outside’ space of the Marrano Jew, alienated from his/her original religion and the one he or she has been forced to adopt, and, a philosophical position that is outside of both Athens and Jerusalem. Derrida finds and re-finds ‘h’ors- texte’, an ‘internal desert’, a ‘secret’ outside place: alien to both the western philosophical tradition and the Hebraic archive. In this liminal space he questions the otherness of the French language to which he was acculturated, and, in a turn to a less discursive modality, autobiography, finds, in the words of Helene Cixous, “the Jew-who-doesn’t know-that-he-is”. Derrida’s galut (exile) is neither Hebrew nor Greek. It is a private place outside of all discourse, which he claims, is inevitably ethnocentric. In inhabiting this outside space, he exercises the prerogative of a Marrano, equipped to critique the French language of his acculturation and the western philosophy of the scholars. French and Hebrew are irreconcilable binaries, western philosophy and his Hebrew legacy is as well. These issues will be discussed in this paper with reference to *Monolingualism of the Other* and *Archive Fever* as they augment some of his earlier work, *Writing and Difference* and *Speech and Phenomena*.

Keywords: Derrida; philosophical Marrano; liminal; archive; Hebrew; Greek; Monolingualism

The Marrano Jew has been studied from a sociological, historical and religious perspective. The effect of the Marrano ‘position’ in the later generations of these original peoples, particularly on the work of Marrano scholars, is of interest as well. The term ‘Marrano’, narrowly defined, applies to Jewish people who were living in the Iberian peninsula in the Middle Ages and were forced to convert to Christianity. Marranos were expelled from the country in which they were acculturated, or they had to assume a position outside the Jewish religion of their ancestors. In either situation they were forced to exist at the margins of the culture in which they lived. The exteriority that goes along with cultural marginalization has had notable effects in shaping Marrano sensibility. Jacques Derrida, a self-proclaimed ‘Marrano’, merits a careful examination to his work in this regard. As Agata Bielik-Robson discusses, Derrida like other philosophers who were “philosophical Marranos” turned “the Jew Greek: Greek Jew” binary to his advantage” (Bielik-Robson 2004, p. 4). His work will serve here to illustrate how a Marrano mentality can situate a philosopher such as Derrida in a unique position to criticize and analyze the ‘host’ culture to which he experienced an uneasy assimilation. The marginal position from which Derrida viewed Western philosophy and its Greek inheritance allowed him to claim himself to be neither ‘Greek’ or Jew but rather exterior to both traditions.

The term ‘liminality’ from the Latin word ‘limen’, meaning ‘threshold’, has the connotation of disorientation between a previous way of structuring one’s reality or identity and assuming a new one. For the postmodern philosopher Jacques Derrida, this term can be applied to an analogy that can be made between two types of liminality: the geographic or cultural exteriority of the Marrano Jew—and a philosophical position that is outside of both Jewish and Greek traditions. In fact, Derrida, who is the arch deconstructor of binary oppositions, is outside or external to almost any binary opposition one cares to name. The Marrano Jew is expelled from her original spiritual domicile and alien to the one

she has been forced to adopt. Derrida is alienated both from the place of his birth and acculturation, including his only, but still foreign, native tongue and his Jewish heritage. Doubling this exteriority is his philosophical alienation both from the totalizing western/Greek philosophical tradition of his educational nurture, and the Hebraic traditional archive, which, to him, in Žižek's prescient term, is an 'unknown known' (Žižek 2008). Outside of both Athens and Jerusalem, he proclaims he is situated in neither.

Derrida, famously, is often characterized as claiming there is no "hors-texte", nothing outside the text (Derrida 1976, p. 158). Outside of all disseminating and totalizing 'White Mythology',¹ and outside the Hebrew texts that comprise the archive of his ancestors, in fact, it is he himself that is hors-texte. He is sans archive; sans a language of his own and sans a believable textual universe of discourse. This is precisely why his *Circumfession*, an autobiographical memoir written later in his career, is a key document that situates him squarely outside of academic writing except when it can function as a record of memory. To occupy that space he had spent a great deal of his career deconstructing the texts of the alien intellectual world to which he had been acculturated. This he had done masterfully throughout his academic life. He could not, however, as he so eloquently expresses, occupy the 'archive' of his own heritage. When he turned to autobiography to make himself immune to discourse that betrays his secret self, he was able to find, in Helene Cixous's words, "the-Jew-who-doesn't-know-tht-he-is" (Cixous 2004, p. 118). The meaning of liminality for Derrida will be taken up here in three contexts: language, archives and philosophical discourse. Derrida's own 'galut' (exile) is neither Hebrew nor Greek.² It is a secret place outside of or at the margins of all discourse which discourse he claims, is inevitably ethnocentric.³

1. What Does Liminality Mean in Terms of a Language/Mother Tongue?

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida describes the community of his childhood and acculturation. First of all, it was cut off from both Arabic or Berber (more properly Maghrebian) language and culture. Second, it was also cut off from French, as a European language and culture, the language of what Derrida calls the 'metropole'. His own Algerian French was equally alien to him. Doubling up on this, he was cut off from Jewish 'cultural memory', from the "[h]istory and language that one must presume to be their own, but which, at a certain point, no longer was; namely Hebrew." Where, he then asks, are we? He cannot take refuge in the language or "[i]diom internal to the Jewish community, to any sort of language of refuge like Yiddish, (which) "would have ensured an element of intimacy, (as he put it), the protection of a "home-of –one's own (chez –soi) against the language of the official culture . . . " (Derrida 1998, p. 54). Ladino, a language spoken primarily by Sephardic Jews throughout the Mediterranean was not spoken in the Algeria he knew, as it was not spoken in the bigger cities, where the Jewish population happened to be concentrated. In fact, he bemoans the fact that the Jews of the Mediterranean coastline would probably be more alien to him than those of Christian France (Derrida 1998, p. 55).⁴ As a philosopher, he was doubly troubled by philosophical coinages as well as by his spoken language. The substantivized abstractions which he systematically dismantled in "White Mythology" and other texts could never, he claimed, produce their intended meanings.

In a footnote to this discussion of his perceived cultural and linguistic exclusion, Derrida elaborates on the issue of being Jewish and being acculturated in a diaspora culture. He cites Franz Rosenzweig who took up the question of Jews and their foreign language. Rosenzweig claimed that "the eternal people have lost their own language (*seine eigne Sprache verloren hat*): "[t]hey have no language that is

¹ His term for the abstract 'philosophemes' that dominate western philosophy.

² See Miriam Leonard, "Derrida between Greek and Jew" in (Leonard 2010) for elaboration on this theme.

³ Erin Graff Zivin's collection of essays in the recent book *The Marrano Specter: Derrida and Hispanism* (Zivin 2017) extensively discusses Derrida's preoccupation with secrecy and its relation to his Marrano identity. See for example Peggy Kanuf's preface.

⁴ See also (Derrida 1998, p. 55, n. 3).

exclusively their own, only the language of the host . . . ". Even when they speak the language of the host who is accommodating them", they speak a language that is not theirs (Derrida 1998, p. 79–80).⁵ As for Hebrew, according to Rosenzweig, the Jewish people speak it only to the extent that it is employed in prayer. Derrida remarks on his own spoken and written acculturated tongue. "My language," he declares, "the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other" (Derrida 1998, p. 25). "Alienation without alienation, this inalienable alienation . . . " seems to be the outcome. He associates murder and trauma and collective assassinations with this unchosen language. Language, then, is another space of potential exclusion as was his own expulsion from non-Jewish schools. He had no choice in either case. The subtext attached to this narrative is the danger that lies within a language not one's own: the assumed language is not free of culture or history. There is no non-ethnocentric panoptic metalanguage that can rescue a speaker who is ambivalent about the culture in which he was brought up. Murder, trauma and collective assassinations, which he pins on to his Algerian French, puts Jacques Derrida in a precarious relationship with his native tongue. The trauma of having been expelled from his school because of antisemitism had raised his consciousness of the dangers of a foreign acculturation. This situation in respect to language was precisely articulated by Franz Kafka. In a letter to Max Brod, concerning German Jewish writers and the German language, Kafka claimed, "They existed "among three impossibilities . . . the impossibility of not writing" (as they could get rid of their inspiration only by writing) the impossibility of writing in German . . . (and) "there is also the impossibility of writing differently since no other language was available . . . " (Kafka 1921).⁶ Kafka considered their use of the German language as the "overt or convert, or possibly self-tormenting usurpation of an alien properly which has not been acquired but stolen . . . quickly picked up, and which remains someone else's possession." Cynthia Ozick points out that Kafka had attended a German university, studied German jurisprudence and published in German periodicals. He did not write in Czech. The Jews of Prague at that time were German educated from grade school on and yet in this letter, he is expressing, as did Derrida in *Monolingualism of the Other*, a feeling of estrangement from this "available" language.⁷

Derrida discusses the position of Hannah Arendt when, while living in Paris, she was stripped of her citizenship by the Nazis. She later made the claim that deprivation of citizenship should be classified as a crime against humanity (Arendt and Kohn 2018, p. 99) If, as Derrida has claimed, we make a language, written or spoken, the agent of ethnocentrism, (Derrida 1976, p. 3), then German as the spoken language of Hannah Arendt should be also implicated. If, as happened to Derrida, the figure of the other within colonial Algeria can be stripped of the privileges of citizenship, the language itself can become an evil stepmother. Derrida describes his situation while he lived in Algiers. Derrida called France the metropole. It was a fantasy place: "[t]he Capital-City-Mother-Fatherland, the city of the mother tongue . . . a faraway country, near but far away . . . , strange fantastic and phantom-like . . . it represented the language of the master" (Derrida 1998, p. 42). Hannah Arendt, discussed at length by Derrida in the footnote to *Monolingualism*, when asked about Nazism and her attachment to the German language said, "After all, it is not the German language that has gone mad . . . and in the second place nothing can replace the mother tongue" (Derrida 1998, p. 84). Derrida contends that in these simplistic statements Arendt did not see the abyss opening under them. The implication here is that the French language of Derrida's acculturation, as a Marrano Jew, could easily open up the abyss of anti-Semitism and take the ground out from under these 'ex-otic' citizens, as it did during Derrida's youth. Though making no direct connection with the events of Germany in the years before the Holocaust, the analogy is implicit.

Doubling upon Derrida's irreconcilable liminality, from both the France of Algiers and that of the idealized Metropole ("the Capital-City-Mother-Fatherland") is an analogous alienation from

⁵ Derrida cites Rosenzweig (1982, p. 354).

⁶ Franz Kafka, Letter to Max Brod, 1921 quoted in Kafka, *Basic Kafka*, (1984, p. 292).

⁷ Cynthia Ozick, discusses this in "The Impossibility of Translating Franz Kafka", (New Yorker, 11 January 1999).

philosophical language as well as from the ancestral archive of Hebrew texts. Philosophical writing is irredeemably metonymic, with no resting place in false absolutes whose meanings disseminate and can be deconstructed. We recall that in an early work, one definitive for his later positions, *Of Grammatology*, (Derrida 1976, p. 3) in an Exergue, Derrida makes it clear that writing is controlled by ethnocentrism. Logocentrism, he says at another point, is an agent of ethnocentrism. As far as the Hebrew textual universe is concerned, Edmond Jabès called these texts “the fatherland of the Jew”—“the sacred text surrounded by commentary” (Jabès 1963, p. 109). Derrida quotes this in his essay on Jabès’ *Les Livre des questions* (Derrida 1978a, p. 67). In the case of the so called “fatherland of the Jews”, the Hebrew archive, it consists of the written scripture and the so-called oral tradition consisting of the Mishnah, Talmud and later commentary. In addition to Derrida’s general suspicion of all written text, for Derrida, there is the uncomfortable possibility that an allegiance to these and other authoritative Hebrew texts would entail a ‘particularism’ that is in opposition to a more ethical universalism. European language, however, is also subject to a particularism that poses as universal and this is perhaps even more deceptive.

When the valorization of a given language is associated with nationalism, the situation is compounded. It is interesting in this regard to recall Fichte’s address to the German People, (an inspiration for one of Heidegger’s most pro-Nazi addresses) in which Fichte extols the German language as an authentic language with spiritual qualities (Fichte 1808).⁸ When Derrida invokes the word ‘fatherland’ it has the uneasy overtones of Fichte Heidegger’s speech and the Nazi valorization of fatherland and of native tongue. The implication here is similar to that of “Interpretations at War”: Kant, the Jew, the German” (Derrida 1991). In this essay, he calls Philo the ‘fuhrer’ using the German word in the sense of leader but, again, invoking the dangerous possibilities of a Jewish philosopher ‘feigning to speak Greek’. In the 1964 essay on Levinas entitled “Violence and Metaphysics,” Derrida asks, “[W]ill a non-Greek ever succeed in doing what a Greek could not do except by . . . feigning to speak Greek in order to get near the king (viz. the parricide of the Greek father)?” (Derrida 1978b, p. 89). Here ‘Greek’ can be considered a metonym for spoken languages, particularly European ones. If, as Jabès claims, it is the Hebrew texts that are the ‘fatherland of the Jews’, (Jabès 1963, p. 109) those of the French will always be alien, even dangerous, only to be used in the service of parracidic textual deconstruction. With this said, Derrida himself can be held to the same standard as he holds Levinas. He too may be ‘feigning’ in the language of the other, also known as Greek (a placeholder for western written texts) and has put his efforts aimed at deconstructing western philosophy in the service of “parricide” as well.

The act of reading Derrida as a system of hyperlinks that circle back from later to earlier writings and then back again to later ones is always crucial to interpreting his work and deriving meaning out of his texts. Derrida’s early work centered on the deconstruction of the privileging of speech over writing, what he considered a prevalent but unwarranted binary opposition which devalued writing in favor of speech. In *Speech and Phenomena*, he questioned the presence to self of speech. Speech is as devoid of presence as writing and signification always refers to other signs not itself. Spatial and temporal differing defer meaning in a dissemination that leaves only ‘traces’ of originating meaning. *Monolingualism of the Other* adds a cultural dimension which spoken languages bring to ‘speech’. The early disavowal of ‘speech’ as a privileged connection to the ‘signified’ as presence is compounded by the addition of the ethnocentricity of language doubling the problematic of its meaning. In *Des tours de Babel*, (Derrida 2002b), Derrida makes it clear that no human language is exempt from a decentered and regional hermeneutic specificity. The situatedness of the subject as speaker of a specific tongue is victim of a tautegorical set of meanings resistant to translation. Derrida will conclude that the acculturated language is always alien, always originates in the ‘other’ for a speaker, such as himself, who holds an ambivalent relationship to the place of his childhood community. “We only ever speak

⁸ In the fifth, sixth, and thirteenth address Fichte extols the German language in this way.

one language-and since it returns to the other, it exists asymmetrically, always for the other, from the other, kept by the other" (Derrida 1998, p. 40).

Reading *Gift of Death* in light of the arguments in *Monolingualism of the Other*, allows a contrast between a public discourse, as are all spoken languages, and a private 'self'. Abraham, when complying with the divine command that he sacrifice his son, the biblical drama that Derrida elaborates at length in *Gift of Death* (Derrida 1995b), embodies the singularity, as opposed to the subject of speech and writing, of a silent but authentic subject Abraham enacts this drama within a liminal situation exterior to public discourse, displaying in his silence an abject faith and avowal to the divine command. *Monolingualism of the Other*, makes it clear that spoken language is always at the service of political, ethnic and social factors and is not an independent signifying apparatus. The silence of Abraham at Mount Moriah represents a moment of avowal, outside all and any sociocultural milieu. The 'I' or self that is the subject to the objectifications posited by language is inauthentic and differs according to the ethnically diverse public domains in which they originate. An original or archaic monolingualism as a universally given structure was lost at Babel. The moment of avowal at Moriah, then, holds significance for Derrida as a template for the possibility of a secret self that is genuinely and truly 'outside'.

2. Archive Fever

As Simon Critchley explains, Derrida's deconstruction attempts to locate a non-site from which he can question philosophy. It is a place of exteriority, alterity or marginality (Critchley 2014, pp. 29–32). Derrida is not only entrapped in a mono-linguicism that is not his own, but in a philosophical history/archive that is equally a mono-ontology or philosopheme-ology of the other. Derrida's externality, in fact, is at the margin or outside of two completely disparate archives, both outside of Hebrew and Greek. He has a painful sense that the search for origins might, (and he equivocates on this), be futile and therefore precludes the possibility of authenticating either one. On the one hand, there is the Greco-Latin-German idealist tradition of which Plato, Philo 'the fuhrer', Maimonides all the way to Kant, Hegel, Husserl and Hermann Cohen and on to Heidegger, are the authorizing patriarchs. On the other hand, there is the Judaic archive, as Urbach (1995) tells us which denotes the written scripture and the Sages of the Oral Law: the Mishna, and Talmud, Tosefta, Midrashim, (and the tradition of responsa which continues into the twentieth century with figures such as Moshe Feinstein). The Torah and the Mishna and the sages of the Talmud provide a core reality that is axiomatic to Jewish thought. The heavenly origin of the Torah, the possibility of a messianic age, elected nationhood and other such principles that ground these works, however, leave them outside modern sensibilities and comprehension. In this sense, Greek/Western philosophy and Judaic thought cannot fully coincide since it would be impossible for the former to meet these primal stipulations. Allegory and symbolic interpretation were long ago recognized as precluded from the Hebrew canon and its idiolectic system. '*Chokhmot chitzoniyot*' (foreign wisdoms) are alien to these texts and their interpretive communities just as they were for Crescas when he viewed Maimonides intellectualism as the direct cause of Iberian Jewry's spiritual breakdown.

Derrida is doubly liminal in relation to the two archival histories. The Marrano Jew, in his or her original situation, was only partially removed from the Judaism h/she secretly practiced, recognizing that the culture to which h/she was assimilated was a false identity. Derrida's 'Converso' position is that of someone who is many generations removed from this original set of circumstances. He has never known or meaningfully practiced his Judaism and is alienated from both his ancestral legacy and his sociocultural assimilated Jewish present. The philosophical archive that Derrida acquired during his university education and from his philosophical community, in addition, is irreconcilable with that of the ancestral heritage of which he only possesses traces. Derrida remains outside the reason/revelation binary that allegedly differentiates the two as well. The God of Moses cannot be translated into the temporalized absolute that appears in western philosophical discussions such as in

the texts of German Idealists, (Hammer 2011)⁹, but neither does the God of the Jewish people make his presence known to Derrida. Derrida joins an ancient and age-old Judaic opposition to philosophy without being able to do it in the name of the traditional sages and medieval Jewish philosophers who opposed so called ‘Greek Wisdom’. Their opposition had the imprimatur of Divine Origin and enfranchised interpretation grounded in proof texts such as the written scripture. His finds no such ground. In fact, he deconstructs the whole idea of a ground.

Derrida is situated outside his own tradition, as well, due to the painful fact that the historicity of the Judaic archive is subject to limitations that any kind of modernist criteria for verification would impose. Cultural memory is not history. For both Edmond Jabès, and Derrida, while an allegorical reading of the Torah, thanks to Philo is unacceptable, the concrete literality of the Judaic archive makes it an idiolect, that is equally suspect. The literal reading that is required for a true faith creates an unnegotiable separation between the ‘really real’ of historicity and the unverified ‘historical’ ‘Book’ that is the proof text of all Jewish learning. On the other hand, as Derrida says in the Jabès essay, describing the Jew as a split self, “He, would have no history at all if he let himself be attenuated within the algebra of an abstract universalism” (Derrida 1978a, p. 75). The modernist alienation from the Jewish archives based on rationalist scientific criteria and a passion for historicity does not allow adherence to the biblical texts but ‘abstract universalism’ is not an option. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida discusses Freud’s book on Moses, not as a history but as a novel. The actual biblical narratives might be equally regarded as fictional by a postmodern reader. Scientific validity and philosophical objectivity, on the other hand, have themselves engendered a troublesome progeny. Once again Derrida is caught between a universality that is permeated by false absolutes and an archive which would make him the patron of concrete literalism and an unacceptable particularism. Citing Jabès, this entails “[t]he incommensurable destiny which grafts the historicity of a ‘race born of the book’ (*Livre des questions*, p. 26) onto the radical origin of meaning as literality, that is, onto historicity itself.” (Derrida 1978a, p. 64).

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida describes himself as subject to a “radical lack of culture from which I undoubtedly never completely emerged” (Derrida 1998, p. 53). He defines himself by this lack and thus identifies himself as the occupant of a space empty of cultural preconditions. He is without a lens through which he could acculturate. His use of any number of mouthpieces other than himself reflects the fact of his personal residence within a cultural desert where none of the options available to him bear fruit intellectually or make him speak in his own voice. In the Talmud all the arguments are made in the voice of one or another of the Rabbinic sages, while the narrative voice of the redactor is unknown. Derrida, too, makes a cryptic use of mouthpieces thus yielding up traces of the secrets he has contemplated while in retreat to his own spiritual desert. In *Archive Fever* he takes on the voice of Yerushalmi in his book, *Freud’s Moses; Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, where Yerushalmi contends that there is some validity to Freud’s own secret, that psychoanalysis is a Jewish science, despite the fact that Freud disavows this in his public discourse (Yerushalmi 1991). When Freud does invoke the Jewish archive, in *Moses and Monotheism*, he gives it a pseudo historicity exiling it from the archival account in the Torah and making it live uncomfortably in neither true history nor biblical narrative. In public Freud was a modern sceptic, in private he held allegiance to his Judaism. *Moses and Monotheism* is the uneasy hybrid. If Yerushalmi’s account of this matter, then, reflects a position with which Derrida identifies, it is archetypically in Marrano style, passed through the lens of Yerushalmi’s discussion of Freud’s secret. Derrida remains hidden concerning his own secrets. Throughout Derrida’s career, he was preoccupied with secrecy and many of the voices he deploys in his texts mask his own backstage puppeteering.

Derrida’s use of Kierkegaard’s discussion of the Akedah to expose the idea of what a secret avowal to the wholly Other, God, would look like –sans text, –sans the Hebrew/Greek binaries, is an example of this practice. Derrida reveals, through a presentation of Kierkegaard’s treatment of the Akedah in

⁹ See Espen Hammer, Hegel’s Temporalization of the Absolute, pp. 71–96. for this general idea of a temporalize absolute.

Fear and Trembling, a secret place. It is a place where the call of the Other qua Other, the Absolute Other reveals “the still Jewish experience of a secret, hidden, separate, absent or mysterious G-d, the one who decrees without revealing his reason demanding of Abraham his impossible sacrifice. All this goes on in secret.” (Derrida 1995a, p. 58) “By keeping the secret, Abraham betrays ethics”. This moment is outside Western discourse, outside ethics and paradoxically removed from Jewish moral teaching as well. In a technique that Plato used when deploying Socrates as a mouthpiece, Derrida hides behind Kierkegaard, Kafka, and Abraham in rendering the Akedah narrative. It functions as a placeholder for the possibility of an authentic avowal of faith. This “Here I Am” moment in relation to the *toute autre* (the Divine call) may hold Derrida’s own secret hints at the possibility of avowal, one which must remain hidden.

The word ‘secret’ can be treated as a hyperlink in the Derridean corpus that links to the “[p]aradox of faith, that interiority that remains ‘incommensurable with exteriority’.” (Derrida 1995b, p. 63) (quoting Kierkegaard 1983). The term ‘secret’ is found again in *Circumfession* (pp. 36, 74, 85 etc.), and all through his writing. It is the backdrop for his disavowal of all spoken and written language and its public and therefore fake reifications, a philosophical language rooted in the substantiations made possible by ancient Greek grammar. From these Abraham is exempt. Abraham is exempt as well from the ethics of law even in the Hebrew archive viz. ‘Thou shalt not kill’. Abraham, in Derrida’s account, embodies the singularity, as opposed to the subject of speech and writing, of a silent but authentic subject who possesses a moral code outside the public discourse, outside of law and illustrates that the true authentic self must be silent. All language, law, and ethical doctrine would position him as the subject/victim of origination in the other.¹⁰

One other factor that places Derrida outside of all archives is their incommensurability with each other and their co-existence in the matrix of what Derrida characterizes as the “ontotheologico-political tradition that links Greek philosophy to the Abrahamic revelations . . . ” (Derrida 2002c, p. 58) He describes this situation, as resistant to interrogation: “perhaps we must also submit to the ordeal of that which resists such interrogation, which will have always resisted from within or as though from an exteriority that works and resists inside. Chora, the ordeal of Chora.” Derrida invokes the term ‘chora’ (a spatial figure that Plato used for as a name for the indeterminate receptacle of form and idea in *Timaeus*). He upgrades its use to be deployed as the site that would be resistant to the ‘ontotheologico-political’ matrix. It is “[t]he name for place, a place name, and a rather singular one at that, for that spacing which, not allowing itself to be dominated by any theological, ontological or anthropological instance, without age, without history, and more “ancient” than all oppositions . . . ” (Derrida 2002c, p. 58). Here he is cryptically but unmistakably assuming a position of exteriority. He goes on to identify the “desert in the desert” as that “which contains” [t]hat which is [n]ot reappropriable, even by our memory, even by our “Greek” memory: it says the immemoriality of a desert in the desert of which it is neither a threshold nor a mourning.” It is outside historical religions etc. (Derrida 2002c, p. 59). In later writing Derrida will continually refer to the “secret” when discussing his Judaism (Derrida 2007). When this is augmented with the idea of a desert in the desert, it also links to what Derrida refers to as his ‘internal desert’ (Bielik-Robson 2017, p. 54).¹¹ Derrida’s reference to ‘chora’, the indeterminate receptacle, the desert etc. identifies through spatial metaphors, an exteriority emptied of conventional meanings and/or sociopolitical or ethnocentric context. Without explicit reference, he invokes the Book of Numbers ‘B’midbar’ (in the desert), the portion of the Bible which describes the forty years of the Jews wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt. On the basis of this positioning, with only a remote hope of liminal reentry and sans archive, neither Hebrew or Greek, Derrida identifies a space

¹⁰ In later writing on sovereignty the idea of a sovereign nation and its potential for violence is can be seen as a further development of the general mistrust of ethnocentric cultures and languages that makes his own monolingualism potentially dangerous (Derrida 2011).

¹¹ Agata Bielik-Robson, “Burn After Reading Derrida the Philosophical Marrano”, p. 54 quoting Derrida (1989), “How to avoid Speaking”, in Howard Coward and Toby Foshay, *Derrida and Negative theology* (SUNY Press), 1992.

outside, once again, all binaries. While some scholars have posited that Derrida's 'silence' and secret internal removal are a kind of apophatic theology, it can also be understood in relation to his Judaism. Derrida's secret, viz Judaism, is secret precisely because revealing it would have to subject it to the public domain and to public discourse. A language that is of necessity ethnocentric and political (there is no metalanguage) would violate the secret silence of the radically singular Judaism of faith and avowal, a commitment which must be protected from violence. Thus the 'outside' space, the 'desert in the desert' protects a self that is not subject to a discourse alien to itself. Jewish philosophers who have made common cause with the Western philosophical tradition, on the other hand, have breached the boundaries of this authentic Jewish space, best held in silence.

Any attempts to integrate Greek philosophy and the Abrahamic tradition would be done within a theological- ontological -political matrix and be suspect. The Jewish philosophers who have made common cause with the western philosophical tradition, beginning with Philo are especially suspect. Hebrew and Greek archives are not intertranslatable. The Hebrew archive, (the so-called fatherland of the Jews), in its idiolectic exclusivity, or as Michael Fishbane describes, is an "ontologically unique literature". Externally it wears one of several garments whose layers conceal deeper aspects of divine truth (Fishbane 1992, p. 35). All of the Holy Scriptures and the Oral tradition (the Mishna and the Talmud, which are written accounts of the spoken debates of the sages of the time) are intrinsically connected or hyperlinked to this scripture as proof text and its canonicity, precluding an outside. The Greek archive consists of the entire philosophic tradition from Ionia to Jena, and beyond. In *Writing and Difference*, for example, Derrida refers to "[t]he two Greeks named Husserl and Heidegger" (Derrida 1978b, p. 83. Derrida houses his entire deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence as a project that cannot be disassociated from an exploration of Greek thought (Derrida 1978b, p. 4). As Miriam Leonard claims; "For Derrida it is the non-Greek, the Barbarian, the Egyptian, the Jew and the Christian who; ultimately come to define the contours of the Hellenic legacy of philosophy." (Leonard 2010, p. 5). Derrida achieves his parricide of the Greek father by reading the Greeks and exposing the hermeneutic instability in the western legacy. Dismantling the metaphysics of presence, he uses to Greeks to deconstruct them. He is not so confident when it comes to assaulting his own ancestral legacy. When it comes to asserting his own Jewish identity, he clearly assumes a Marrano position. In 'Abraham, the Other' he states this as follows. "[t]he law that comes upon me, a law that, appearing antinomian dictated to me the hyper-formalized formula of a destiny devoted to the secret-and that is why I play seriously, more and more, with the figure of the Marrano the less you show yourself as Jewish, the more and better jew you will be." (Derrida 2007, p. 13).

Those Jewish philosophes who would contrive illegitimate confabulations composed of Hebrew and archival texts and 'Greek' ideas are misguided and even dangerous. There are no supervening principles to resolve the differences between the two. In 'Interpretations at War' (Derrida 1991) he discusses Hermann Cohen, who influenced and mentored a whole generation of German Jewish scholars in Neo Kantian Idealism. Cohen contended that German Jewry is the legitimate offspring, and exclusively so, of the Hellenist traditions. Derrida points out that though anti-Semitism touched Cohen closely in his own institution and took the form of excluding Jewish students from corporate student associations, Cohen only alludes to that briefly. Cohen argues for Jewish German solidarity and even calls Germany the homeland of the Jews. Derrida takes him to task for this insistence on this unhealthy alliance. The false messiah Immanuel Kant and Cohen's abject admiration for him, seen through the eyes of Derrida who has seen the horrific sequel of the fusion between nationalism and German Idealism situates Cohen along the intellectual trajectory that lent support to Nazi ideology. Derrida actually makes an analogy between the Jewish militants of the Front Populaire who during a demonstration in Nice presented a bouquet to Mr. Le Pen, a trivializer concerning the Holocaust, and Cohen who "[p]resents at each moment a bouquet to all the dormant -or rather ever-wakeful-Le Pens . . . " of this world. (Derrida 2002d, p. 166). Even Derrida's good friend Emmanuel Levinas must be implicated as a purveyor of a false coupling between Hellenism and Judaism. In his 1967 essay, 'Violence and Metaphysics', Derrida claims that Levinas sought an exit from the "Greek domination

the same and The One" in Hebraic alterity (Derrida 1978b, p. 83). He argues that Levinas is trapped in the philosophical language and is therefore compelled to speak 'Greek'. (Leonard 2010, p. 137). For Derrida even, the idea of otherness, a mainstay of Levinas' ethical admonitions concerning the 'other' is Greek.

For Derrida, then, "the entirety of philosophy is conceived on the basis of its Greek source . . . it would not be possible to philosophize . . . outside this medium." (Leonard 2010, p. 137). Derrida has positioned himself outside of this western archive while deconstructing it in its own terms. His position of extreme exteriority is not completely Nietzschean (in the sense of assuming a vantage point that allows a negative assessment of all philosophical shibboleths or so called "dangerous old conceptual fictions" as Nietzsche calls them in *Genealogy of Morals* (Nietzsche 1989, p. 119). On the other hand, it is not held in the name of the Jewish defenders of the Talmud who burnt Maimonides books in the Middle Ages in defiance of Greek wisdom. Derrida shares Nietzsche's cynicism in regard to the false absolutes of Western philosophy but never arrives at either the place of 'hidden miracles' as did Nachmanides a medieval Jewish philosopher who opposed Maimonides rationalism) nor the Holy commands of the rabbis. He did not hold to the full extent of Nietzschean negativity either, rather, he regards and analyzes the Western archive and its terminology in the service of dismantling the so called 'metaphysics of presence'. Derrida is sans archive, neither Hebrew nor Greek.

3. Philosophical Liminality

How and where can we find Jacques Derrida, the holder of an interiority that is outside of all cultural binaries? In a not very well-known interview/essay, 'Eating well', Derrida claims that the whole idea of the Subject as it has been contrived by philosophers as diverse as Descartes, Marx, Freud, Heidegger, Lacan, Foucault and others, is a fictitious and fabulated entity. At one point he states, "I don't see the necessity of keeping the word 'subject' at any "price" (Derrida 1991, p. 99). When it comes to his own person, Derrida is outside the binary that is at the heart of modern philosophy: subject and object. Where can Derrida find himself? It must be an internal site that is not a falsely fabulated Cartesian, Kantian, Hegelian or Husserlian subject. In his earliest work, in his deconstruction of Husserl, he makes it clear that the alleged primal moment that Husserl identifies as the last refuge of the metaphysical entails the "I" that can perform the phenomenological *epoché*. It consists of an allegedly authentic comprehension of reality by a subject as distinct from its 'object'. A true 'self' and true inner life, as opposed to the Husserlian 'subject' must somehow be apart from objectification. Thus, in *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida makes it clear that the very existence of temporality makes the framing of experience in terms of subject and object under erasure at every turn (Derrida 1973). A true self would have to be one that does not undergo a continuous dissolution under the dominance of moveable temporality. The Cartesian/Husserlian subject is a fabrication born of philosophical abstraction, a chimera, and Derrida situates himself outside of it. Not only is it a metaphysical shibboleth on the mythological structure of the individual but its equivalent in public discourse is fraught with dangerous possibilities.

We can now understand that the secret is equivalent to a position that is outside public discourse and outside of western philosophy in its Greek incarnation. Where is he? Where can Derrida be found? Who is in the desert? Who is it that does not possess his own language? It is the Jacques Derrida as the child who was circumcised and did not have the right of refusal, was not an autonomous subject, and did not give informed consent, as he describes in *Circumfession*. This is the self who acquired his Judaism by being born of a Jewish mother, who was given the name Elie and who can be persecuted by anti-Semitism, whether or not he is a believer. Helen Cixous explains "To think he was a Marrano all along and didn't know it. A true Marrano. Don't tell a soul. It's a secret." (Cixous 2004, p. 86). Now it is possible to understand Derrida's gnomic pronouncement that all he has ever spoken about is circumcision (Derrida 1993, p. 70). Circumcision is the wound which signifies his exteriority and brings his 'self' as a subject into question. Who is it that was circumcised and given a Hebrew name? It was not the 'Ich' of the autonomous ego of Kant, it was not the subjectivity that is the opposing subject

of the subject/object dichotomy set up by Descartes and which features in Husserl's texts and carries a long history in western philosophy. It is not the Hegelian subjectivity. Derrida is the son of a long line of wandering Jews who have left Harran (Abraham), left Egypt (Moses), left Algeria and now leaves western philosophy. Jacques Derrida is a marked man. Just as Jean Améry in his book, *At the Mind's Limits*, (Améry 1980, p. 94) realizes that he is a Jew when examining the numbers on his left arm after his concentration camp experience, it is interesting to follow Derrida's use the word '*marque*'. His French Algerian experience has marked his body of language, his Jewish identity imposed from without marked his body with circumcision. Circumcision becomes the placeholder for the whole Judaic archive.

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida uses the word '*marque*' in relation to the body of language. He makes an analogy to the wound of circumcision, –"Terror is practiced at the expense of wounds inscribed on the body" A "Franco-Maghrebian martyr" is assigned a single language but prohibited from appropriating it. and is subject to the terror which marks a martyred existence, (Derrida 1998, p. 27) The other *marque* he finds on his own body. In the *marque* of circumcision there is the trace of the 'unknown known' of his ancestral archive. Both the nonlinguistic language and the circumcision are violent wounds upon him while he, the subject who is not a subject, was not autonomous in choosing or receiving these inscriptions. Finding himself trapped in a language not his own and a mark on his body that he received from without, he is caught between avowing and disavowing. He disavows his given language but never the less writes in French. Like Kafka's Abraham described in his essay, *Abraham the Other*, he hears the call of the *tout autre* but cannot trust the call that he hears.

In "*Circumfession*" and other later writings, Derrida finds a living, confessing 'self' and takes hold of an authentic and personal inner life. Here he confesses and here he can assume an autobiographical 'I', gestated within an interior space where he can elect to be Jewish, without exemplarity and with only an archive of personal memory. Here he can stay outside the binary universalism/particularity where particularity would endorse an ethnocentric position that would exclude others and be ethically questionable. Here he finds, within "a bottomless alienation for the soul a catastrophe that others will also say is a paradoxical opportunity". This circumstance was the "[t]he radical lack of culture from which I undoubtedly never completely emerged . . ." (Derrida 1998, p. 53). This has allowed him the freedom that a Marrano might possess. As a Marrano he is outside of all the constraints of a language not his own, a culture that is alien and a 'faith' free of a publicly endorsed religion.

4. Conclusions

Although it is a commonplace that language is inextricably wedded to spatial metaphor, Derrida's geographical spatial allusions are telling. In his early essay on Jabès, Derrida, in the voice of a poet, names a "site that is "not necessarily pagan". This "[s]ite, is not a site, an enclosure, a place of exclusion, a province or a ghetto" (Algiers, France Europe?). "When a Jew or a poet proclaims the Site, he is not declaring war. For this site, this land, is from beyond memory is always elsewhere. This site is not the empirical and national" (Derrida 1978a, p. 66). Derrida, it seems, has found such a place. Its indeterminateness becomes an opportunity of non-situatedness allowing an unusual perspective. It is a place that symbolizes his own state of being, '*b'midbar*, in a desert but with a promise. "It is immemorial, and thus also a future . . . Freedom is granted to the nonpagan Land only if it is separated from freedom by the Desert of the Promise. That is by the poem. When it lets itself be articulated by poetic discourse, the Land always keeps itself beyond any proximity" (Derrida 1978a, p. 66). Derrida the ventriloquist makes the poet a voice for a wandering Jew "not born here but elsewhere." Derrida, in the name of Jabès, articulates a non-temporal exteriority outside of a promised land. This "land" is one which his universalist, public and ethical European sensibilities relegates to poetic phantasm. It is something other than a place of exclusion- which place would be uninhabitable. He is outside of both *mythos* and *logos* and only a poet, such as Jabès can supply the words to articulate this situatedness.

We must leave Derrida on route, like his father whom he mentions crossed the sea with his tallit. We leave him caressing it, as he describes his relation to that silken prayer shawl in that he keeps and treasures (Derrida 2002a, p. 327). This transitional space is a perpetual transit between modernity and an archive from which he is exiled. In an autobiographical mode, in *Circumfession*, he was somehow able to take leave of his borrowed language and assume his Hebrew name. Still, he remains, as he puts it, never at rest, interminably, “[s]earching for the archive right where it slips away.” (Derrida 1995a, p. 91). The marks on him and the ghosts who haunt him make him believe there is a ‘really real’, even if he cannot appropriate it. As Freud had his ghosts, Jakub Shelomoh, Moses, he himself claims the ghosts of “[J]akob, Hayim, my grandfather Moses and Abraham and a few others” (Derrida 1995a, p. 78). Circumcision, like marked steles that are inscribed with ancient aretalogies, carries the weight of the whole archive that he cannot own. Thus, the place that is assigned to him from without and which endowed him with a language that is not his own leaves Derrida *B’midbar*. He is an inhabitant of a desert in which he can experiment with his secret, assault the identity imposed on him but never enter the spiritual homeland that he never knew. He destroys every effigy of *Amalek* (the term for the perennial enemy of the Jews) but unlike Abraham smashing the idols of his father and leaving Harran, he can smash idols but cannot arrive. Like Moses who leads his followers out of the land of alienation but is himself flawed in the eyes of G-d, he is unable to enter the Promised Land. Jacques Derrida’s liminality leaves him, therefore, as the title of an English translation of Edmond Jabès’ poetry suggests, wondering, “If there were anywhere but Desert”.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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