

JACQUES DERRIDA

All Ears: Nietzsche's Otobiography

[The following excerpt is taken from a lecture delivered by Derrida at the University of Virginia in 1977. The lecture deals with institutions, signatures, and the authorities and authorizations that link them. Having discussed a number of texts, from the American Declaration of Independence to the autobiographical elements in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, Derrida moves to the question of the "perversion" of Nietzsche's writings by Nazi theories of culture. The focus of Derrida's analysis is a number of passages from *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (a series of lectures delivered in 1872 but never published by Nietzsche) in which Nietzsche deplores the degeneration of German culture and the disfigurement of the mother tongue, and describes—in typically problematic Nietzschean rhetoric—the conditions for a possible cultural and educational renewal. It is with the following remarks that Derrida concludes his lecture.—Ed.]

For there are human beings who lack everything, except one thing of which they have too much—human beings who are nothing but a big eye or a big mouth or a big belly or anything at all that is big. Inverse cripples I call them.

"And when I came out of my solitude and crossed over this bridge for the first time I did not trust my eyes and looked and looked again, and said at last, 'An ear! An ear as big as a man!' I looked still more closely—and indeed, underneath the ear something was moving, something pitifully small and wretched and slender. And, no doubt of it, the tremendous ear was attached to a small, thin stalk—but this stalk was a human being! If one used a magnifying glass one could even recognize a tiny envious face; also, that a bloated little soul was dangling from the stalk. The people, however, told me that this great ear was not only a human being, but a great one, a genius. But I never believed the people when they spoke of great men; and I maintained my belief that it was an inverse cripple who had too little of everything and too much of one thing."

When Zarathustra had spoken thus to the hunchback and to those whose mouthpiece and advocate the hunchback was, he turned to his disciples in profound dismay and said: "Verily, my friends, I walk among men as among the fragments and limbs of men. This is what is terrible for my eyes, that I find man in ruins and scattered as over a battlefield or a butcher-field. And when my eyes flee from the now to the past, they always find the same: fragments and limbs and dreadful accidents—but no human beings."

—Thus Spoke Zarathustra

Is there anything "within" Nietzsche's oeuvre that can help us understand its double interpretation and the so-called perversion of the text? The Fifth Lecture tells us that there must be something uncanny [*unheimlich*] about repression [*Unterdrückung*] when it is brought about by the force of the least degenerate needs. Why *unheimlich*? This is another form of the same question.

Uncanny is the ear: what it is—double; what it can become—large or small; what it can make or let happen [*faire ou laisser faire*] (we can say "let," since the ear is the most obliging, the most open organ, as Freud points out, the only one the infant cannot close); and the way in which it can be pricked or lent. It is to that ear that I will pretend to address myself, in order to conclude, here and now, by speaking, as promised, of "academic freedom." Mine and yours.

When Nietzsche, lecturing in the University, appears to be recommending linguistic training as an antidote to the kind of "academic freedom" that leaves students and teachers free to pursue their own thoughts and programs, it is not in order to oppose constraint to freedom. The silhouette of a constraint far more ferocious and unbending takes shape behind "academic freedom" in the concealed and disguised form of letting things take their course [*laisser-faire*]. Through the agency of "academic freedom," the State controls all. The State: that is the great accused in this trial, and Hegel, the great thinker of the State, stands as the guilty party's proper name. In fact, the autonomy of the university, as of those inhabiting it—students and professors—is a ruse of the State, "the most perfect ethical organism" (Hegel cited by Nietzsche). The State wants to attract docile and unquestioning functionaries to its cause. To accomplish this, it imposes tight controls as well as rigorous constraints which these functionaries believe they have initiated auto-nomously. The Lectures can thus be read as a modern critique of the cultural machinery of State and of that fundamental system of State constituted, even as recently as the advent of a fully industrialized society, by the educational system. And if nowadays it appears that this system is being partly replaced by or associated with the mass media, this makes Nietzsche's critique of journalism—and Nietzsche never dissociates journalism from the educational system—all the more compelling. Of course, he implements this critique from a perspective that would make any Marxist analysis of this machinery, including its organizing concept of "ideology," appear as another symptom of degeneracy, as a new form of subjection to the Hegelian State. But all such issues—the question of *the* Marxist concepts of the State, the nature of Nietzsche's opposition to socialism and democracy (*The Twilight of Idols* says that "Science is part of democracy"), or the functioning of the opposition science/ideology—must of course be looked at more closely and from both points of view. Elsewhere we shall pursue the development of this critique of the State

in the *Nachlass*-fragments and in *Zarathustra* ("On the New Idol": "State? What is that? Well, then, open your ears to me. For now I shall speak to you about the death of peoples. The State is the name of the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly it tells lies, too; and this lie crawls out of its mouth: 'I, the State, am the people.' That is a lie! . . . Confusion of tongues of good and evil: this sign I give you as the sign of the State. Verily, this sign signifies the will to death! Verily, it beckons to the preachers of death. . . 'On earth there is nothing greater than I: the ordering finger of God am I—thus roars the monster. And it is not only the long-eared (*Langeohrte*) and shortsighted who sink to their knees! . . . State I call it where all drink poison, the good and the wicked; . . . State, where the slow suicide of all is called 'life.'")

The State not only bears the paternal sign and figure of death, but it also wants to pass for the mother; or, in other words, for life, the people, the womb of things themselves. In *Von grossen Ereignissen* a hypocritical dog, likened to the Church, claims that his voice emanates from the "belly of things."

The hypocritical dog speaks to your ear through his educational systems that are acoustic or acroamatic machines. Your ears enlarge. You turn into "long-eared asses." And this occurs when, rather than listening to and obeying the best master and the best of leaders with small, finely tuned ears, you think yourselves free and autonomous with regard to the State, and when you open thus your great ear tubes (*pavillons*) to the State without knowing that it is already contaminated by reactive and degenerate forces. Having become all ears to this dog—the dog of the phonograph—you transform yourself into a high fidelity receiver. And the ear (your ear which is also the ear of the other) begins to occupy in your body the same disproportionate place as in the "inverse cripple" (*umgekehrte Krüppel*).

Is this our situation? Is it a question of the same ear—the one you are lending me or that I lend myself in speaking, in other words, a borrowed ear? Or rather, do we hear, do we already hear each other with another ear?

The ear offers no response.

Even here, who hears whom? Who, for instance, listened to Nietzsche when in the "Fifth Lecture" he lent his voice to the philosopher of his fiction to describe—for instance—this very situation (*scène*)?

"Permit me to measure this autonomy (*Selbstständigkeit*) of yours by the standard of this culture (*Bildung*), and to consider your university solely as a cultural institution (*Bildungsinstitution*). When a foreigner wants to understand our university system, he first asks earnestly: 'how is the student connected with (*hängt zusammen*) the university?' We answer 'By the ear, as a listener.' The foreigner is taken aback: 'Only by the ear?' he repeats, 'Only by the ear,' we again reply. The student listens. The student is autonomous, i.e., not dependent upon the educational institution when he speaks, when he sees,

1. Trans. Walter Kaufmann, in *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York, Viking, 1968), pp. 160–62.

when he walks, when he enjoys the company of his companions, when he engages in artistic activity: in short, when he *lives*. Quite often, the student writes as he listens; and it is only in these rare moments that he dangles by the umbilical cord of the university (*an der Nabelschnur der Universität hängt*)."²

Dream this umbilicus: it holds you by the ear, but by the ear which dictates to you what you presently write when you write according to that mode called "taking notes." In fact the mother—the bad or false one whom the teacher, in his capacity qua functionary of the State, can only simulate—yes, the mother dictates to you precisely that which, passing through your ear, moves along the cord as far as your stenography. This in turn links you, like a leash in the form of an umbilical cord, to the paternal belly of the State. Your pen is its pen; you hold its teleprinter as you hold those ballpoints in the post office which are attached to chains. And all the motions are induced through the body of the father representing (*figurant*) the *alma mater*. How can an umbilical cord create a link to this cold monster that is a dead father—or the State. This is what is *unheimlich*.

We should be attentive to this: the *omphalos* of which Nietzsche makes you dream resembles both an ear and a mouth. Containing invaginated folds and involuted orificiality, the *omphalos* maintains its center at the base of a cavity. This cavity remains, however, invisible, restless and sensitive—to all waves, whether coming from the outside or not, whether emitted or received, and always transmitted by the trajectory of dim circumvolutions.

The person transmitting the discourse which you teleprint in this situation does not himself produce it; indeed, he barely emits it. He reads it. Just as you are ears that transcribe, the master is a mouth that reads; and what you transcribe amounts to what he deciphers of a text that precedes him—and from which he is suspended by the same umbilical cord. Here is what transpires: I read, ". . . it is only in these rare moments that he dangles by the umbilical cord of the university. He himself may choose what he is to listen to; he is not bound to believe what he hears; he may close his ears if he does not care to listen. This is the acroamatic method of teaching." Abstraction itself: the ear can be closed and contact can be suspended because the *omphalos* of a disjointed body rejoins a dissociated segment (*morceau*) of the father. As for the professor, who is he? What does he do? Look, listen: "As for the professor, he speaks to these listening students. Whatever else he may think or do is cut off from the student's perception by an immense gap. The professor often reads while speaking. As a rule he prefers to have as many listeners as possible; in the worst of cases he contents himself with just a few, and rarely with just one. One speaking mouth, with many ears, and half as many writing hands—there

2. *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, trans. J. M. Kennedy (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1910). (In this and the following quotations, I have often modified Kennedy's translation in order to bring it closer to the German original.—Trans.)

you have, to all appearances, the external academic apparatus (*äusserliche akademische Apparat*); there you have the university culture-machine (*Bildungsmachine*) in action. As for what remains, the proprietor of this one mouth is severed from and independent of the owners of the many ears; and this double autonomy is enthusiastically loaned and lauded under the heading of 'academic freedom.' And of what is left, one can say—so that freedom is still accrued—more or less what one wants, as the other may hear more or less what he wants. . . Except that, behind both of them the State stands at a measured distance with all the intentness of an overseer. It stands there now and then reminding professors and students that it, the State, is the aim, the goal, the be-all and end-all (*Zweck, Ziel und Inbegriff*), of this curious speaking and hearing procedure." End of quote. I have just read, and you have just heard, a fragment of a discourse lent to or cited by Nietzsche and placed in the mouth of an ironic philosopher ("The philosopher laughed, not altogether good-naturedly" before holding the discourse that was just recorded). This philosopher is old; he resigned from the university, hardened and disappointed. He is not speaking at noon, but in the afternoon, at midnight. And he has just protested the unexpected arrival of a flock, a horde, a swarm (*Schwarm*) of students. What is your objection to students? they ask him. At first he offers no response. Then, after a pause: "So, my friend, even at midnight, even on top of a solitary mountain, we shall not be alone; and you yourself are bringing a pack (*Schar*) of mischief-making students along with you, although you well know that I am only too glad to be cut off from *hoc genus omne*. I don't quite understand you, my distant friend . . . in this place where, in a memorable hour, I once came upon you as you sat in majestic solitude (*feierlich vereinsamt*), and where we would earnestly deliberate with each other like knights of a new order. Let those who can understand us listen to us; but why should you bring with you a throng of people who don't understand us! I no longer recognize you, my distant friend!"

"We did not think it proper to interrupt him during his disheartened lament: and when in melancholy he receded into silence, we did not dare tell him how greatly this distrustful repudiation of students distressed us."

The temptation is strong. I am referring to that temptation which leads *all* of us to recognize *ourselves* in the program of this very situation or in the partition of this very piece. I could demonstrate this further if the academic allotment of lecture-time did not prohibit it. Yes, to recognize *ourselves*, *all* of us, in these places, and within the walls of an institution whose collapse is heralded by the old philosopher of midnight ("Constructed upon clay foundations of the current *Gymnasien*-culture, on a crumbling groundwork, your edifice would prove awry and unsteady if a whirlwind were to swirl up").

But even if we yielded to the temptation of recognizing ourselves, all of us,

and no matter how well we demonstrated it, what indeed would we recognize but all of *us*, ourselves, a century later? I would say in French "*nous tous*," not "*nous toutes*"—all of us men, not all of us women. For such is the profound complicity linking the protagonists in this situation or scene; such is the contract that masterminds all, even their conflicts: woman, if I have read correctly, never appears. Neither to engage in study nor to teach. She appears at no point on the umbilical cord. The great "cripple," perhaps. No women—and I would not want to extract from this remark the supplement of seduction that figures as part of all courses today: the vulgar sleight of hand related to what I propose to call "gynegogy."

No women, then, if I have read correctly. With the notable exception of the mother, of course. But this makes up part of the system, for the mother is the faceless, unfigurable figure of a *figurante*. She creates a place for all the figures by losing herself in the background, like an anonymous persona. All returns to her—and, in the first place, life—all addresses and destines itself to her. She survives—on the condition of remaining in the background.

Translated by Avital Ronell