



NO APOCALYPSE, NOT NOW (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)

JACQUES DERRIDA

First missile, Let me say a word first about speed.

first *At the beginning there will have been speed.*

missive. We are speaking of stakes that are apparently limitless for what is still now and then called humanity. People find it easy to say that in nuclear war “humanity” runs the risk of its self-destruction, with nothing left over, no remainder. There is a lot that could be said about that rumor. But whatever credence we give it, we have to recognize that these stakes appear in the experience of a race, or more precisely of a *competition*, a rivalry between two rates of speed. It’s what we call in French a *course de vitesse*, a *speed race*. Whether it is the arms race or orders given to start a war that is itself dominated by that economy of speed throughout all the zones of its technology, a gap of a few seconds may decide, irreversibly, the fate of what is still now and then called humanity—plus the fate of a few other species. As no doubt we all know, no single instant, no atom of our life (of our relation to the world and to being) is not marked today, directly or indirectly, by that speed race. And by the whole strategic debate about “no use,” “no first use,” or “first use” of nuclear weaponry. Is this new? Is it the first time “in history”? Is it an invention, and can we still say “in history” in order to speak about it? The most classical wars were also speed races, in their preparation and in the actual pursuit of the hostilities. Are we having, today, *another*, a different experience of speed? Is our relation to time and to motion qualitatively different? Or must we speak prudently of an extraordinary—although qualitatively homogeneous—acceleration of the same experience? And what temporality do we have in mind when we put the question that way? Can we take the question seriously without re-elaborating all the problematics of time and motion, from Aristotle to Heidegger by way of Augustine, Kant, Husserl, Einstein, Bergson, and so on? So my first formulation of the question of speed was simplistic. It opposed quantity and quality as *if* a quantitative transformation—the crossing of certain thresholds of acceleration within the general machinery of a culture, with all its techniques for handling, recording, and storing information—could not induce qualitative mutations, as *if every* invention were not the invention of a process of acceleration or, at the very least, a new experience of speed. Or as *if* the concept of speed, linked to some quantification of objective velocity, remained within a homogeneous relation to every experience of time—for the human subject or for a mode of temporalization that the human subject—as such—would have himself covered up.

Why have I slowed down my introduction this way by dragging in such a naive question? No doubt for several reasons

Reason number one. Let us consider the form of the question itself: is the war of (over, for) speed (with all that it entails) an irreducibly new phenomenon, an invention linked to a set of inventions of the so-called nuclear age, or is it

rather the brutal acceleration of a movement that has always already been at work? This form of the question perhaps constitutes the most indispensable formal matrix, the keystone or, if you will, the *nuclear* question, for any problematics of the “nuclear criticism” type, in all its aspects.

Naturally, I don't have time to demonstrate this. I am offering it, therefore, as a hasty conclusion, a precipitous assertion, a *belief*, an opinion-based argument, a doctrine or a dogmatic weapon. But I was determined to begin with it. I wanted to begin as quickly as possible with a warning in the form of a dissuasion: watch out, don't go too fast. There is perhaps no invention, no radically new predicate in the situation known as “the nuclear age.” Of all the dimensions of such an “age” we may always say one thing: it is neither the first time nor the last. The historian's critical vigilance can always help us verify that repetitiveness; and that historian's patience, that lucidity of memory must always shed their light on “nuclear criticism,” must oblige it to decelerate, dissuade it from rushing to a conclusion on the subject of speed itself. But this dissuasion and deceleration I am urging carry their own risks: the critical zeal that leads us to recognize precedents, continuities, and repetitions at every turn can make us look like suicidal sleepwalkers, blind and deaf *alongside the unheard-of*; it could make us stand blind and deaf alongside that which cuts through the assimilating resemblance of discourses (for example of the apocalyptic or bimillennarist type), through the analogy of techno-military situations, strategic arrangements, with all their wagers, their last-resort calculations, on the “brink,” their use of chance and risk factors, their mimetic resource to upping the ante, and so on – blind and deaf, then, alongside what would be absolutely unique; and it, this critical zeal, would seek in the stockpile of history (in short, in history itself, which in this case would have this blinding search as its function) the wherewithal to neutralize invention, to translate the unknown into a known, to metaphorize, allegorize, domesticate the terror, to circumvent (with the help of circumlocutions: turns of phrase, tropes and strophes) the inescapable catastrophe, the undeviating precipitation toward a remainderless cataclysm. The critical slowdown may thus be as critical as the critical acceleration. One may still die after having spent one's life recognizing, as a lucid historian, to what extent all that was not new, telling oneself that the inventors of the nuclear age or of nuclear criticism did not invent the wheel, or, as we say in French, “invent gunpowder.” That's the way one always dies, moreover, and the death of what is still now and then called humanity might well not escape the rule.

Reason number two. What is the *right* speed, then? Given our inability to provide a good answer for that question, we at least have to recognize gratefully that the nuclear age allows us to think through this aporia of speed (i.e., the need to move both slowly and quickly); it allows us to confront our predicament starting from the limit constituted by the absolute acceleration in which the uniqueness of an ultimate event, of a final collision or collusion, the temporalities called subjective and objective, phenomenological and intraworldly, authentic and inauthentic, etc., would end up being merged into one another. But, wishing to address these questions to the participants of a colloquium on “nuclear criticism,” I am also wondering at what speed we have to deal with these aporias: with what rhetoric, what strategy of implicit connection, what ruses of potentialization and of ellipsis, what weapons of irony? The “nuclear age” makes for a certain type of colloquium, with its particular technology of information, diffusion and storage, its rhythm of speech, its demonstration procedures, and thus its arguments and its armaments, its modes of persuasion or intimidation.

Reason number three. Having raised, very rapidly, my question on the subject of speed, I am unilaterally disarming, I am putting my cards on the table. I am announcing that, for want of time – time for preparation and time for the speech act – I shall not make a real “speech.” By which means, you will say, I shall have taken more time than all my partners. I am thus choosing, as you have already observed, the genre or rhetorical form of tiny atomic nuclei (in the process of fission or division in an uninterrupted chain) which I shall arrange or rather which I shall project toward you, like tiny inoffensive missiles: in a discontinuous, more or less haphazard fashion. This will be my little strategic and capitalistic calculation, in order to say, potentially, without being too tedious and as quickly as possible, as many things as possible. Capitalization – or capitalism – always has the structure of a certain potentialization of speed. This has been, in three points, my *first missile*, or my *first missive*, or my first

nuclear aphorism: *in the beginning there will have been speed*, which is always *taking on speed*, in other words, overtaking or—as we say in French, *prendre de vitesse, doubler*, doubling, passing—both the act and the speech. At the beginning was the word; at the beginning was the act. No! At the beginning—faster than the word or the act—there will have been *speed*, and a speed race between them. But of course, speed was only a beginning for my speech, for my speech act, today.

**Second
missile,
second
missive.**

For such a feat, we may consider ourselves competent.

And for the reason I have just stated very quickly: because of speed.

Indeed: nowhere has the dissociation between the place where competence is exercised and the place where the stakes are located ever *seemed* more rigorous, more dangerous, more catastrophic. *Seemed*, I said. Is it not *apparently the first time* that that dissociation, more unbridgeable than ever for *ordinary mortals*, has put in the balance the fate of what is still now and then called humanity as a *whole*, or even of the earth as a whole, at the very moment when your president is even thinking about waging war beyond the earth? Doesn't that dissociation (which is dissociation itself, the division and the dislocation of the *socius*, of sociality itself) allow us to think the essence of knowledge and *technè* itself, as socialization and de-socialization, as the constitution and the deconstruction of the *socius*?

Must we then take that dissociation seriously? And what is seriousness, in this instance? That is the first question, and thus *the first reason* why it is not totally irrelevant, inconsistent, to hold a colloquium on the nuclear in a space, our own, which is essentially occupied by non-experts, by questioners who doubtless don't know very well who they are, who don't very well know what justifies them or what legitimates their community but who know at least that they are not military professionals, are not professionals of strategy, diplomacy, or nuclear techno-science.

Second reason. So we are not experts in strategy, in diplomacy, or in the techno-science known as nuclear science, we are oriented rather toward what is called not humanity but the humanities, history, literature, languages, philology, the social sciences, in short all that which in the Kantian university was situated in the inferior class of the philosophy school, foreign to any exercise of power. We are specialists in discourse and in texts, all sorts of texts.

Now I shall venture to say that in spite of all appearances this specialty is what entitles us, and doubly so, to concern ourselves seriously with the nuclear issue. And by the same token, if we have not done so before, this entitlement, this responsibility that we would thus have been neglecting until now, directs us to concern ourselves with the nuclear issue—*first*, inasmuch as we are representatives of humanity and of the incompetent humanities which have to think through as rigorously as possible the problem of competence, given that the stakes of the nuclear question are those of humanity, of the humanities. How, in the face of the nuclear issue, are we to get speech to circulate not only among the self-styled competent parties and those who are alleged to be incompetent, but among the competent parties themselves. For we are more than just suspicious; we are certain that, in this area in particular, there is a multiplicity of dissociated, heterogeneous competencies. Such knowledge is neither coherent nor totalizable. Moreover, between those whose competence is technoscientific (those who invent in the sense of unveiling or of “constative” discovery as well as in the sense of production of new technical or “performing” mechanisms) and those whose competence is politico-military, those who are empowered to make decisions, the deputies of performance or of the performative, the frontier is more undecidable than ever, as it is between the good and evil of all nuclear technology. If on the one hand it is apparently the first time that these competencies are so dangerously and effectively dissociated, on the other hand and from another point of view, they have never been so terribly accumulated, concentrated, entrusted as in a dice game to so few hands: the military men are also scientists, and they find themselves inevitably in the position of participating in the final decision, whatever precautions may be taken in this area. All of them, that is, very few, are in the position of inventing, inaugurating, improvising procedures and giving orders where no model—we shall talk about this later on—can help them at all. Among the acts of observing, revealing, knowing, promising, acting, simulating, giving orders, and so on, the limits have never been so precarious, so undecidable. Today it is on the basis of that situation—the limit case in which the limit itself is suspended, in which therefore the *krinein*, *crisis*, decision itself, and choice are being subtracted from us, are abandoning us like the remainder of that subtrac-

tion — it is on the basis of that situation that we have to re-think the relations between knowing and acting, between constative speech acts and performative speech acts, between the invention that finds what was already there and the one that produces new mechanisms or new spaces. In the undecidable and at the moment of a decision that has no common ground with any other, we have to reinvent invention or conceive of another “pragmatics.”

Third reason. In our techno-scientifico-militaro-diplomatic incompetence, we may consider ourselves, however, as competent as others to deal with a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through. Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past, it seems, upon structures of information and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic decoding. But the phenomenon is fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place: one can only talk and write about it. You will say, perhaps: but it is not the first time; the other wars, too, so long as they hadn't taken place, were only talked about and written about. And as to the fright of imaginary anticipation, what might prove that a European in the period following the war of 1870 might not have been more terrified by the “technological” image of the bombings and exterminations of the Second World War (even supposing he had been able to form such an image) than we are by the image we can construct for ourselves of a nuclear war? The logic of this argument is not devoid of value, especially if one is thinking about a limited and “clean” nuclear war. But it loses its value in the face of the hypothesis of a total nuclear war, which, as a hypothesis, or, if you prefer, as a fantasy, or phantasm, conditions every discourse and all strategies. Unlike the other wars, which have all been preceded by wars of more or less the same type in human memory (and gunpowder did not mark a radical break in this respect), nuclear war has no precedent. It has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event. The explosion of American bombs in 1945 ended a “classical,” conventional war; it did not set off a nuclear war. The terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text. At least today apparently. And that sets us to thinking about *today*, our day, the presence of this present in and through that fabulous textuality. Better than ever and more than ever. The growing multiplication of the discourse — indeed, of the literature — on this subject may constitute a process of fearful domestication, the anticipatory assimilation of that unanticipatable entirely-other. For the moment, today, one may say that a non-localizable nuclear war has not occurred; it has existence only through what is said of it, only where it is talked about. Some might call it a fable, then, a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions. It may also be called a speculation, even a fabulous specularization. The breaking of the mirror would be, finally, through an act of language, the very occurrence of nuclear war. Who can swear that our unconscious is not expecting this? dreaming of it, desiring it? You will perhaps find it shocking to find the nuclear issue reduced to a fable. But then I haven't said simply that. I have recalled that a nuclear war is for the time being a fable, that is, something one can only talk about. But who can fail to recognize the massive “reality” of nuclear weaponry and of the terrifying forces of destruction that are being stockpiled and capitalized everywhere, that are coming to constitute the very movement of capitalization. One has to distinguish between this “reality” of the nuclear age and the fiction of war. But, and this would perhaps be the imperative of a nuclear criticism, one must also be careful to interpret critically this critical or diacritical distinction. For the “reality” of the nuclear age and the fable of nuclear war are perhaps distinct, but they are not two separate things. It is the war (in other words the fable) that triggers this fabulous war effort, this senseless capitalization of sophisticated weaponry, this speed race in search of speed, this crazy precipitation which, through techno-science, through all the techno-scientific inventiveness that it motivates, structures not only the army, diplomacy, politics, but the whole of the human *socius* today, everything that is named by the old words culture, civilization, *Bildung*, *scholè*, *paideia*. “Reality,” let's say the encompassing institution of the nuclear age, is constructed by the fable, on the basis of an event that has never happened (except in fantasy, and that is not nothing at all),* an event of which one

* Freud said as early as 1897 that there was no difference in the unconscious between reality and a fiction loaded with affect.

can only speak, an event whose advent remains an invention by men (in all the senses of the word “invention”) or which, rather, remains to be invented. An invention because it depends upon new technical mechanisms, to be sure, but an invention also because it does not exist and especially because, at whatever point it should come into existence, it would be a grand premiere appearance.

Fourth reason. Since we are speaking of fables, of language, of fiction and fantasy, writing and rhetoric, let us go even further. Nuclear war does not depend on language just because we can do nothing but speak of it – and then as something that has never occurred. It does not depend on language just because the “incompetents” on all sides can speak of it only in the mode of gossip or of *doxa* (opinion) – and the dividing line between *doxa* and *épistémè* starts to blur as soon as there is no longer any such thing as an absolutely legitimizable competence for a phenomenon which is no longer strictly techno-scientific but techno-militaro-politico-diplomatic through and through, and which brings into play the *doxa* or incompetence even in its calculations. There is nothing but *doxa*, opinion, “belief.” One can no longer oppose belief and science, *doxa* and *épistémè*, once one has reached the decisive place of the nuclear age, in other words, once one has arrived at the critical place of the nuclear age. In this critical place, there is no more room for a distinction between belief and science, thus no more space for a “nuclear criticism” strictly speaking. Nor even for a truth in that sense. No truth, no apocalypse. (As you know. Apocalypse means Revelation, of Truth, *Un-veiling*.) No, nuclear war is not *only* fabulous because one can *only* talk about it, but because the extraordinary *sophistication* of its technologies – which are also the technologies of delivery, sending, dispatching, of the missile in general, of mission, missive, emission, and transmission, like all *technè* – the extraordinary sophistication of these technologies coexists, cooperates in an essential way with sophistry, psycho-rhetoric, and the most cursory, the most archaic, the most crudely opinionated psychagogy, the most vulgar psychology.

Third missile, third missive. *We can therefore consider ourselves competent because the sophistication of the nuclear strategy can never do without a sophistry of belief and the rhetorical simulation of a text.*

First reason. The worldwide organization of the human *socius* today hangs by the thread of nuclear rhetoric. This is immediately readable in the fact that we use the term “strategy of deterrence” or “strategy of dissuasion,” as we say in French, for the overall official logic of nuclear politics. Dissuasion, or deterrence, means “persuasion.” Dissuasion is a negative mode or effect of persuasion. The art of persuasion is, as you know, one of the two axes of what has been called rhetoric since classical times. To dissuade is certainly a form of persuasion, but it involves not only persuading someone to think or believe this or that, but persuading someone that something *must not* be done. We dissuade when we persuade someone that it is dangerous, inopportune or wrong to decide to *do* something. The rhetoric of dissuasion is a performative apparatus that has other performatives as its intended output. The anticipation of nuclear war (dreaded as the fantasy, or phantasm, of a remainderless destruction) installs humanity – and through all sorts of relays even defines the essence of modern humanity – in its rhetorical condition. To recall this is not to paint with verbose vanity the horror of the nuclear catastrophe which, according to some, is already degrading our world in its totality, or improving it by the same token, according to others; it is not to say of this absolute *pharmakon* that it is woven with words, as if we were saying “all this horror is nothing but rhetoric.” On the contrary, this allows us to think today, retrospectively, the power and the essence of rhetoric; and even of sophistry, which has always been connected, at least since the Trojan War, with rhetoric (this is true for the Greek conception of what we are committed here to naming, Greek style, sophistry, and rhetoric).

Second reason. Beyond this essential rhetoricity, we have to situate the conjugal relation between the hyperbolic refinement, the technological sophistication of *missility* or missivity, and the rusticity of the sophistic ruses that are elaborated in the politico-military headquarters. Between the Trojan War and nuclear war, technical preparation has progressed prodigiously, but the psychagogic and discursive schemas, the mental structures and the structures of intersubjective calculus in game theory have not budged. In the face of the technological leap, a man of the World War I era might gasp with amazement, but Homer, Quintilian, or Cicero would not have been astonished if they had read what I read in the *New York Times* a few days ago while I was preparing this paper (for what I want to say

about the *doxa*, newspapers have to be considered as the best corpus for study). It was an article by Leslie H. Gelb, the *Times*' national security correspondent in Washington. Gelb (I like this name a lot, I'll tell you why in a moment) is visibly unfavorable to the Reagan administration. His article takes sides, it exposes what can be called an "opinion," a belief. I shall pick out only one point in an article that is full of information. One of the subheads of the newspaper repeats the words of the text as follows: "Reagan stretches the meaning of deterrence, says the author. Gaining superiority translates into diplomatic power." And indeed, Gelb's discourse analyzes the presumed beliefs of the Reagan administration at a particular moment. Gelb thus ends up talking about opinions, about the *doxa*, beliefs (old words, old things: how to integrate them into the world of nuclear technology?) not of an individual nor even of a group of individuals but of that entity called the "Administration." Where does the "belief" of an Administration reside? The whole theory of strategic games that Gelb analyzes, then, integrates on the one hand beliefs that are advertized or presupposed, on the other hand beliefs or opinions that are induced. Later on, Gelb takes into account the Soviets' evaluation of (thus their belief about) not only American nuclear power but also American resolve – we can translate: the Americans' belief in themselves. Fair enough. But what is happening on the side of American belief under Reagan? We are witnessing on the one hand an evolution of belief, on the other an apparent rhetorical innovation, the choice of a new word, all of a sudden accompanied by a double hermeneutics, a private exegesis and a public one; it is a question of one single little word, "to prevail," whose weight, value, and presumed effects have at least as much importance as a given set of technological mutations that would, on both sides, but of such a nature as to displace the strategic bases of an eventual armed confrontation. You are better acquainted with the episode than I: I am referring to the policy defined in the document entitled "Fiscal Year 1984–1988 Defense Guidance" (spring 1982), according to which, in the course of a nuclear war of any length, the United States "must prevail"; this policy, adopted officially and secretly, was then publicly disavowed by Weinberger, the Secretary of Defense, in two letters (August 1982, July 1983), quoted and discussed by Theodore Draper ["Nuclear Temptations," *New York Review of Books*, January 19, 1984]. Everything apparently comes together in the public or private exegesis of what the word "prevail" may or must implicitly mean. Let us now follow the word "belief" in the interpretation Gelb proposes of that sequence of events:

In the Reagan Administration's apparent belief in being able to actually control a nuclear war once begun and to fight it over a period of perhaps months, doctrine has been carried beyond well-established bounds. Such a belief could induce some leader some day to think he could risk starting a nuclear war because he would be able to stop short of a complete catastrophe. But the Reagan Administration went further still by reintroducing the 1950's idea of actually seeking to win a nuclear war. For the last 20 years, Administrations have used words like "preventing defeat" or "avoiding an unfavorable outcome" to describe their belief that there could be no winners in a nuclear war. Following the uproar caused by the secret use of the word "prevail," Mr. Weinberger stated that "nowhere in all this do we mean to imply [do we mean to imply!] that nuclear war is winnable. This notion has no place in our strategy. We see nuclear weapons only as a way of discouraging the Soviets from thinking they could ever resort to them."

This brings to light the proportional relation between the multiplicity of rhetorics and the multiplicity of supposed addressees: a private or a public dimension within the United States, American or non-American public opinion, American or Soviet decision makers, as if the Soviet adversaries were not capable, moreover, of immediately integrating all these variables into their own calculus. Mr. Chernenko has just denounced Reagan's "rhetoric" – it's his own term. And Gelb, too, uses the word "rhetoric": "The Reagan declaratory policy is quite consistent with past official rhetoric" [29]. But let us continue reading Gelb:

Mr. Reagan also issued denials. Nonetheless, the suspicion lingers that the leaders of the Administration had something in mind in choosing that word. There are officials in this Administration who have written and spoken of the likelihood of nuclear war,

and the need for the United States to prepare to fight, survive and win it. How widely this view is shared in the Administration is not clear.* The charitable explanation, and the one that squares most with my own experience with Reagan officials, is that prevailing to them really translates into the goal of gaining strategic nuclear superiority over the Soviet Union. Many of these officials helped to draft the 1980 Republican Party Platform, which calls for achieving overall military and technological superior over the Soviet Union. To many on the Reagan team, nuclear superiority is important not because they are sanguine about fighting and winning a nuclear war but because they believe that this kind of superiority is translatable into diplomatic power and, in the event of a crisis, into coercing the other side to back down. This idea is highly debatable, and, I believe, not supported by evidence.

Gelb (whose name is a homonym for the name of the author of the first book to bear the word “grammatology” in its title: it was also to give an account of this that I wrote *Of Grammatology*) – Gelb believes, then (“I believe,” he says), that there is no “evidence,” no proof. He believes that there are only beliefs. The “Reagan” belief is not based on proofs. But by definition it could not be, for there are no proofs in this area. There is only one proof, that is war, and moreover it proves nothing. The only thing the adverse discourse can oppose to the “Reagan” belief is another belief, its own hermeneutics and its own rhetoric: “I believe,” writes Gelb.

As for the translation “into diplomatic power” of a new word, “prevailing,” we might think at first that the word “translation” only has its broad, vague, and metaphorical meaning: it is a matter, indeed, of translating and of transporting a word (to prevail) into another realm (“into diplomatic power”), in the course of a nonlinguistic transference. That much is indisputable, but the thing gets complicated nevertheless as soon as one takes the following fact into account: “diplomatic power” would not exist without the structure of a text. Of the text in the unlimited sense that I give the word, and of a text in the most strictly traditional sense of the term. There is only text in the diplomatic moment, that is, sophistic-rhetoric of diplomacy. And you remember Clausewitz’s statement on Diplomacy and War.

As for the aporias of the nuclear referent, we don’t believe in them.

Fourth missile, fourth missive.

Under the heading of *nuclear criticism*, in a colloquium organized by *Diacritics*, we have to talk about literature, about the literature that I shall distinguish here from poetry, from the epic, from *belles-lettres* in general. Now it seems that the constitution of literature has not been possible without (1) a project of stockpiling, of building up an objective archive over and above any traditional oral base; (2) without the development of a positive law implying authors’ rights, the identification of the signatory, of the corpus, names, titles, the distinction between the original and the copy, the original and the plagiarized version, and so forth. Literature is not reduced to this form of archiving and this form of law, but it could not outlive them and still be called literature. Now what allows us perhaps to think the uniqueness of nuclear war, its being-for-the-first-time-and-perhaps-for-the-last-time, its absolute inventiveness, what it prompts us to think even if it remains a decoy, a belief, a phantasmatic projection, is obviously the possibility of an irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive – that is, total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism. Not necessarily the destruction of humanity, of the human habitat, nor even of other discourses (arts or sciences), nor even indeed of poetry or the epic; these latter might reconstitute their living process and their archive, at least to the extent that the structure of that archive (that of a nonliterary memory) implies, structurally, reference to a real referent external to the archive itself. I am taking care to say: to that extent, and on that hypothesis. It is not certain at all that all the other archives, whatever their material basis may be, have such a referent absolutely outside themselves, outside their own possibility. If they do have one, then they can rightfully reconstitute themselves and thus, in some other fashion, survive. But if they do not have one, or to the extent that they do not have one outside themselves, they find themselves in the situation of literature. One might say that they participate in literature in that literature produces its referent as a fictive or fabulous referent,

* It is un-clear, we have to make it clear, says Gelb. Nu-clear criticism has to make clear what is unclear in the Administration’s views.

which in itself is dependent on the possibility of archiving, indeed constituted in itself by the archiving act. That would lead to a considerable extension – some would say an abusive one – of the field of literature. But who has proven that literature is a field with indivisible and simply assignable limits? The events known by the name of literature are definable; and there is in principle a possible history of this name and of the conventions attached to the naming. But the same cannot be said of the structural possibilities of what goes by the name literature, which is not limited to the events already known under this name.

Here we are dealing hypothetically with a total and remainderless destruction of the archive. This destruction would take place for the first time and it would lack any common proportion with, for example, the burning of a library, even that of Alexandria, which occasioned so many written accounts and nourished so many literatures. The hypothesis of this total destruction watches over deconstruction, it guides its footsteps; it becomes possible to recognize, in the light, so to speak, of that hypothesis, of that fantasy, or phantasm, the characteristic structures and historicity of the discourses, strategies, texts, or institutions to be deconstructed. That is why deconstruction, at least what is being advanced today in its name, belongs to the nuclear age. And to the age of literature. If “literature” is the name we give to the body of texts whose existence, possibility, and significance are the most radically threatened, for the first and last time, by the nuclear catastrophe, that definition allows our thought to grasp the essence of literature, its radical precariousness and the radical form of its historicity; but at the same time, literature gives us to think *the totality* of that which, like literature and henceforth in it, is exposed to the same threat, constituted by the same structure of historical fictionality, producing and then harboring its own referent. We may henceforth assert that the historicity of literature is contemporaneous through and through, or rather structurally indissociable, from something like a nuclear *epoch* (by nuclear “epoch,” I also mean the *epochè* suspending judgment before the absolute decision). The nuclear age is not an epoch, it is the absolute *epochè*; it is not absolute knowledge and the end of history, it is the *epochè* of absolute knowledge. Literature belongs to this nuclear epoch, that of the crisis and of nuclear criticism, at least if we mean by this the historical and ahistorical horizon of an absolute self-destructibility without apocalypse, without revelation of its own truth, without absolute knowledge.

This statement is not abstract, it does not concern general and formal structures, some equation between a literarity extended to any possible archive and a self-destructibility in general. No, according to my hypothesis it would rather be a question of the sudden “synchronous” appearance, of a cohabitation of two formations: on the one hand, we have the principle of reason (interpreted since the seventeenth century according to the order of representation, the domination of the subject/object structure, the metaphysics of will, modern techno-science, and so on [I refer here in passing to Heidegger, who moreover is less interested in nuclear war than in the atomic age as an age of in-formation which forms and in-forms a new figure of man: cf. *Der Satz vom Grund*, etc.]) * and on the other hand we have the project of literature in the strict sense, the project which cannot be shown to antedate the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To advance the hypothesis of their conjugation, it is not necessary to follow Heidegger in his interpretation of the principle of reason and in his evaluation of literature (as distinguished from poetry), as it appears for example in *Was heisst Denken*. But I have discussed this elsewhere and I cannot pursue this direction further here. In what I am here calling in another sense an absolute epoch, literature comes to life and can only experience its own precariousness, its death menace and its essential finitude. The movement of its inscription is the very possibility of its effacement. Thus one cannot be satisfied with saying that, in order to become serious and interesting today, a literature and a literary criticism must refer to the nuclear issue, must even be obsessed by it. This has to be said, and it is true. But I believe also that, at least indirectly, they have always done this. Literature has always belonged to the nuclear epoch, even if it does not talk “seriously” about it. And in truth I believe that the nuclear epoch is dealt with

* And I would add this for Frances Ferguson. Heidegger reminds us of the fact that Leibnitz, who was the author of the formula for the Principle of Reason (*Der Satz vom Grund*), was also supposed to be the author of insurance, as we know it.

more “seriously” in texts by Mallarmé, of Kafka, or Joyce, for example, than in present-day novels that would offer direct and realistic descriptions of a “real” nuclear catastrophe.

Such would be the *first version of a paradox of the referent*. In two points. 1. Literature belongs to the nuclear age by virtue of the performative character of its relation to the referent, and the structure of its written archive. 2. Nuclear war has not taken place, it is a speculation, an invention in the sense of a fable or an invention to be invented in order to make a place for it or to prevent it from taking place (as much invention is needed for the one as for the other), and for the moment all this is only literature. Some might conclude that therefore it is not real, as it remains entirely suspended in its fabulous and literary *époque*.

**Fifth
missile,
fifth
missive.**

But we do not believe, such is the other version or the other side of the same paradox, in any thing except the nuclear referent.

If we are bound and determined to speak in terms of reference, nuclear war is the only possible referent of any discourse and any experience that would share their condition with that of literature. If, according to a structuring hypothesis, a fantasy or phantasm, nuclear war is equivalent to the total destruction of the archive, if not of the human habitat, it becomes the absolute referent, the horizon and the condition of all the others. An individual death, a destruction affecting only a part of society, of tradition, of culture may always give rise to a symbolic work of mourning, with memory, compensation, internalization, idealization, displacement, and so on. In that case there is monumentalization, archivization and *work on the remainder, work of the remainder*. Similarly, my own death as an individual, so to speak, can always be anticipated phantasmatically, symbolically too, as a negativity at work – a dialectic of the work, of signature, name, heritage, image, grief: all the resources of memory and tradition can mute the reality of that death, whose anticipation then is still woven out of fictionality, symbolicity, or, if you prefer, literature; and this is so even if I live this anticipation in anguish, terror, despair, as a catastrophe that I have no reason not to equate with the annihilation of humanity as a whole: this catastrophe occurs with every individual death; there is no common measure adequate to persuade me that a personal mourning is less serious than a nuclear war. But the burden of every death can be assumed symbolically by a culture and a social memory (that is even their essential function and their justification, their *raison d'être*). Culture and memory limit the “reality” of individual death to this extent, they soften or deaden it in the realm of the “symbolic.” The only referent that is absolutely real is thus of the scope or dimension of an absolute nuclear catastrophe that would irreversibly destroy the entire archive and all symbolic capacity, would destroy the “movement of survival,” what I call “*survivance*,” at the very heart of life. This absolute referent of all possible literature is on a par with the absolute effacement of any possible trace; it is thus the only ineffaceable trace, it is so as the trace of what is entirely other, “*trace du tout autre*.” This is the only absolute trace – effaceable, ineffaceable. The only “subject” of all possible literature, of all possible criticism, its only ultimate and a-symbolic referent, unsymbolizable, even un-signifiable; this is, if not the nuclear age, if not the nuclear catastrophe, at least that toward which nuclear discourse and the nuclear symbolic *are still beckoning*: the remainderless and a-symbolic destruction of literature. Literature and literary criticism cannot speak of anything else, they can have no other ultimate referent, they can only multiply their strategic maneuvers in order to assimilate that unassimilable wholly other. They are nothing but those maneuvers and that diplomatic strategy, with the “double talk” that can never be reduced to them. For simultaneously, that “subject” cannot be a nameable “subject,” nor that “referent” a nameable referent. Then the perspective of nuclear war allows us to re-elaborate the question of the referent. What is a referent? In another way, to elaborate the question of the transcendental ego, the transcendental subject, Husserl’s phenomenology needed, at some point, the fiction of total chaos. Capable of speaking only of that, literature cannot help but speak of other things as well, and invent strategies for speaking of other things, for putting off the encounter with the wholly other, an encounter with which, however, this relationless relation, this relation of incommensurability cannot be wholly suspended, even though it is precisely its epochal suspension. This is the only invention possible.

What I am saying can be transposed into a discourse of contemporary diplomatico-military strategy. Consider for example what Theodore Draper says in an article entitled “How Not to Think about Nuclear War” [*New York Review of Books*, July 15, 1982]. In the early going Draper has criticized the whole strategy of “no first use” of nuclear weapons,

which would amount to “no use,” and directed his irony at the “realm of utopian obscurantism” of Jonathan Schell who, in *The Fate of the Earth*, spoke about “reinventing politics” and “reinventing the world” (“a global disarmament, both nuclear and conventional, and the invention of political means by which the world can peacefully settle the issues that throughout history it has settled by war”). Now Draper falls back upon what may appear to be wisdom or an economy of deferral (*différance*): gain as much time as possible while taking into account the unmovable constraints; return, if possible (as if it were possible) to the original meaning of deterrence or dissuasion, which would seem by and large to have been lost or perverted in recent times. To quote Draper: “Deterrence is all we have. Like many such terms that are abused and misused, it is best to get back to its original meaning.” I cannot deal with this discourse in detail; it would warrant a meticulous and vigilant analysis, especially at that point where, referring to Solly Zuckerman’s *Nuclear Illusion and Reality*, Draper imputes to scientists a greater responsibility than that of the military and political authorities. Draper reminds us that in a chapter about “the advice of scientists,” Zuckerman “shows how they have been pushing the politicians and the military around; the arms race, he warns, can be brought to an end only if the politicians ‘take charge of the technical men.’ This reversal of the commonly understood roles may come as a surprise to most readers.”

An absolute missile does not abolish chance.

**Sixth
missile,
sixth
missive.**

There is nothing serious to be said against that “rational” and “realistic” wisdom of dissuasion, against that economy of deferral or deterrence. The only possible reservation, beyond objection, is that if there are wars and a nuclear threat, it is because “deterrence” has neither “original meaning” nor measure. Its “logic” is the logic of deviation and transgression, it is rhetorical-strategic escalation or it is nothing at all. It gives itself over, by calculation, to the incalculable, to chance and luck. Let us start again from that conception of sending or “missivity” on the basis of which Heidegger finally relaunches the thought of being as the thought of a gift, and of what gives impetus to thought – gives to be thought, gives forth into thought, “*ce qui donne à penser*” – of the “*es gibt Sein*,” of the dispensation or the emission (*envoi*: sending) of being (*Geschick des Seins*). This emission or sending of Being is not the firing of a missile or the posting of a missive, but I do not believe it is possible, in the last analysis, to *think* the one without the other. Here I can do no more than designate titles of possible discourses. I have often tried, elsewhere, to stress the divisibility and the irreducible dissemination of the *envois* (sendings, dispatches), of the acts of sending. Even what I have called “*destinerrance*” [– a wandering that is its own end, etc. . . .] no longer gives us the assurance of a sending of being, of a recovery of the sending of being. If the onto-ontological difference ensures the gathering-up of that sending (*le rassemblement de cet envoi*), the dissemination and the *destinerrance* I am talking about go so far as to suspend that onto-ontological difference itself. The dissemination epochalizes the difference in its turn. Of this movement I can only indicate the path. The *destinerrance* of the *envois*, (sendings, missives, so to speak), is connected with a structure in which randomness and incalculability are essential. I am not speaking here of factors of undecidability or incalculability that function as reservations in a calculable decision. I am not speaking of the margin of indeterminacy that is still homogeneous to the order of the decidable and the calculable. As it was in my lecture on “*Psychè, Inventions of the Other*,” it is a question here of an aleatory element that appears in a heterogeneous relation to every possible calculation and every possible decision. That unthinkable element offers itself to (be) thought in the age when a nuclear war is possible: one, or rather, from the outset, some sendings, many sendings, missiles whose *destinerrance* and randomness may, in the very process of calculation and the games that simulate the process, escape all control, all reassimilation or self-regulation of a system that they will have *precipitously* (too rapidly, in order to avert the worst) but irreversibly destroyed.

Just as all language, all writing, every poetico-performative or theoretico-informative text dispatches, sends itself, allows itself to be sent, so today’s missiles, whatever their underpinnings may be, allow themselves to be described more readily than ever as dispatches in writing (code, inscription, trace, and so on). That does not reduce them to the dull inoffensiveness that some would naively attribute to books. It recalls (exposes, explodes) that which, in writing, always includes the power of a death machine.

The aleatory *destinerrance* of the *envoi* allows us to think, if we may say so, the age of

nuclear war. But this thought has been able to become a radical one, as a thought left over from the “remainderless,” only in the nuclear age. This contemporaneity is not historical in the trivial sense of the term. It had to have given signs of itself *even before* nuclear technoscience reached the point where it is now with its inventions: in Democritean physics as well as in Nietzsche or Mallarmé, among many others. But let us not eradicate the broad scansion of this history which has constructed a concept of history lacking any proportion with it: the moment when Leibnitz’s formation of the Principle of Reason (and all that Reason prescribes for modern techno-science) comes to resonate with the nuclear question of metaphysics, the question that Leibnitz himself formulates and around which Heidegger organizes the very repetition of the essence of metaphysics in 1929 (between the first and the last “world war”) in *What is Metaphysics?* The question is, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

Hence we meet once again the necessity and the impossibility of thinking the event, the coming or venue of a first time which would also be a last time. But the desterrance of the sendings is precisely what both divides and repeats the first time and the last time alike.

**Seventh
missile,
seventh
missive.**

The name of nuclear war is the name of the first war which can be fought in the name of the name alone, that is, of everything and of nothing.

Let us start again, for this the last dispatch, from the homonymy between Kantian criticism and “nuclear criticism.” First, on the topic of this name, “nuclear criticism,” I foresee that soon, after this colloquium, programs and departments in universities may be created under this title, as programs or departments of “women’s studies” or “black studies” and more recently of “peace studies” have been created – things which, no matter how quickly they are reappropriated by the university institution, are nonetheless, in principle and conceptually, irreducible to the model of the *universitas* (but it would take too long to demonstrate this here). “Nuclear criticism,” like Kantian criticism, is thought about the limits of experience as a thought of finitude. The *intuitus derivativus* of the receptive (that is, perceiving) being, of which the human subject is only one example, cuts its figure on the (back)ground of the possibility of an *intuitus originarius*, of an infinite intellect which creates its own objects rather than inventing them. As for the history of humanity, that example of finite rationality, it presupposes the possibility of an infinite progress governed according to an Idea of Reason, in Kant’s sense, and through a treatise on Perpetual Peace.

Such a criticism forecloses a finitude so radical that it would annul the basis of the opposition and would make it possible to think the very limit of criticism. This limit comes into view in the groundlessness of a remainderless self-destruction of the self, auto-destruction of the *autos* itself. Whereupon the kernel, the nucleus of criticism, itself bursts apart.

Now when Hegel *on the one hand* sets forth the implicit consequence of Kantian criticism and recalls or postulates that one must begin *explicitly* with a thought about the infinite of which Kantian criticism has indeed had to begin implicitly, and *on the other hand* defines access to the life of the mind and to consciousness by the passage through death or the risk of biological (let us say natural) death, through war and the struggle for recognition, he still has to hold on to that remainder of natural life which, in symbolization, makes it possible to capitalize (on) what is gained from the risk, from war and from death itself. As individual or community, the master has to survive in order to enjoy the symbolic profit (in mind and consciousness) from death risked or endured. He takes risks and he dies *in the name* of something which is worth more than life, but something which will still be able to *bear his name* in life, in a residue of living support. That is what made Bataille laugh: the master has to live on in order to cash in on and enjoy the benefits of the death risk he has risked.

Today, in the perspective of a remainderless destruction, without mourning and without symbolicity, those who contemplate launching such a catastrophe do so no doubt in the name of what is worth more in their eyes than life (“better dead than red”). On the other hand, those who want nothing to do with that catastrophe are ready to prefer any sort of life at all, life above all, as the only value worthy to be affirmed. But nuclear war – as a hypothesis, a phantasm, of total self-destruction – can only come about in the name of that which is worth more than life, that which, giving its value to life, has greater value than life. Thus it is indeed waged *in the name of* That, in any case, is the story that the war-makers always tell. But as it is in the name of something whose name, in this logic of total destruction, can no longer be borne, transmitted, inherited by anything living, that name in

the name of which war would take place would be the name of nothing, it would be pure name, the “naked name.” That war would be the first and the last war in the name of the name, with only the non-name of “name.” It would be a war without a name, a nameless war, for it would no longer share even the name of war with other events of the same type, of the same family. Beyond all genealogy, a nameless war in the name of the name. That would be the End and the Revelation of the name itself, the Apocalypse of the Name.

You will say: but all wars are waged in the name of the name, beginning with the war between God and the sons of Shem who wanted to “make a name for themselves” and transmit it by constructing the tower of Babel. This is so, but “deterrence” had come into play among God and the Shem, the warring adversaries, and the conflict was temporarily interrupted: tradition, translation, transference have had a long respite. Absolute knowledge too. Neither God nor the sons of Shem (you know that Shem means “name” and that they bore the name “name”) knew absolutely that they were confronting each other in the name of the name, and of nothing else, thus of nothing. That is why they stopped and moved on to a long compromise. We have absolute knowledge and we run the risk, precisely because of that, of not stopping. Unless it is the other way around: God and the sons of Shem having understood that a name wasn’t worth it – and this would be absolute knowledge – they preferred to spend a little more time together, the time of a long colloquy with warriors in love with life, busy writing in all languages in order to make the conversation last, even if they didn’t understand each other too well. One day, a man came, he sent messages to the seven churches and they called that the Apocalypse. The man had received the order, “What you see, write in a book and send to the seven churches.” When the man turned around to see what voice was giving him this order, he saw in the middle of seven golden candlesticks, with seven stars in his hand, someone from whose mouth “a sharp double-bladed sword” was emerging, and who told him, among other things: “I am the first and the last.” The name of the man to whom he was speaking, the one who was appointed to send messages, to deliver the seven messages, was John.

– Translated by Catherine Porter and Philip Lewis.