THE POSTMODERNISM OF POSTMODERNISM: IT’S A “FUNNY” STORY

Abstract: My primary thesis is that postmodernism always invokes a meta-function of self-reflexivity to some notion of “beginning.” First, I reference Heidegger, who views being as the beginning. However, as Gayatri Spivak writes in her famed introduction to Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology, “That something is, presupposes that anything can be” (xiv). Thus, there is some preoriginary concept for any concept before it emerges. In this sense, the arche (the beginning) only has presence by its complimentary absence. In Postmodernism, then, we are left with a language of metaphority (which is the crux of Being). However, I then ask: if the thought of thought tends towards the beginning, what could be said of the Meta-mind behind “thought?” Descartes, Derrida argues, gives the name ‘folly’ to the prereflective cogito – before the “I think” can be reflected upon a pronounced being. Building off Derrida’s argument at length I claim that in postmodernism, nothing should be in stasis; everything is in flux. Thus, to reconcile with this pre-originary space, one always falls from the beginning, always traces the beginning (in the Derridean sense).

Keywords: beginning, arche, trace, aletheia, erasure, Deleuze.

A Foreword

What is Postmodernism?

Ok, fair enough, that’s a cheap introduction to a paper vaguely built upon that very assignment prompt. However, it is a style (simple...direct) – and already the question is (always already) on the table of how said style influences our understanding of postmodernism. If postmodernism is a plural assemblage of
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intersecting nodes of thought, how can a colloquial introduction find its place... or maybe its place is already established as a counter-expected and (therefore) postmodern approach. What I’m trying to say is: does postmodernism have a reverse psychology? Or am I only wading in a sea of pop psychology?

Either way, forgive me for this narrative aside. During my Master’s program in 2008, I had my first exposure to Post-Structuralism (and its poster child, Derrida). In a cheeky (and it’s hard to use cheeky without being cheeky oneself) move I made a faux “poststructuralist-generative-program,” somewhat akin to ELIZA, the psychoanalytic therapist computer. ELIZA – for a brief aside – is an early example of primitive natural language processing; it used only tricks like string substitution to prompt canned responses / questions to a user (or patient) based on keywords.

My “game” had even less intelligence (I assure you). The simplest program (and the one I will focus on in this paper) was to merely generate: the “X of X,” for example – what is the “truth of truth?” What is the “society of society?” What is the “questioning of questioning?” It kind of works...yet, I put everything in scare-quotes not only for liability purposes, but as a type sous nature, which I’ll define as a cancelation that in effect generates more than it cancels. As asinine as this program was/is, it did lead me to wonder why it created an inkling of post-modern thought (having a concept examine itself). And it soon hit me. In brief, my deduction, and the thesis I will put forward for this paper, is that postmodernism is always an act of the Meta (oftentimes, but not exclusively, paradoxical).

To Begin...

In sync with my introduction, what is a better place to begin than asking: What is the beginning of the beginning? I will begin with the rhizomatic lines of Martin Heidegger’s early “postmodern” (?) work on early philosophers, Parmenides, which in its beginning directly states: “In essential history the beginning comes last” (1). There’s more than mere paradoxical play at work in Heidegger’s statement, he precedes: “We call what thus precedes and determines all history the beginning. Because it does not reside back in a past but lies in advance of what is to come, the beginning again and again turns out to be precisely a gift to an epoch” (1). The “beginning” is a tense of the future-perfect, lying in advance of what will have been, a gift to the future.

In Heidegger’s study of what “truth” (aletheia) meant to the ancient Greeks, he quickly declares that the proposition “the beginning is last” is “nonsense;” he states this flawed belief stems from the “remarkable fact” that the beginning is
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easily taken to mean “unfinished, imperfect, and rough” (1, 2). He further claims these common opinions arise from the fact that the beginning, at first, always appears veiled in a unique way: “The ’beginning’ is what, in this early thinking, is to be thought and what is thought;” Heidegger later continues: “We name what is thought in the thinking of the thinkers the beginning. Which hence now means: Being is the beginning” (7).

To Be... (And not to be)

However, if “Being” is the beginning, what is the beginning of “Being?” Gayatri Spivak writes in her famed introduction to Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology, “That something is, presupposes that anything can be” (xiv). We could claim that Heidegger’s view “solves” the paradoxical question of: what is “Being” if it has no beginning? (It is the beginning) However, Derrida takes issue with Heidegger’s centrality of Being as a “transcendental signified.”

In Derridean deconstruction, there is no signified, only signifiers. Instead of focusing on “Being,” Derrida presents the trace.1 For him, the trace refers to the “mark of the absence of a presence;” moreover, this is an always-already present, an originary lack that appears to be “the condition of thought and experience” (xvii). The trace is Meta – for the presence/absence of presence/absence is the absence [the trace]/presence of absence/presence [which leads to the trace]. Thus, it is the trace that is always-already hidden within language, much akin to the “hidden” truth [aletheia] for Heidegger that must be unconcealed.

As such, the arche (the beginning) only has presence by its complimentary absence:

The value of the transcendent arche [origin] must make its necessity felt before letting itself be erased. The concept of the arche-trace must comply both that necessity and that erasure. It is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity. The trace is not the disappearance of the origin [...] it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a non-origin, the trace, which thus becomes the origin of the origin (Derrida 90, 61).

1 In addition, Derrida uses a number of other terms – “difference,” “arche-writing,” “pharmakos/pharmakon,” and “specter” (to name a few) – almost interchangeably. Spivak makes the claim that his reluctance to apply only one name to his ideas is, in fact, an intentional strategy to avoid a certain sort of metaphysics.
Thus, the Meta-origin could be phrased as the “Origin-of-Origins” as the
“Being-of-Being.” This is what Derrida calls “the trace” - the nonexistence of Being
not as an ontological God-point but instead as a paradox of complementarity built
upon the Meta (a “meta” without the “physics”).

Moreover, referring to *Of Grammatology*, Spivak writes:

> What Derrida balks at in Roudinesco’s description is that a “grammatology”
> – science of the effacement of the trace – should be described as modeled on a
> “metaphysics” – science of presence; that it should be called an “onto-theology”
> [,] that the “trace,” mark of radical anteriority, should be misnamed an “origin.”
> (xlvi).

Derrida is against any onto-theology relying upon the trace as its foundation
– its origin, as all concepts of “Being” and “beginning” are Meta, cycling back
onto themselves. Thus, he instead, advocates the *act*, or perhaps, the *movement*
of deferment amongst all concepts, which are only ever signifiers, only ever
representation. Thus, every presence / trace is “transported” along a polysemous
line of signification.2

**And So We “Represent”**

In *Parmenides*, one crucial point that Heidegger makes is that θυσία (αλθεία)
[truth] is not the “goddess of truth” but *is* the goddess herself. In other words,
*Aletheia* is not a representation of truth in the ancient Greek mantra, but *is* truth
itself. Of course, the mere reference to the goddess by name, however, is still a
representation itself.

Heidegger writes:

> As the essence of the emergence (θυσία), [αλθεία] is the beginning itself. The
> journey to the home of the goddess is a thinking out toward the beginning. The

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2 We can also speak of movement, or deferment, or difference of signifiers as regards the translations
of all these works into English. To begin, in the translator’s foreword to *Parmenides*, we read: “We
have thus rendered Übersetzung as ‘transporting,’ Heidegger’s claim that every act of translating is
founded upon a transporting (of ourselves into a new realm of meaning) should then be understand-
able” (Silverman xv). On a much larger level, however, the act of translation is crucial to Heidegger’s
historical analysis of the concept of “truth” (*aletheia*), specifically as regards its romanization; he
writes, “what is decisive is that the Latinization occurs as a transformation of the essence of truth and
*Being* within the essence of the Greco-Roman domain of history. This transformation is distinctive
in that it remains concealed but nevertheless determines everything in advance. This transformation
of the essence of truth and *Being* is the genuine event of history” (42).
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thinker thinks the beginning insofar as he thinks *aletheia*. Such recollection is thinking’s single thought. This thought [the thought of thought], as the dictum of the thinker, enters into the word and language of the Occident (60?).

Thus, the *movement* (the trace – the erasure and the path) of truth is 1) the thought of thought, or Meta-thought, and 2) the entryway to the word and language. For, even to the Greeks, “*Aletheia*” as goddess was still referred to (represented) by the word, the signifier “Aletheia.”

We are left only with *differance*. As Spivak writes, “the structure of ‘presence’ is [...] constituted by difference and deferment. But since the ‘subject’ that ‘perceives’ presence is also constituted similarly, differance is neither active nor passive. The ‘-ance’ ending is the mark of that suspended status” (xliii). We could even go so far as to say this “neographism” by Derrida is only a representation of other representations, a play of signification (xxix).

In Postmodernism, then, we are left with a language of meta-phoricity. Spivak utilizes Nietzsche as a gateway to metaphor, claiming “[his] theory of metaphoricity, or figuration, explodes into ‘sous rature’ and neutralizes into a play of resisting forces” (xxvii). But, it is important to stress that this “play of resisting forces” is not negation (as I move further into the Meta to use negation to talk of negation). Under the play of “sous rature” the negation of negation is not a positive. It is, rather, a type of “third-act,” not active nor passive, not presence nor absence; it is more of a self-aware Meta-action in which we play with play. We must use meta-phors as all we have are signifiers, so we look at the system of metaphoricity itself – cancelled and presenced.

But one clear question still remains – we focused on language and metaphor as the crux of Being. Then, what can be said of the material? What can be said of the physical world as we interact with it? Spivak writes, “For whatever a concept might ‘mean,’ anything that is conceived of in its being-present must lead us to the already answered question of Being. In that sense, the sense of the final reference, Being is indeed the final signified to which all signifiers refer,” referring to the final reference of the physical world (xvi). For Heidegger, this entails an unconcealing of the concealed, a disclosure of the truth. Susan Hekman, likewise, attaches herself to this notion of disclosure, stating, “disclosure is not a refutation of relativism or skepticism but a new way of approaching the issues of knowledge and reality. It avoids the problems of representationalism by offering another way of

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3 To review, that is the Origin-of-Origins which was deduced to be the Being-of-Being, which was deduced to be the Language-of-Language (or meta-phoricity).
understanding the relationship between language and reality” (Hekman 92). This disclosure, for Hekman, rests upon a consolidation of knowledge and reality. But before I focus on the material, even Hekman does not negate perceptual relativism – while there is a material world, we only-ever access this world through a mental lens of perception (and language).

*And What of the Mind that Processes all of these Theories?*

If the thought of thought, tends towards the beginning, what could be said of the Meta-mind behind “thought?” Descartes, Derrida argues, gives the name ‘folly’ to the prereflective cogito – before the “I think” can be reflected upon a pronounced. What of this philosophical relative to the Freudian preconscious? Is the capital “I” a free-form, a transcendentational signifier of self or is it always already formed in a Cartesian soup of ideological influences?

Susan Hekman looks at the origin (?) of the subjective mind, at “the complex relationship between the ontology of the subject – being a subject, having an identity – and the power of discursive norms in society […] I can only be a subject if my identity conforms to one of the identities offered by the society in which I live. If my identity falls outside the range of acceptable identities, then I quite literally cease to be: my ontological existence is erased” (94). The “I” is a mangle to Hekman, a conglomerate form in which boundaries are fungible, always-already pre-originary.

In Deleuze’s terminology, “the issue is never to reduce the unconscious or to interpret it or to make it signify according to a tree model. The issue is to produce the unconscious, and with it new statements, different desires: the rhizome is precisely this production of the unconscious” (Plateaus 18). We can batter around terms like “mangle” and “rhizome,” both a commonality in postmodernism, but the key idea is the “production” of a pre-originary sign-structure unconscious, which for Deleuze (like Hekman’s “fungible boundaries”) negates enclosures or “molds” in favor of “modulation, like a self-deforming cast that will continuously change from one moment to the other or like a sieve whose mesh will transmute from point to point” (Control 4). It is the mind as sign-structure of the jouissance of difference!

And so the ontology of the unconscious mind is put under erasure as well: “Whether he acknowledges it or not, Freud implies that the psyche is a sign-structure ‘sous rature,’ for, like the sign, it is inhabited by a radical alterity, what is totally other – Freud gives it [this radical alterity] a metaphysical name, the unconscious” (Mp 21, SP 151). If the psyche is a sign-structure, is it also representative? If so, only representative of its own origin: “thus, within the Freudian perspective of the
psyche, perception is an ‘originary inscription.’ And time, according to Kant ‘the privileged and necessary form of intuition,’ becomes a mark of the ‘economy of a writing’” (ED 334, FF 112, Spivak xl). The psyche is an origin to our prescriptive views – and these views must always “inscribe” (or become) a text of seemingly transcendental signification.

What of the Grapheme?

I’ll now return to the beginning of this writing (if I have succeeded in falling away from it), citing Parmenides again to chip away at “writing;” Heidegger writes: “What we are calling the basic meaning of words is their beginning, which does not appear at first but at last, and even then never as a detached formation, a specimen we could represent as something for itself. The so-called basic meaning holds sway in a veiled manner in all the modes of saying the respective word” (21). In a true Biblical parable (again), the first seems to come last.

This fact is a crucial point, as Spivak writes: “The deconstructive reader exposes the grammatological structure of the text, that its ‘origin’ and its ‘end’ are given over to language in general” (xlix). And language (in general) far from the dead pharmokon in Plato’s medicine cabinet, “bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (ED 416, SC 254). We the (ever) reader must be as self-aware as the text of all texts, playing a game already played.

In Spivak’s introduction to Of Grammatology, she is certainly self-aware of the comic irony of her preface (citing much of Dissemination): “The preface is a necessary gesture of homage and parricide for the book (the father) make a claim of authority or origin which is both true and false.” The Father – both here and elsewhere – is also carries with it the Phallus, the transcendental signifier of Lacanian psychoanalysis (xi).

However, beyond prefaces – a “beginning” to a work, an outwork, a state of the future-perfect – Spivak writes of the ontological nature of writing (in general) to the Derridean schema.; “the cloture of metaphysics found the origin and end of its study in presence” (xli). Can the “sous rature” be an oxymoron? Spivak clarifies that Nietzsche puts “knowing” under erasure; Freud puts “the psyche” under erasure; Heidegger puts “Being” under erasure – each negating the always meta-originary transcendental signifier. And here’s the rub of the issue: “the name of this gesture effacing the presence of a thing and yet keeping it legible, in Derrida’s lexicon, is writing – the gesture that both frees us from and guards us within, the metaphysical enclosure” (Spivak xli).
And freeing us from a molded enclosure is a hark back to Deleuze and Guattari, who state, “a book has neither object nor subject; it is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds” (3). A book is a fluid, if not amorphous, entity. They continue:

In a book of all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification [...] These lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary of acceleration and rupture. All this, line and measurable speeds, constitutes an assemblage (3).

What is important for my present writing is the fact that “as an assemblage, a book has only itself, in connection with other assemblages and in relation to other bodies without organs” (4, italics mine). Thus, ontologically, the “beginning,” or “origin” of a book is the book itself; it is a self-sustained meta-entity of assemblage, connectable to further assemblages. The mention of a “body without organs” is a reference to the continual dismantling of the organism, in which no individuals exist, just “dividuals” (4). In other words, it is a reference to a Post-Structuralist arche-writing, largely synonymous with Derrida’s conceptualization of the gesture of “writing,” which at once frees us and guards us within some metaphysical enclosure.

Why do this? In short, because all writing is a representation anyway – we can only ever float along a sea of signifiers; it is, naturally, futile to trace the origin of a particular thought [pun intended]: “we know that the metaphor that would describe the genealogy of a text correctly is still forbidden” (Derrida 101). However, the significance [pun also intended] of writing is that it will change the signifier of the mind; Spivak writes, “Derrida [...] is asking us to change certain habits of mind; the authority of the text is provisional, the origin is a trace; contradicting logic, we must learn to use and erase our language at the same time” (xviii). Language is a path of the trace, in which the “beginning” is only ever an impossible self-reference, a Meta-game of paradox. We erase a text as we read a text and through its simultaneous erasure and presence destroy an ontological foundation beyond anything but Meta-awareness.

I will restate that form will always make an argument. Hence, the often “impenetrable” style of Derrida (and many other Post-Structuralist writers) is an act of deconstruction itself, imposing an imperative upon the reader to change his or her way of thinking, of reading, of understanding the play of signifiers that dance across the page. In describing outwork, Derrida will use outwork. In describing
deconstruction, he will use deconstruction to present itself – it is the self-aware, Meta style of postmodernism.

**The Material vs. The Ideological**

In “Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” Louis Althusser asks “[what] is the reproduction of the conditions of production?” (127). For him, the reproduction of labor “reveals as its sine qua non” not only the reproduction of bodies and “skills” but also the reproduction of “its subjection to the ruling ideology or of the ‘practice’ of that ideology,” which for Althusser is accomplished by the ideological state apparatuses [ISA’s] (130). We could, then, say the production of production is production (or reproduction) – a very meta description.

However, Althusser is not looking through just a Marxist lens; rather, he hopes to find a “theory of ideology in general” (159). He begins by giving a very postmodern reading of Marx, stating:

> Ideology [...] is for Marx, an imaginary assemblage (bricolage), a pure dream, empty and vain, constituted by the ‘day’s residues’ from the only full and positive reality that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence. Ideology “is a pure dream [with] no history” – no history of its own (160).

And, thus, seemingly counter to Heidegger, ideology is suggested to have no beginning (or at least no history). Spivak writes, “Time is still the model of pure auto-affection, where something ideal – Being as such – is produced without having to relate to an object” (1). This brings us down two paths: the first cycles back to the representative: “Ideology is a ‘Representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (162). It is at once an illusion and an allusion - a paradoxical state of nonbeing while at the same time a reference (or deferment) to being (in other words, it is the Derridean trace).

The second path is to see no objects in ideologies, but rather subjects. It is a meta-path in Althusser’s language: “in every case, the ideology of ideology thus recognizes, despite its imaginary distortion, that the ‘ideas’ of a human subject exist in his actions, or ought to exist in his actions, and if that is not the case, it lends him other ideas corresponding to the actions (however perverse) that he does perform” (172, italics mine). Thus, to play is to be.

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4 This, for Althusser, is specifically accomplished through a Marxist topographical model of a base and ruling superstructure, the latter term referring to the ideological core of a given society.
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We are back at the beginning too, as Althusser writes “you and I are always already subjects” (172). The beginning does not come last – it interpolates a subject prior to the subject’s Being [the beginning-of-beginning and the Being-of-Being, etc.]. Is ideology, then, ever self-aware – ever Meta? Is a subject always aware of his or her position in an ideological frame? We are left with a set of Gödel’s impossibility – the subject is always already a subject in a set unaware of itself…unless the ideology of ideology becomes a Meta-form.

Meta-jokes

I would say this brings us to a (ironically I might even say the) Postmodern Paradox – that Post-Structuralism adheres to no centrality and is yet Meta always unto itself. How can the Meta be a core point in a theory that has no centrality?

The first solution lies in plurality. In defining plurality, we are making a distinction between “multiple” and “multiplicity.” This would be highly fallacious. It is not that we are always ever concerned with a multiple items (necessarily) but are concerned with the multiplicity of each item. For example, Deleuze and Guattari start out A Thousand Plateaus with the sentence, “the two of us wrote Anti-Oedipus together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd” (1). Yet, plurality (like all terms) must be put under erasure as well, which will lead to a plurality of approaches towards plurality and the very act of the “sous rature.” Due to this fact, Deleuze and Guattari make the statement we must “make a map, not a tracing” (6). This is to say that “a map has multiple entryways, as opposed to the tracing, which always comes back ‘to the same’” (6). Thus, when we read, we read multiply. When we think, we think multiply. When we exist, we exist multiply. This notion also explains the persistence of deconstruction to break binaries. Spivak writes, “The confounding of opposites, with the attendant switching of perspectives, might be an example of that plural style” (xxix). This “plural style” is a meta-act too. For as we think, we make new maps to thinking (for example, this paper, which is on itself as much as any other postmodern work), ultimately leading to the thinking of thinking itself. As we write, we make new maps with each new exploration of any writing (for example, this paper again), ultimately leading to writing on writing. I am always a meta-being, and postmodernism understands the plurality of that functioning.

Footnote:

1 It’s hard not to point out the linguistic coincidences between “tracing” in this quote and the concept of the Derridean “trace.” Unless, perhaps, putting the trace under erasure would lead to the sentence: the simultaneous presence and absence of the presencing of an absence – perhaps this is a map after all and we are becoming ever-more meta by tracing the trace.
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How so? With gameplay. In postmodernism, nothing should be in stasis; everything is in flux. The universe is a fluid being, moving inside and outside itself and in a meta-play of critique we interact with its complex beauty. Spivak writes: “This imprudence, constantly attempting to bypass the prudence of stabilizing through ‘interpretation,’ is amor fati, the love of what Derrida calls ‘the game of chance with necessity, of contingency with law’ (Dis 309)” (xxx). Let me be “meta” (under erasure) and consider this very paragraph: of myself citing Spivak who cites Derrida. This paragraph is as fluid as its ideas – Derrida’s original text is multiplied into plethora of argumentative statements through my Meta-awareness of postmodernism. I am playing with the text just as Spivak always already had played with the text; together we three are playing a game of rhizomatic already insanity, constantly “falling” away from a source text but, in doing so, paying it the greatest compliment through expansion.

To summarize this, consider the following passage from Parmenides:

Western metaphysics may elevate the true up to the absolute spirit of Hegel’s metaphysics and may claim “the angles” and “the saints” for “the true,” yet the essence of truth has already long since retreated from its beginning, i.e., from the ground of its essence. It fell out from its beginning and hence is a falling away, an apostasy (52).

To tend towards the beginning (to aletheia) is to fall from the beginning, to trace the beginning (in the Derridean sense) – the presence of the absence, in itself a meta-presence.

An Addendum

Now that my paper is barely begun, I will end it: “In essential history the beginning comes last” (Heidegger 1). And so, my form will give its beginning as the end – reifying my meta thesis as a better argument than I could have made (if you believe in paradoxes).

Thus...of course the style of this paper is postmodern postmodernism, no?...[if postmodern forms of representation make arguments and this form argues self-awareness of a postmodern form by not using a postmodern form]...Or by telling you that, did I just break its style? Nah, let’s say “no?” But if I point that out – do I reverse its postmodern effects, or reverse those effects by pointing out the fact that I pointed it out? ...Is this a joke? But it isn’t funny – unless postmodern (meta) jokes aren’t funny...
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Works Cited

ПОСТМОДЕРНИЗАМ ПОСТМОДЕРНИЗМА:
„ЗАБАВНА“ ПРИЧА

Резиме
У раду се заступа мишљење да постмодернизам увијек призива мета-функцију самопропитивања неке идеје „почетка“. За почетак, позивамо се на Хајдегера, који посматра буће као почетак. Ипак, како Гајатри Спивак каже у свом главном уводу Деридином ајду *Из граматологије*, „То што нешто јесте претпоставља да било шта може да буде“ (xiv). Дакле, прије него што се било који концепт појави, већ постоји неки претходни концепт. У овом смислу, архе (почетак) постоји тсак као допуна свом одсуству. Према томе, у постмодернизму нам је остао језик мета-форичности (што је основни проблем Бића). Ако је тако, онда се питамо сљедеће: уколико мисао о мисли тежи ка почетку, шта би се онда могло рећи за мета-ум који иде даље од „мисли“? Надограђујући Деридин став, напослетку тврдимо да у постмодернизму ништа не би требало да буде у стагнацији; све је у покрету. Да би се помиро са претходним простором, човјек увијек пада с почетка, увијек тражи почетак (у деридовском смислу).

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