

Deconstruction and the Promise of Hospitality to The Other

*Prolegomena to a Theory of Deconstruction**

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*... for which the consummation will forever be *to-come*.

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Abstract

Anyone who has read anything about, or from, Jacques Derrida, will probably have come into contact with his most known concept: deconstruction. Finding out what it really entails, however, is not as easy. Many describe deconstruction as, for example, a theory or method (often: of *destruction*), which Derrida himself strongly opposed. Due to the “logocentric condition” of western culture we are wound up with the (according to Derrida: deceptive) idea that language is an ultimate description of reality, and, thus, that we can define concepts unambiguously and clearly. How, then, are we supposed to give meaning to the word ‘deconstruction’—how can we properly present the meaning of a concept, when the “meaning” of this concept is exactly the incomprehensibility of meaning? However problematic it might seem if we want to find out what deconstruction entails, this incomprehensibility of meaning is precisely the problematic which Derrida wishes to highlight by means of deconstruction. Hoping to provide some clarification on the idea of deconstruction, we will follow Derrida’s deconstructions of three concepts important throughout his oeuvre: hospitality, the promise, and the other. I will conclude by *proposing a “theory of deconstruction.”* Not proposing *the* theory, but rather *a* theory of deconstruction—a suggestion of one of the (many) imaginable theories of deconstruction: a theory of deconstruction as the promise of hospitality to the other.

Prolegomena

Of Deconstruction and X

“

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them in a certain way, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.¹

Whoever has read anything about, or from, Derrida, will probably have at least come into contact with his concept of deconstruction. However, finding out what it really entails is another matter. As we, according to Derrida, are bound to finding meaning in the world around us, we urge to define concepts, to find clear definitions and strict references for the words we use. Derrida sees this as due to the (deceptive) “logocentric”² condition of Western culture. Hence, calling deconstruction by the name of a method, a theory, a tool or a strategy, as many do, is all very understandable. Indeed, if we want to talk about deconstruction and give an explanation of what it entails, we will have to describe it with the use of language, and thus necessarily categorize it in some way, label it, classify and specify it in order to find a clear definition for it. However, to make some points clear from the start of our quest, I would like to begin with a short disclaimer: deconstruction is no theory. It is no method. We are even unable to meaningfully call it a tool or a strategy, and we could wonder whether it is definable at all³—whether any possible concept is ever definable, and whether we can have a definite concept of anything at all.

But how, with these preliminary remarks in mind, are we supposed to give meaning to the word ‘deconstruction’—how can we properly present the meaning of a concept, when the “meaning” of this concept is exactly the incomprehensibility of meaning? How can we give it definition,

¹ Jacques Derrida, “From ‘Of Grammatology’,” in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 41.

² In short: the idea, due to the centralization of the ‘logos’ (i.e., language, meaning and the human intellect), that language provides us with an ultimate description of reality, and, accordingly, that we can understand external reality through language. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Luise Mallet, trans. David Wills (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2008), 27.

³ As John D. Caputo puts it: “I am making a meta-statement about deconstruction [...] that every time we translate X one way and then attempt to grasp it in a concept (from *con* + *capere*, in German: *begreifen*) it slips between our conceptual fingers. [...] [If] we try to intuit it clearly and distinctly in an *Anschauung*, it immediately shifts its shape and demands to be retranslated otherwise.” John D. Caputo, “Introduction,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, ed. John D. Caputo (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2020), xxvii.

without giving it a definition? This undecidability on exact meanings is, however problematic it might seem if we want to find out what deconstruction entails, precisely the problematic which Derrida wishes to highlight by means of deconstruction. In a way, we already caught deconstruction in an (albeit very tiny) nutshell, which I will try to crack open and lay out as we continue. As Derrida himself has said during “The Villanova Roundtable: *A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*,” “If I were more responsible, I would simply say ‘No, I won’t, I won’t participate in this game.’ Nevertheless, sometimes it is not a bad thing, at least if you do not do it⁴ too often. It is not that bad that we try to encapsulate deconstruction in a nutshell. [...] Sometimes, of course, I am not able to do that. But sometimes it may be useful to try nutshells.”⁵ Let us assume, and hope that Derrida would have agreed, that this is one of these “sometimes.”

Deconstruction

As we will see while representing Derrida’s deconstructions of hospitality, the promise and messianicity, *aporias*⁶ are coming up in several cases. For hospitality, for example, explicitly when examining the foreigner, the host, and hospitality itself: we will be unable to unambiguously define the foreigner as someone from abroad or totally other; the host, in spite of *and* by virtue of his power, turns into hostage; and the only possibility for hospitality renders hospitality itself impossible. In case of the promise we will find ourselves, inter alia, occupied with the plurality of the singular (*the other in me*); with the impossibility of promise’s premise of keepability; and with its anachrony, it’s being *chronologically out of time*. Lastly, then, while deconstructing the messianic other, we will, again per example, come up against the aporetic structure of messianicity without messianism and with the heterogeneity of the future-to-come.

Many, then, find in deconstruction a method, theory, strategy or tool of *destruction*. Any meaning, whether common sense or more thoroughly examined, seems to be impossible. But as I hope I will be able to show, following (due to the scope of this thesis, in very abbreviated form) Derrida’s deconstruction of the concepts of hospitality, the promise and the messianic other, deconstruction is not merely a way to *destruct*, but, at the same time, provides us with an

⁴ i.e., taking extensive amounts of work out of their context(s) and trying to encapsulate them in a nutshell.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida,” in *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, eds. Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2020), 16.

⁶ “[T]he Greek word for a seemingly insoluble logical difficulty: once a system has been ‘shaken’ by following its totalizing logic to its final consequences, one finds an excess which cannot be construed within the rules of logic, for the excess can only be conceived as *neither this nor that*, or both at the same time – a departure from all rules of logic.” Alan Bass, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Writing and Difference*, ed./trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), xviii.

ability to *construct* a more inclusive idea of concepts as well.⁷ As Derrida put it himself in ‘Et Cetera’:

Each time that I say ‘deconstruction and X (regardless of the concept or the theme),’ this is the prelude to a very singular division that turns this X into, or rather makes appear in this X, an impossibility that becomes its proper and sole possibility, with the result that between the X as possible and the ‘same’ X as impossible, there is nothing but a relation of homonymy, a relation for which we have to provide an account.... For example, here referring myself to demonstrations I have already attempted ..., gift, hospitality, death itself (and therefore so many other things) can be possible only as impossible, as the im-possible, that is, unconditionally.⁸

Différance

According to Derrida the aporia, as described here, has its origin in *différance*.⁹ He does not consider it to be a result of the analysis of a concept; it is always already inherent to language itself, it is always already present. Derrida diagnosed western culture with “logocentrism,” stressing that—due to the centralization of the “logos” (i.e., language, meaning and the human intellect)—we have the idea that language provides us with an ultimate description of reality, and, accordingly, that we can understand external reality through language. We get the idea that we can define concepts unambiguously and clearly, that the sign consists of signifier and (unequivocally) signified; “that is, of a sensible (i.e., relating to the senses, most often hearing) part which is the vehicle to its intelligible part (its meaning).”¹⁰ This idea is, according to Derrida, a deception, which leads us towards unsurmountable dichotomies in defining concepts.¹¹ This impossibility of finding definite meaning should, however, *not* cause us to be skeptical on the importance of, above all, ethical notions. Derrida stresses: “Casting doubt on responsibility, on decision, on one’s own being-ethical, seems to me to be—and is perhaps what should forever remain—the unrescindable essence of ethics, decision, and responsibility.”¹² The way to accomplish this vigilance, is, according to Derrida, to be found in deconstruction. With it we can find more inclusive, integrated and exhaustive—albeit necessarily and always

⁷ Hence the term ‘deconstruction,’ de-con-struction.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Et Cetera,” in *Deconstructions: A User’s Guide*, ed. Geoff Bennington, trans. Nicolas Royle (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 200), 300.

⁹ *Différance* is a neologism for the familiar French word ‘différence,’ with just the “slight” (inaudible) difference of an *a* instead of an *e*. As ‘différence’ is derived from the Latin ‘diferrere,’ meaning both *to differ* and *to defer*, Derrida’s ‘différance’ entails an acknowledgement of this double meaning and is, accordingly, used as a reminder, both to the difference within and to the appeal for the deferral of meaning. See Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” *Margins of Philosophy*, trans/ed. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹⁰ Alan Bass, “Translator’s Introduction,” xvi.

¹¹ Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*.

¹² Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 126.

still ambiguous and incomplete¹³—accounts of concepts; by showing us the traces between dichotomies. Différance could then be described thus: as these traces, as *the trace*¹⁴; always already present, while at the same time always already absent as, when trying to grasp it, it is already continuing to unfold, it is already moving away, and is never fully at hand.

Deconstruction and the Promise of Hospitality to The Other

Deconstruction, then, might, for now, best be described as a continuous and necessarily infinite search for *différance*, for the impossible unveiling of the always veiled trace. “*Différance* maintains our relationship with that which we necessarily misconstrue, and which exceeds the alternative of presence and absence.”¹⁵ Whether this description of deconstruction gives us any clarity on this notion is, however, doubtful. Hoping to provide some clarification on the idea of deconstruction, we will follow Derrida’s deconstructions of three concepts important throughout his oeuvre: hospitality, the promise, and the other. I will conclude by *proposing a “theory of deconstruction.”* Not proposing *the* theory of deconstruction, nor *posing* a theory of deconstruction—for I hope, after the several representations of deconstruction I will provide, we will by then be compelled to find ourselves in a place of vigilance towards conclusive judgments on the meaning of concepts, and thus, also on the meaning of deconstruction. I will, thus, not provide you with *The Theory of Deconstruction*, but instead with a suggestion of one of the (many) imaginable theories of deconstruction: of deconstruction as the promise of hospitality to the other.

¹³ “Deconstruction ceases to be merely negative or destructive where it becomes affirmative without being simply positive.” Johan de Jong, *The Movement of Showing* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2019), 61.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, “From ‘Speech and Phenomena’,” *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 8–30.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “From ‘Différance’,” *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), 73. I will come back to the presence/absence-dichotomy later – albeit in a footnote – when dealing with Derrida’s countering of the preference for spoken over written language.

XI. Hostipitality

Deconstruction and Hospitality

“

[W]e know enough to tell ourselves that hospitality, what belabors and concerns hospitality at its core [ce qui travaille l'hospitalite en son sein], what works it like a labor, like a pregnancy, like a promise as much as like a threat, what settles in it, within it [en son dedans], like a Trojan horse, the enemy (hostis) as much as the avenir, intestine hostility, is indeed a contradictory conception, a thwarted [contrariee] conception, or a contraception of awaiting, a contradiction of welcoming itself.¹⁶

As a first example of deconstruction, we will take a look at Derrida's deconstruction of hospitality, mostly by means of Derrida's and Anne Dufourmantelle's *Of Hospitality*. Here, Dufourmantelle comments on Derrida's two lectures featured in the book: "Question d'étranger: venue de l'étranger" and "Pas d'hospitalité," translated as, respectively, "Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad / from the Foreigner" and "Step of Hospitality / No Hospitality." Already by looking at the translation of the titles of these lectures we notice the ambiguity inherent to the French words *étranger* (abroad/foreigner) and *pas* (step/not). Such highlighting of ambiguities is, as we will see throughout this thesis, emblematic of Derrida's approach to the quest for meaning. As Dufourmantelle puts it, Derrida has a "particular way of 'taking to the limit' one or a number of concepts."¹⁷ In *Of Hospitality* Derrida does this for several concepts, among which we have the foreigner, the guest, the mother tongue, host and hostage, the oath, and—the case we will take on here¹⁸—hospitality itself.

The Foreigner

Derrida starts by taking us back to the Greeks in Plato's dialogues, to consider the position of the foreigner in the early texts paradigmatic of western philosophy. Derrida stresses that "it is often the Foreigner (*xenos*) who questions,"¹⁹ subsequently proposing the *Sophist* and the *Statesman* as examples—both in which it is the foreigner who puts the most daring questions concerning the "common sense" about Athenians like the sophist, the statesman and the

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality," in *Acts of Religion*, trans./ed. Gil Anidjar (New York/London: Routledge, 2001), 359. Brackets (apart from the first in "[W]e") in original.

¹⁷ Anne Dufourmantelle, "Invitation," in *Of Hospitality*, ed. Anne Dufourmantelle, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 80.

¹⁸ All the while knowing that Derrida's deconstruction of hospitality cannot be completely separated from the other dichotomies Derrida examines during these lectures. These, however, will – for the sake of brevity and considering this thesis' objective – not (or, at least, not expansively) be dealt with here.

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Foreigner Question: Coming from Abroad / from the Foreigner," in *Of Hospitality*, ed. Anne Dufourmantelle, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 5.

philosopher, as from an outsider to the insiders. He then turns to Socrates in *The Apology of Socrates*, at the point where Socrates addresses the Athenian judges and his fellow citizens, defending himself against the charges that would later turn out to be the prelude to his death sentence. He announces himself as being like a foreigner: he doesn't know the judges' language; he doesn't know how to defend himself due to his lack of knowledge of the court's rules. This is exemplary of the questions Derrida posed a little before:

That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country? If he was already speaking our language, with all that that implies, if we already shared everything that is shared with a language, would the foreigner still be a foreigner and could we speak of asylum or hospitality in regard to him? This is the paradox that we are going to see become clearer.²⁰

Socrates, when standing before the Athenian judges, is *like* a foreigner as he is actually an Athenian citizen and thus “by definition” no foreigner at all, but he also *is* a foreigner, inasmuch as he is an outsider from the court's “culture” due to his juridical illiteracy. “Speaking the same language is not only a linguistic operation. It's a matter of *ethos* generally,”²¹ Derrida later stresses. At the same time, Socrates asks of the Athenians to treat him *as if he were indeed* from abroad, because this way he could be treated more like he had the Athenian right to—as foreigners in Athens had a right to hospitality. Derrida concludes here that “the foreigner, the *xenos*, is not simply the absolute other, the barbarian, the savage absolutely excluded and heterogeneous,”²² but, in some cases, can actually be more familiar or proximate than fellow countrymen, -women or -other.

He then continues by taking into consideration Émile Benveniste's emphasis on the Greek word *xenos*, which “indicates relations of the same type between men linked by a pact which implies precise obligations also extending to their descendants.”²³ Derrida stresses the importance of this ambiguity of the *xenos*, who is thus a foreigner, an outsider, *and* an insider as they are²⁴ granted rights and obligations in a reciprocal pact. Due to the pact, extending to the descendants, the foreigner will have their rights and duties (which can, considering the pact, only be granted

²⁰ Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” 15–17.

²¹ Derrida, “Step of Hospitality / No Hospitality,” 133.

²² Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” 21.

²³ Émile Benveniste, cited in Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” 21.

²⁴ I use the gender-neutral pronoun ‘they’ (plural), whenever possible.

by name and identity) and will thus get included into the community, but will, at the same time, always stay this specific foreigner (or one of their descendants) as the rights and duties are granted precisely *on the ground of* their being foreign.²⁵

Hostipitality

Consequently, in his deconstruction of hospitality, Derrida distinguishes between the conditional *laws* of hospitality and the (unconditional) *law* of hospitality.

The law of hospitality, the express law that governs the general concept of hospitality, appears as a paradoxical law, pervertible or perverting. It seems to dictate that absolute hospitality should break with the law of hospitality as right or duty, with the “pact” of hospitality [embodied in *laws* of hospitality]. To put it in different terms, absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner (provided with a family name, with the social status of being a foreigner, etc.), but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names.²⁶

He considers the laws of hospitality to be “traditional” hospitality as we know it in the everyday use of the term in which hospitality is embodied as a right or a duty; and the law of hospitality to be the limitless, ideal form of hospitality which everyday hospitality should strive for. Hospitality in its conditional and everyday form presupposes a sovereignty: of the nation, of the host, of the provider of hospitality. Derrida calls this “[p]aradoxical and corrupting law,” because it depends on the complicity of traditional hospitality and power. It recognizes the guest and tolerates it, grants it rights and duties, but only because the host chooses to do so—only because the host exercises his power. At the same time, there is a necessary procedure of selection from the host as to whom they grant hospitality, which, according to Derrida, amounts to a “power in its finitude,”²⁷ for “sovereignty can *only* be exercised by filtering, choosing, and thus by excluding and doing violence. Injustice, a certain injustice, and even a certain perjury, begins right away, from the very threshold of the right to hospitality.”²⁸ The host chooses their *subject* of hospitality (or decides who is worthy of having the right to hospitality)—hence the injustice and perjury necessarily resulting from their power over the visitor. But at the same

²⁵ We have here our first explicit example of a ‘Deconstruction and X’ as described in the “Prolegomena”: a “division that turns this X [the foreigner] into, or rather makes appear in this X [foreigner], an impossibility that becomes its proper and sole possibility.”

²⁶ Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” 25.

²⁷ Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” 55.

²⁸ Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” 55 (Italics added, MS).

time, the host is unable to grant hospitality (and thus is unable of being a host) if there is no one to host—hence the necessity of the visitor actually visiting, and hence the host becoming hostage of the visitor. The host cannot exercise their power over the visitor if their potential subject does not come. Considering this complicity of traditional hospitality and power, conditional hospitality can never accomplish justice because it necessarily carries within it a certain injustice.

Unconditional hospitality, on the other hand, hospitality in its ideal form, is concerned with a radical openness to an(y) absolute, indistinguishable other—be they a desirable guest, an invitee, an unexpected visitor or an enemy. As unconditional hospitality cannot have any complicity to power, and thus to any processes of filtering or selection, the other, who is granted hospitality, should be (able to be) anonymously other. Unconditional hospitality is, then, independent of the guest's specific identity, of their name or their motives to come to this new place, independent of rights and duties. A hospitality granted to anyone, always.

Hostipitality

However, alluring as this unconditional hospitality might sound, it will eventually lead us to an aporia as well. While conditional hospitality is unable to secure ideal and just hospitality, unconditional hospitality would—exactly by virtue of its radical openness to the absolute other regardless of its identity—make it impossible for us *to identify the other as other*; this inability to identify the other will bestow us with an inability to grant them hospitality; and, thus, turns hospitality into an impossibility as well.

One of Derrida's ways of pursuing a vigilance towards the idea of a homogeneous meaning for concepts was by introducing neologisms. In another one of his works on hospitality, "Hostipitality," Derrida, inter alia, examined the origin of the word 'hospitalité' or 'hospitality,' analyzing both its French origin, *hôte*, and its derivation from the Latin word *hostis*.²⁹ According to Derrida, these origins bring to light hospitality's inherent ambiguity. As *hôte* in French means both *host* and *guest*, it is, as we have remarked already, always unsure who grants hospitality to whom—and, inherent to this granting of hospitality, there always is a complicity to power and injustice. Furthermore, as the Latin *hostis* originally signified both *host* and *enemy*, this would indicate, according to Derrida, a state of (mutual) hostility. By introducing

²⁹ Jacques Derrida, "Hostipitality".

the neologism *hostipitality* Derrida highlighted the ever-ambiguous meaning of the concept of hospitality and made place for an attentiveness towards its inherent relation to hostility.

According to Derrida aporias like these on the meaning of concepts should not cause us to be skeptical on the importance of notions such as hospitality and, more generally, responsibility, decision and ethics.³⁰ The fact that we are unable to provide an unambiguous and homogeneous meaning for it is instead *reason* to keep us alert and critical. For example, the two forms of hospitality are in need of each other to be able to grant anything like hospitality to anyone: unconditional hospitality needs conditional hospitality to be manifested via laws and duties, while conditional hospitality should keep its eye on unconditional hospitality for inspiration and as a directive to justice.

[L]et us consider the distinction between unconditional hospitality and, on the other hand, the rights and duties that are the conditions of hospitality. Far from paralyzing this desire or destroying the requirements of hospitality, this distinction requires us to determine what could be called, in Kantian language [...], intermediate *schemas*. Between an unconditional law or an absolute desire for hospitality on the one hand and, on the other, a law, a politics, a conditional ethics, there is distinction, radical heterogeneity, but also indissociability. One calls forth, involves, or prescribes the other. In giving a right, if I can put it like that, to unconditional hospitality, how can one give place to a determined, limitable, and delimitable—in a word, to a calculable—right or law? How can one give *place* to a concrete politics and ethics, including a history, evolutions, actual revolutions, advances—in short, a perfectability? [*sic*] [...] So by really intervening in the condition of hospitality in the name of the unconditional, even if this pure unconditionality appears inaccessible, and inaccessible not only as a regulatory idea, an Idea in the Kantian sense and infinitely removed, but inaccessible for the structural reasons, ‘barred’ by the internal contradictions we have analyzed?³¹

³⁰ Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable”.

³¹ Derrida, “Step of Hospitality / No Hospitality,” 147–149.

X₂. Premiss

Deconstruction and Promise

“

*Just as any utterance implies a performative promising to address itself to someone else as such ('I am speaking to you, and I promise you the truth'), just as any speech act promises the truth (even and especially if I am lying) – well, anyway, I can always lie, of course [...], but that will signify quite simply that therefore I'm not speaking to someone else, end of story.*³²

As we have already seen in the preliminary remarks on deconstruction and while deconstructing hospitality, language is of key importance to Derrida. He explicates this importance, for example, in *Writing and Difference* and *Of Grammatology*, although, in fact, the importance is to be found everywhere in his work and throughout all of deconstruction. This granted importance to language is closely associated with Derrida's view on the notion of promise—a notion we have also already come across during our deconstruction of hospitality (e.g., in hospitality's inherent perjury)—for Derrida considers every speech act ever made to, fundamentally, be a promise: “Each time I open my mouth, I am promising something.”³³ With regard to the large amounts of work he delivered, however, he has written hardly anything on it explicitly. “Advances,” his foreword to Serge Margel's (one of his most promising former students) book *Le Tombeau du Dieu Artisan*, seems to be the only work in which Derrida wrote explicitly towards a “Theory of the Promise.”³⁴ *Towards a theory of the promise*, indeed, as, considering his deconstructive approach, it would be naive to assume that Derrida would provide us with a conclusive theory. However, next to this *prolegomenon*³⁵ we find lots of references to the promise within Derrida's work on many other subjects. From these works and from “Advances” combined I will first try to show the importance of this notion for Derrida by uncovering its fundamentality to language, then unveil the aporetic structure of this notion of promise, and conclude by proposing a Derridean-style neologism for it: *premiss*.

To address, to promise / to promise, to address

As we saw just before, Derrida considers the promise to be not just one in many speech acts, but *every speech act ever made* to fundamentally be a promise.³⁶ Although he often may have

³² Jacques Derrida, “From ‘Of Grammatology’,” 41.

³³ Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” 22.

³⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Advances*, ed./trans. Philippe Lynes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 25.

³⁵ ... for which the consummation will forever be *to-come* ...

³⁶ Jacques Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable”.

seemed to do so, Derrida did not hierarchically distinguish between written and spoken language. What he did do is try to counter the ubiquitous preference for spoken as opposed to written language.³⁷ However, countering the hierarchy does not necessarily mean reversing it—a style of response we are gently becoming familiar with as we see more of Derrida’s deconstructive approach. Instead of cultivating a preference for written language over spoken language, he put both on the same footing by claiming that speech acts refer to “the general graphematic structure of every ‘communication.’”³⁸ Considering Derrida’s observation of every speech act fundamentally being a promise—the analysis of which we will get back to any minute now—this would mean that every act of communication is fundamentally a promise. And, as language is a communicative act, every use of language (be it either spoken or written) would fundamentally be an act of promising.

To examine the structure of this originary promising in language, let us first take a look at the everyday experience of simply addressing someone other, anyone other. According to Derrida, this addressing of another is always under the condition of a promise. Taking the example closest at hand at this moment, we may consider my current writing and my current address to you, as a reader. In addressing you I am, according to Derrida, promising. I promise to make my thoughts available to you, an other (which is as much a promise to *you* as a promise *from me to myself*—something we will return to later), and in making these thoughts available I promise to be honest. I promise to speak the truth, or at least to try to speak the truth. I promise not to lie to you. At the same time, the fact that I am able to “speak” to you now is under the condition that *you* believe that I (at least implicitly) promised to address you. For a successful address to take place, then, you should believe that I (again, at least implicitly) promised to speak the truth—or, at the very least, that I promised that I will try to speak the truth; that is, that I promised to speak “my” truth. Even if I would be lying to you, be it deliberately or not, I could only do so under the condition that you believe I would not do that, and thus, that I (once

³⁷ Derrida considered this preference of spoken over written language to be due to a preference of presence over absence – where, in the history of linguistics and rhetoric, spoken language was deemed to be “more present” or “less mediated.” For the sake of brevity and considering the scope of this thesis, I will not elaborate further on Derrida’s countering of the spoken/written-dichotomy here. If, however, you wish to read more of his work on this dichotomy of spoken vs. written language and of presence vs. absence, I recommend reading, e.g., Jacques Derrida, “Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas,” in *Writing and Difference*, ed./trans. Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001).

³⁸ Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff (Evanston: IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 19.

more, at least implicitly) promised not to.³⁹ Furthermore, even if I *break* my promise, if I commit perjury, this would be under the condition that I (this will be the last time, *I promise*; at least implicitly) promised not to break it.⁴⁰

What then, you could wonder, if you *knew* I was going to lie or if you expected me to; what if you knew or expected that I was going to commit perjury? For if you knew I intended on lying, or if you knew I intended on omitting to do what I promised, the most probable outcome would be that my address to you fails (although even then, in some sense, if in fact you did listen or read, my address to you was not completely unsuccessful). However, this failure of my address to you does not take away the fact that my attempt at addressing you would, according to Derrida, still have been initiated by a promise: “Just as any utterance implies a performative promising to address itself to someone else as such (‘I am speaking to you, and I promise you the truth’), just as any speech act promises the truth (even and especially if I am lying)—well, anyway, I can always lie, of course [...], but that will signify quite simply that therefore I’m not speaking to someone else, end of story.”⁴¹ It would signify “quite simply” that my address to you failed, but this has not taken away the promise implied by my utterance—be it, as we have seen before, a written or a spoken one.

From this foregoing quote, we can, apart from the address to the, let’s say, *externally* other, also derive an initial promising *from me to myself*. As the beginning part where Derrida writes “Just as any utterance implies a performative promising to address itself to someone else as such (‘I am speaking to you, and I promise you the truth’)”⁴² foreshadows, this same promising operates when I am speaking to myself. In addressing myself, I am always, in some sense, addressing some “other,” for, if I wish to address, I must have an addressee—I cannot address to no-one. As Derrida put it: “The thought of the promise or of promising thus presupposes, like every performative experience [which, as we have already seen, is, according to Derrida, always fundamentally a promise], what at least the grammar of a ‘first person’ presupposes [...] that this first person be plural, more than one, one and the other. Even when *I promise myself*,

³⁹ Jacques Derrida, “History of the Lie: Prolegomena,” in *Without Alibi*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 28–70. And Jacques Derrida, “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2),” in *Without Alibi*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 71–160.

⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, “‘Le Parjure,’ Perhaps: Storytelling and Lying,” in *Without Alibi*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 161–201. This is, of course, next to the condition of there being a promise at all, which subsequently could be broken.

⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” 67.

⁴² Jacques Derrida, “Foreigner Question,” 67.

whether I am promising myself this or that or *I am promising myself to myself*, the other is already in place. One must make a place for the other because there is no place without it.”⁴³ Formulated slightly differently, to clarify: One (necessarily) has to make place for the other, because the I itself is unable to have place without the other. One cannot *not* make place for the other, for it itself does not have place without the other.⁴⁴ From this, Derrida derives a particular “we”: not “of one and the other, one as the other, even when the one guards itself from the other,”⁴⁵ but “a ‘we’ without assured gathering, without intersubjectivity, without community or reciprocity, a strange dissymmetrical ‘we’ anterior to every social bond,”⁴⁶ which, at the same time, he deems to be the condition for any social bond to-come. “What comes before any promise, any promising, any ‘I promise,’ ‘you promise,’ ‘you (plural) promise,’ ‘they—masculine or feminine—promise’ is ‘*we promise ourselves*’ in *promising to the other*.”⁴⁷ We, I and the other (in me), necessarily promise ourselves in promising to the other—be the other an external or internal other. “Communication—and therewith every being-with-another, every being—is a promise,”⁴⁸ Werner Hamacher concludes.

The promise as anachronous

As we have already seen quite a lot of the promise while examining its fundamentality, I reckon it is time to take a look at this specific notion in and of itself. When doing so, we indeed again encounter an insurmountable dichotomy as we try to unequivocally grasp the essence of the promise—something which would probably not have surprised Derrida, keeping in mind that he diagnosed our western culture with logocentrism. When trying to define the promise, we have, on the one hand, to acknowledge that it carries within it the presumption that it is keepable and will be kept, and, thus, that the content of the promise (i.e., the promised) will “become true.”⁴⁹ If it would not, the so-called “promise” would simply be a believe or speculation, a wild guess. The promised would be something that “might just happen” somewhere in the future,

⁴³ Derrida, *Advances*, 49.

⁴⁴ Taking it to a more abstract level, we could say: the singular is unable to have place without plurality (it cannot singularize itself without an other, without plurality); the singular necessitates the plural.

⁴⁵ Derrida, *Advances*, 49.

⁴⁶ Derrida, *Advances*, 49.

⁴⁷ Derrida, *Advances*, 49 (My italics, MS).

⁴⁸ Werner Hamacher, “Lingua Amissa: The Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida’s Specters of Marx,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London/New York: Verso, 1999), 202.

⁴⁹ True in both of the following senses: of the promise being a genuine statement *and* of it being a factual statement – however focusing, considering the scope of this thesis, on the promise as factual statement. (Nonetheless, for a promise to be considered genuine, to be a genuine promise, it would have to fulfill the presumption of it being a factual statement as well.)

without any assurance of it. This promise would, in short, not have the convincing power of the promise. At the same time, the promise has to carry the presumption that its content could *not* become true, that it could *not* happen, that the promise is *unkeepable*. Otherwise, it would simply be a statement of fact or some sort of announcement of a causal chain of predetermined development. This promise would, then, not call upon the engagement of a certain amount of faith as is required in the promise.

As we are becoming more and more acquainted with after our deconstructions of several concepts already, our findings, alongside Derrida's, boil down to the inevitable observation that "there is here an intrinsic aporia in the concept of the promise," which is, however, "also the chance of the promise and not only a negative threat that would paralyze it."⁵⁰ Again we get, by way of deconstruction, burdened with the impossibility of a concept—but, *at the same time*, we get alleviated as this impossibility "becomes its proper and sole possibility,"⁵¹ just as we saw Derrida describe before.

The promise must always be *at once, at the same time infinite and finite* in its very principle: *infinite* because it must be capable of carrying itself beyond any possible program, and because in promising what is calculable and certain one no longer promises; *finite* because in promising the infinite ad infinitum one no longer promises anything presentable, and therefore one no longer promises. To be a promise, it *must be able to be unkeepable* and must thus be able *not to be* a promise (for an unkeepable promise is not promise). Conclusion: one can never *constatively* claim [...] *that there is or that there has been a promise.*⁵²

One can never constatively claim that a promise is taking place, or that it has taken place. Following Derrida's line of thought, this is because of the "irreducible anachrony [...] of any promise."⁵³ Within the promise, there are three "times" at play, simultaneously: the present (in which the *act* of promising takes place), the finite future (in which the promised should take place—and, in a sense we will return to, has already taken place), and the infinite future (or the infinite *to-come*,⁵⁴ which must remain open to the possibility of the promise to *not* take place). This simultaneous play of times is what Derrida calls *anachrony*, which we could accordingly describe as being *chronologically out of place*. He considers any promise, then, to be irreducibly

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Advances*, 27.

⁵¹ Derrida, "Et Cetera," (Cf. "Prolegomena" of this thesis)

⁵² Derrida, *Advances*, 27.

⁵³ Derrida, *Advances*, 28.

⁵⁴ I will get back to this notion of the *to-come*, alluding to the future, in the following chapter.

anachronous: *in the present* we promise something which we must have already kept *in advance* (so the promise is in the present always “after the fact,” or “too late,” as the promised has, in some sense, already taken place⁵⁵) *and* which must be absolutely open to a possible *non-advent* (so the promise is in the present always “before the fact,” or “too early” as the promised cannot yet have taken place and could even possibly never take place at all).

Premiss

When trying to find the essence of the notion of promise, we encounter, thus, on the one hand the premise that the promise is keepable and finite, that it must be and will be kept, and that the future will turn out to be its proof. However, at the same time we must recognize that this specific, expected, aimed-at future can be, and, in fact, must be able to be missed. The promise must be open to an infinite and undetermined to-come. “[I]n order to be a promise, it must remain *keepable* without any assurance that it be *kept*, it must be able to remain unkeepable, possibly unkeepable in order to remain what it will have been, to wit, a promise. But a merely keepable promise remains finite,”⁵⁶ and, hence, is calculable and no longer a promise. And so on and so forth.

From this analysis of the notion of promise, a notion to which Derrida (at least implicitly⁵⁷) attributes so much importance, we can, thus, derive two extremes. We have seen that the promise bears both the necessary *premise* that it is keepable, *and* the possibility that its foreseen future can be, and must necessarily be able to be, *missed*—either by the disclosure of another future, or of no future at all.⁵⁸ Unifying these two characteristics, which seem to be both necessary and unreconcilable at the same time, I propose *premiss* as a neologism for promise. Both in sound and in text *premiss* is close to ‘promise’ and keeps loyal to its traditional use in everyday language, while *at the same time* indicating a break with the logocentric deception of being able to grasp the unambiguous meaning of ‘promise.’ *Premiss* unveils the internal heterogeneity of the notion of promise, and keeps us in a welcome state of vigilance towards it. These characteristics fulfill, I think, what Derrida aims for when introducing a neologism.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ For *it must have already taken its place somewhere* on this predetermined timeline.

⁵⁶ Derrida, *Advances*, 37–38.

⁵⁷ When we take the importance Derrida attributes to language and his analysis of promise’s fundamentality to language in mind, I think we can be quite certain that the notion of promise must have affected Derrida’s ideas greatly. (By the way, sorry for not keeping my earlier promise...)

⁵⁸ I will come back to this in the next chapter.

⁵⁹ Cf. Derrida, “Différance”.

X₃. Messianicity without messianism

Deconstruction and The Other

“

As soon as you address the other, as soon as you are open to the future, as soon as you have a temporal experience of waiting for the future, of waiting for someone to come: that is the opening of experience. Someone is to come, is now to come. Justice and peace will have to do with the coming of the other, with the promise. Each time I open my mouth I am promising something. When I speak to you, I am telling you that I promise to tell you something, to tell you the truth. Even if I lie, the condition of my lie is that I promise to tell you the truth. So the promise is not just one speech act among others; every speech act is fundamentally a promise. This universal structure of the promise, of the expectation for the future, for the coming, and the fact that this expectation of the coming has to do with justice—that is what I call the messianic structure.⁶⁰

In both of the foregoing chapters, we have already seen parts of Derrida’s deconstruction of the notion of ‘the other.’ While deconstructing hospitality we saw the other for example as the foreigner, the *xenos*, the host, or as absolutely or anonymously other—all of these cases in which we found ourselves in a place of aporia when trying to disclose their meanings. Deconstructing the promise, then, we found the other as the addressee, as both external and internal, as the other (physically) outside of me, but also as *the other in me*—the other as the necessary plurality inherent to singularity. In this chapter I will take the deconstruction of the other a step further and relate it to the idea of absolute futurity, or the *to-come*. Following Derrida, I will provide an examination of the absolutely and indeterminably other who, in western (Judaic, Islamic and Christian) monotheisms, or “Abrahamic religions”⁶¹ is—or: *was* or *will be*—embodied by the Messiah. From this, Derrida derived a messianic structure, a messianicity without messianism, and a particular idea of the future as the *absolutely other to-come*, or the other as the *future-to-come*.

Messiah, messianism and messianicity

In Abrahamic religions, there is an expectation of the Messiah, of an other, a determinate other, that will come (or return) to bring justice. This expectation of the Messiah as a “*prophetic prefiguration*,”⁶² for example Jesus in Christianity, is called messianism. In this anticipation of the Messiah, Derrida recognizes a structure of experience, which he calls *messianicity*. Messianicity “*resembles* ([...] resembles, I hasten to add, *without* identifying itself with it, or

⁶⁰ Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” 22–23.

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ within the Limits of Reason Alone,” in *Acts of Religion* (New York/London: Routledge, 2001), 56.

⁶² Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge,” 56.

reducing itself to it)⁶³ messianism in that it is the promise of an emancipatory event. However, whereas messianism refers to “a specific determination of the emancipatory event within the overarching telos of history,”⁶⁴ messianicity, on the other hand, refers to “the basic ‘experience’ of an emancipatory promise that always stands in relation to the unrealizable future-to-come,”⁶⁵ “or even [...] a past-to-come-again.”⁶⁶ It is open to whatever it is that is to come, whenever it is to come, and whether it is to come at all. So, whereas messianism refers to the promised coming of a specific, *determinate* other, messianicity refers to a universal structure of experience in which the coming of an *indeterminate* other is anticipated.⁶⁷

Derrida introduced the notion of messianicity in *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, originally a series of lectures during the conference ‘Whither Marxism?’ in which the possibility of a future for Marxism after the fall of Soviet communism was discussed. He further developed this notion in, among others works, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ within the Limits of Reason Alone,” where he examined the distressed⁶⁸ place of religion in modernity. Considering his historical environment of that time, then, we can see why Derrida considers a separation of messianicity from messianism to be so important.

This messianic structure is not limited to what one calls messianisms, that is, Jewish, Christian, or Islamic messianism, to these determinate figures and forms of the Messiah. As soon as you reduce the messianic structure to messianism, then you are reducing the universality and this has important political consequences. Then you are accrediting one tradition among others and a notion of an elected people, of a given literal language, a given fundamentalism. That is why I think that the difference, however subtle it may appear, between the messianic and messianism is very important.⁶⁹

Derrida recognizes in *the promise of Marxism* a messianic promise, although Marxism in its concretization, with an inevitable proletarian revolution on its horizon—and, thus, a determined view on the other, the event, that is to come and bring justice—, would rather be a “secularized”

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” in *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London/New York: Verso, 1999), 254.

⁶⁴ Owen Ware, “Dialectic of the Past / Disjunction of the Future: Derrida and Benjamin on the Concept of Messianism,” *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* 5, no.2 (2004): 100.

⁶⁵ Owen Ware, “Dialectic of the Past / Disjunction of the Future,” 100.

⁶⁶ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 254.

⁶⁷ We can notice here an analogy to the *finite* and *infinite* future, a distinction we already encountered when deconstructing the notion of promise. I will return to this analogy later on.

⁶⁸ In both the senses of *being without place* and *procuring a new place*.

⁶⁹ Derrida, “The Villanova Roundtable,” 23.

messianism.⁷⁰ “As soon as we place the messianic on a horizon of expectation, it quickly precipitates into traditional messianism, becoming dogmatically religious, in the same way that justice, whenever we try to give it (self) presence, results in the rigidity of law.”⁷¹ Here, we can notice an analogy to hospitality: when we place unconditional hospitality on a horizon of expectation, it abruptly turns into traditional hospitality, embodied in laws, in rights and duties. As Derrida states, the waiting for the messianic will have to be “a waiting without horizon of expectation.”⁷² “Involved this time, however, would be a waiting *without* waiting, a waiting whose horizon is, as it were, punctured by the event (which is waited for *without* being awaited); we would have to do with a waiting for an event, for someone or something that, in order to happen or ‘arrive’, must exceed and surprise every determinant anticipation. No future, no time-to-come [*à-venir*], no other, otherwise; no event worthy of the name, no revolution. And no justice.”⁷³

Messianicity without messianism

This foregoing “waiting *without* horizon of expectation,” this “waiting *without* waiting,” and, as the heading just here foreshadows, this “messianicity *without* messianism,” have in common that “everything seems to come down to the interpretation and ‘logic’ of the little word ‘without’.”⁷⁴ Because, does it not seem quite useless, or even impossible, to “wait without a horizon of expectation,” to “wait without waiting”? What, then, is one waiting for? How does one know when to “stop” waiting? When has the awaited arrived? And how can one wait if there exists no such thing as waiting? Derrida stresses here that “‘without’ does not necessarily designate negativity; even less does it designate annihilation. If this preposition effects a certain abstraction, it also accounts for the necessary effects of abstraction in so doing—of the abstraction of the ‘there is’, of the abstraction *that* ‘there is’.”⁷⁵ So, waiting without a horizon of expectation, would not mean that there *is* no horizon of expectation—the preposition

⁷⁰ As Dufourmantelle puts it: “Utopias from Marxism to fascism that are inscribed in the reality of a place, a country, a power, collapse at the very point of their constitution, in nostalgia for a timeless fixity that would keep in its hands the means of its exercise.” Dufourmantelle, “Invitation,” 72–74.

⁷¹ Ware, “Dialectic of the Past / Disjunction of the Future,” 110. “Whenever we determine the content of justice, according to Derrida, we obtain law instead. Law is always algebraic, centered on an economy of rules, restitution, divestiture, appropriation, and all the totalizing norms of representation that rest on self-presence. Justice, on the other hand, is impossible, not in a negative sense, but in the sense that it can never have self-presence. And only if time is heterogeneous can we establish a heterogeneous relation to the other. Still, disjointed time does not necessarily lead to justice; it simply opens up the heterogeneity crucial for any respect and responsibility toward the other. Justice is therefore ‘undeconstructible’ because it disrupts the notion of linear time, not because it has a self-presence immune to the logic of displacement.” Ware, “Dialectic of the Past / Disjunction of the Future,” 107.

⁷² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 211.

⁷³ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 251. Brackets in original translation.

⁷⁴ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 251.

⁷⁵ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 251.

‘without’ indicates that there, in fact, can be. Waiting without waiting would not mean that there *is* no such thing as waiting—there, in fact, can be. We just do not *know* it, so we will have to be in anticipation of it, be open to its possibility.

The same accounts when Derrida emphasizes that the messianic structure must be explicitly considered to be a “messianicity without messianism.” “In principle, my use of the word ‘messianic’ bears no relation to any messianistic tradition. That is why I speak, precisely, of ‘messianicity *without* messianism’. [...] It is a different structure.”⁷⁶ Derrida’s interpretation of the messianic “no longer has *any* essential connection with what messianism may be taken to mean, that is, at least two things: on the one hand, the memory of a determinate historical revelation, whether Jewish or Judeo-Christian, and, on the other, a relatively determinate messiah-figure. The very structure of messianicity *without* messianism itself suffices to exclude these two conditions.”⁷⁷ Derrida emphasizes that the structure of messianicity without messianism excludes the two conditions concerning the determinate historical revelation and this revelation being embodied by a determinate messiah-figure. Nevertheless, he explicitly excludes them *as conditions*, not as possibilities. He continues: “Not that I think we must reject them, or that we must necessarily denigrate or do away with the historical figures of messianism; these are, however, only possible on the universal and quasi-transcendental ground of the structure constituted by this ‘*without* messianism’.”⁷⁸ Messianicity without messianism would, thus, not mean that there *is* no such thing as messianism or a Messiah, or that the disclosure of *a Messiah* as the emancipatory event is an impossibility—the preposition ‘without’ indicates, again, precisely that there, in fact, *can be*. We just do not *know* it, so we will have to be in anticipation of it, be open to whatever it is that is to-come.

The Other To-Come

During the course of this thesis, we have already seen several mentions of the future, of the “to-come” and of the “future-to-come.” Although Derrida mostly used just “future” and he, in fact, was not really consistent in using its extended version, the “future-to-come” (or future-to-come’s abbreviation “to-come”), he did actually distinguish between these two concepts:

In general, I try to distinguish between what one calls the future and “l’avenir.” The future is that which—tomorrow, later, next century—will be. There’s a future that is

⁷⁶ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 250.

⁷⁷ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 251.

⁷⁸ Derrida, “Marx & Sons,” 251.

predictable, programmed, scheduled, foreseeable. But there is a future, l'avenir (to come), which refers to someone who comes whose arrival is totally unexpected. For me, that is the real future. That which is totally unpredictable. The Other who comes without my being able to anticipate their arrival. So if there is a real future beyond this other known future, it's this other unknown future, it's l'avenir [the "to-come"], in that it's the coming of the Other when I'm completely unable to foresee their arrival.⁷⁹

We can find, here, an analogy to the concepts of the *finite* and *infinite* future as we have seen them during our deconstruction of the promise. While simply "future" would designate the finite future, as some sort of predetermined timeline, the "future-to-come" or the "to-come" would denote the infinite future as the openness to whatever is, indeed, *à-venir*, to-come—or not to-come, as we have also seen. Derrida uses this to-come in the sense of "that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality."⁸⁰ This breaking with constituted normality should, however, not be conceived of as the external to normality (i.e., transcendental) but rather as the unrepresentable ("quasi-transcendental,"⁸¹ as Derrida would name it). Although Johan de Jong does not distinguish between the "future" and the "(future-)to-come" in contemplating Derrida's notion of future, it is illuminating to take a look at the following quote: "It would go against Derrida's sense of the term if the future[-to-come] were thought of as the becoming-present of what is still absent. [...] The future[-to-come] does not just transcend what we colloquially call the present, but everything that lets itself be presented."⁸² Analogous to *différance*, as we have seen in the "Prolegomena" of this thesis, the future-to-come "exceeds the alternative of presence and absence."⁸³

To account for this heterogeneity of the future, which is inherent to the messianic structure, "Derrida recasts time as out-of-joint, thereby viewing the future not as a future-present, but as a heterogeneous *other*."⁸⁴ If, as in messianism, the future would have already been laid out, if it would already be determined what emancipatory event would take place, it would have already *taken place*, taken its place on the predetermined timeline. This is what Derrida dubs the future-present; the future as already present (and then, analogous to the anachrony of the promise, also as already past). According to Derrida, however, the future as it is implied by the

⁷⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Derrida: Screenplay and Essays on the Film*, ed. Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 53. Brackets in the original.

⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 2nd ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 5.

⁸¹ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 212.

⁸² De Jong, *The Movement of Showing*, 43–44.

⁸³ Derrida, 'From "Différance",' 73.

⁸⁴ Ware, "Dialectic of the Past / Disjunction of the Future," 100.

messianic structure should be infinite, open, and undetermined, and *give place* to the absolutely other that is to-come.

Disjointed time [...] allows Derrida to view the future-to-come as the site of justice. The future-to-come, like the *other*, is heterogeneous: we cannot have a pure understanding of alterity, and, according to Derrida, any attempt to reduce the other to the same amounts to violent appropriation. Though we never have absolute knowledge of the future-to-come, we can nevertheless affirm its heterogeneity and, in doing so, welcome the other without reserve.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Ware, "Dialectic of the Past / Disjunction of the Future," 107.

Deconstruction and/as the Promise of Hospitality to the Other

*Prolegomena to a Theory of Deconstruction**

“

*Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is the citizen of another country, a human, animal, or divine creature, a living or a dead thing, male or female.*⁸⁶

So far, during the course of this thesis, we have seen several deconstructions. Beginning with the deconstruction of hospitality—within which we saw, inter alia, deconstructions of the foreigner and the host as well—, we continued by deconstructing the promise, and ended with a deconstructed other, the other as the future-to-come. Now, as I have foreshadowed, I will conclude by *proposing a “theory of deconstruction.”* Not proposing *the* theory of deconstruction, nor *posing* a theory of deconstruction—for I think, after the several representations of deconstruction we have seen, we should by now be compelled to find ourselves in a place of vigilance towards conclusive judgments on the meaning of concepts, and thus, also on the meaning of deconstruction. I will, thus, not provide you with *The Theory of Deconstruction*, but instead with some preliminary remarks to one of the imaginable theories of deconstruction: I will provide you with my “Prolegomena to a Theory of Deconstruction”⁸⁷ (—for which the consummation will forever be to-come).

Deconstruction and X

However, before doing so, we will first concern ourselves with a short recap of the steps already taken throughout this thesis. We started our quest of defining deconstruction by introducing its very impossibility. However, as with Derrida an impossibility often implies its possibility, we went on and decided to try and find deconstruction a fitting nutshell. We then preliminarily defined deconstruction by stating that, in any case, it is *no* theory, no method, no tool or strategy, no (or not solely a) course of destruction but at the same time of construction, and by, for the time being, describing it as “a continuous and necessarily infinite search for *différance*, for the

⁸⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Step of Hospitality / No Hospitality,” in *Of Hospitality*, ed. Anne Dufourmantelle, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 77.

⁸⁷ Cf. Jacques Derrida, “The Countertime of Philosophy (Prolegomena to a Theory of the Promise),” in *Advances*, ed./trans. Philippe Lynes (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 25–34.

*... for which the consummation will forever be *to-come*.

impossible unveiling of the always veiled trace [between dichotomies, or within aporias].”⁸⁸

We encountered Derrida on the way, explicating the following:

Each time that I say ‘deconstruction and X (regardless of the concept or the theme),’ this is the prelude to a very singular division that turns this X into, or rather makes appear in this X, an impossibility that becomes its proper and sole possibility, with the result that between the X as possible and the ‘same’ X as impossible, there is nothing but a relation of homonymy, a relation for which we have to provide an account.... For example, here referring myself to demonstrations I have already attempted ..., gift, hospitality, death itself (and therefore so many other things) can be possible only as impossible, as the im-possible, that is, unconditionally.⁸⁹

Guided by this Derridean wit, we embarked on the deconstruction of several concepts: hospitality (X_1), the promise (X_2), and the other (X_3), the last one with whom we already crossed paths several times during the foregoing deconstructions, but here dealt with on a more abstract level—linking the other to futurity.

X_1

Our first deconstruction was concerned with the concept of *hospitality*. Following Derrida in *Of Hospitality*, we first encountered (Socrates as) the foreigner, the *xenos*, of whom we turned out to be unable to unambiguously decide whether they were in fact from abroad or totally other, or may sometimes be even more familiar than our fellow citizens. We came across the *hôte* (meaning both host *and* guest), or host, who, in spite of *and* by virtue of their power, turns into hostage. And, of course, we dealt with the notion of hospitality itself, within which we distinguished between the conditional laws of hospitality and the unconditional law of hospitality. Due to its complicity to the host’s necessary power, conditional hospitality (i.e., traditional hospitality as we know it in the everyday use of the term, embodied as rights and duties) always already falls short in the wake of unconditional hospitality. Unconditional hospitality, however, would, due to its radical openness to any indistinguishable other, make it impossible for us to identify the other as other, and, thus, will bestow us with an inability to grant them hospitality. Both conditional and unconditional hospitality, then, would turn out to be an impossibility. Derrida captured this aporetic structure of hospitality with the neologism “hostipitality,” a conjunction of hospitality and hostility (derived from the Latin *hostis*, meaning both host *and* enemy), and emphasized the importance of staying alert when hospitality is

⁸⁸ Page 5 of this thesis.

⁸⁹ Derrida, “Et Cetera,” 300.

concerned—encouraging a state of vigilance, which he considers to be the only possibility to ever be able to grant anything like hospitality at all.

*X*₂

Coming from a noticed importance of language within Derrida's work, we continued by taking *the promise* into consideration, as Derrida himself stressed that "Each time I open my mouth, I am promising something."⁹⁰ First, we analyzed Derrida's idea of the fundamentality of the promise to language (be it either spoken or written): Derrida stressed that every address to anyone other always implies a promise—and that, even if my address to you would fail, we would still have to do with an initial promise *from me to myself*, from me to *the other within me*; a promise *of myself*, *from me to myself*. Subsequently, we laid bare promise's aporetic structure and concerned ourselves with its anachrony. As we noticed that the promise, in short, must *at the same time* be keepable *and* unkeepable, the promise is, according to Derrida, chronologically out of time. He sees here three "times" at play, simultaneously: the present (in which the *act* of promising takes place), the finite future (in which the promised should take place, and which, in some sense, already has taken place), and the infinite future (or the infinite *to-come*, which must remain open to the possibility of the promise to *not* take place). After this analysis we saw the introduction of a Derridean-style neologism for the promise, to keep us alert to its aporetic structure: *premiss*, a conjugation of the necessary *premise* that the promise is keepable, *and* the possibility that its foreseen future can be, and must necessarily be able to be, *missed*—either by the disclosure of another future, or of no future at all.

*X*₃

All the while being on the lookout for deconstructive potential, we have seen *the other* coming up in several cases already: as the foreigner, the *xenos*, the guest, the enemy, and the absolutely and indistinguishably other; and as the addressee of speech acts, as both the external and internal other, the other as the necessary plurality inherent to singularity. Taking the deconstruction of the other a step further and relating it to the idea of absolute futurity, or the *(future-)to-come*, we came to see the other as the *messianic other*; not defined by messianism but by messianicity (precisely *without* messianism), the other as "The Other who comes without my being able to

⁹⁰ Derrida, on page 12 of this thesis.

anticipate their arrival,”⁹¹ and the future “not as a future-present, but as a heterogeneous *other*.”⁹² Concluding, then, on The Other as “the absolutely other that is to-come.”⁹³

Deconstruction as the Promise of Hospitality to The Other

As we have seen during the deconstruction of our several X’s, deconstruction is a way of *giving place* to that which has, up until then, *not had place*. It breaks with the traditional meanings of concepts and invites us to think otherwise, it breaks with the idea of the possibility of unambiguous meaning at all and even invites us to open up to the possibility of impossibility, to the possibility of an absolute, indeterminate otherness. An otherness which does not have place, did not have place, does not have place yet, might never have place; but which should, for it to ever have place, be *given place*, be granted hospitality. Deconstruction, then, can be seen *as hospitality*: hospitality towards *the indeterminate other*, hospitality towards whatever it is that is *to-come*, hospitality towards *the other to-come*. “Hospitality—this is a name or an example of deconstruction. Of the deconstruction of the concept, of the concept of concept⁹⁴, as well as of its construction, its home, its ‘at-home’ [*son chez-soi*]. Hospitality is the deconstruction of the at-home; deconstruction is hospitality to the other, to the other than oneself, the other than ‘its other,’ to an other who is beyond any ‘its other.’”⁹⁵

Our last concern, then, must be: What is this *place* that we can give to that which not, as yet, has had place? What is the place for that which, as yet, has been *without place*? I suggest that this place must be the place of the promise. Precisely because the promise is, as we have seen, chronologically *out of place*. It does not have place in the ordinary course of things and from this impossible “standpoint” grants us with the possibility to *give a place within itself*—which means, precisely: a place in these three “times” of the present, the finite future (which is, in some sense, always already the past) and the infinite future-to-come—to that which does not have place within “constituted normality.”⁹⁶ “The very essence of a promise [...] is its futurity, what is to-come. Affirming the promise—instead of the promised event—amounts to affirming the future-to-come indirectly, which prevents us from ever determining the future with content. [...] Affirming the future *as future* is parallel to affirming the other *as other*: in each case, by

⁹¹ Derrida, on page 22 of this thesis.

⁹² Ware, on page 22 of this thesis.

⁹³ Page 22 of this thesis.

⁹⁴ Cf. “Prolegomena” of this thesis, 3.

⁹⁵ Derrida, “Hostipitality,” 364. Brackets in original.

⁹⁶ Derrida, on page 22 of this thesis.

affirming the given heterogeneity, we refrain from reducing the other to the same, or the future to the present.”⁹⁷ Deconstruction, I propose, *can* be seen as “the promise of hospitality to the other.”

⁹⁷ Ware, “Dialectic of the Past / Disjunction of the Future,” 112.

Foreseen Salvation

An Epilogue

“

*To say 'I promise' I must also say 'I admit my promise' and 'I admit it in view of its admission by the other to whom it is addressed.' But to admit a promise means unavoidably to concede its potential failure, its potential breach and even its potential inadmissibility; hence, to treat its admission not as an assured fact but as a rendering possible which does not exclude its rendering impossible as well – the possibility of the impossibility of this rendering possible. 'I promise' therefore always also means: 'This promise is admitted on the condition of its unreliability and its possible inadmissibility.'*⁹⁸

I have, as announced, not wanted to propose *the* theory of deconstruction, nor to conclusively *pose* any theory, as I believe with absolute certainty⁹⁹ that what we have just seen is only one of the many possible ways to interpret, to present, to illustrate deconstruction—only one of the many possible ways to give it definition without giving it *a* definition. I very deliberately limited myself to a specific part of Derrida's extensive oeuvre, as I foresaw “salvation” in doing so: a possibility to bring us closer to *an* idea of deconstruction. However, as we are familiar with by now, this possibility led abruptly towards its impossibility—by putting deconstruction on a horizon of expectation, I abruptly turned it into “traditional” deconstruction: I called it by the name of a theory, I used it as a method, as a tool, a strategy. My messianic hope for salvation turning out to be, in its concretization, a rather “secularized” messianism.

“The enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Hamacher, “Lingua Amissa,” 208.

⁹⁹ By now, we should not be too surprised anymore with these kinds of seemingly contradictory remarks.

¹⁰⁰ Jacques Derrida, “From ‘Of Grammatology,’” 41.

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