

How Much Writing is Enough?  
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## How Much Writing is Enough?

### Abstract

The difference between Derrida and Deleuze has been debated in terms of their understandings and uses of the historical distinction between Being and beings. Daniel W. Smith intersects with the question when discussing transcendence and immanence. Clair Colebrook intersects when discussing materialism. Paul Patton intersects when distinguishing the unconditioned and conditioned. This essay moves along with their ideas, and contributes to the discussion by re-inscribing the debate in terms of nouns and verbs. The conclusion suggests that the noun/verb prism yields a view of the question about Being and beings that fits most easily into Smith's conception of the relation between Derrida and Deleuze. Thematically, the essay is framed by a line from Derrida's eulogy for Deleuze, and by a question. The line is Derrida recollecting Deleuze commenting that, "It's painful for me to see you spending so much time on the College International de Philosophie. I would rather you wrote..." The question addressed to the prolific Derrida and Deleuze is: "How much writing is enough?" Why do individuals with limited time who have already written numerous and thick volumes of philosophy choose to go ahead and write more?

### Keywords

Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Juan Rulfo, writing

### I How much is enough?

"It pains me," Gilles Deleuze said to Jacques Derrida, "that you don't spend more time writing...." That's a true quote, more or less, according to Derrida. It comes from his eulogy for Deleuze. It's also astonishing. I mean, given that Derrida's bibliography alone runs longer than some books, how could it have occurred to anyone to admonish Derrida – however gently - for not writing *enough*?

How much is enough?

## II From zero to the necessary book

Zero, that's the fastest answer. Philosophers should write no pages at all, and it would be difficult to conceive this essay without another in the background: *Plato's Pharmacy*, which invokes the most notorious philosopher who authored nothing, and so affirmed that no writing is already enough.

Next, going past this absent book attributable to Socrates, there's a tiny novel titled *Pedro Páramo* by the Mexican Juan Rulfo. The story chronicles a man's struggle with reality after arriving in a desolate town named Comala. It's a fictional place, though the novel has inspired an international tourist industry of erudite pilgrims tramping through obscure pueblos in search of the real town that inspired the literary one. Rulfo never divulged the secret, so we'll never know the actual location. It's probably not surprising, though, that the opportunistic citizens of a spot in Mexico that happens to be called Comala have dressed the town up with literary references, and with hotels happy to accept dollars.

Two other discussions surrounding Rulfo's book also relate to the question about stopping writing. The first involves the story's place in literary history. Published in 1955, it sparked the Latin American literary boom crystalized by Magic Realism. About that, Susan Sontag wrote that,

*"Pedro Páramo* is a classic in the truest sense. In retrospect, it seems as if it had to be written.

Rulfo's novel, the idea is, was *necessary*; it was a required piece in Latin American literary development. And if that's right, then in his time and place at least, more writing was unnecessary. The book did the required work, and was done, and enough.

The second discussion surrounding Rulfo and his story concerns literary output. His was paltry. It started with *Pedro Páramo* which can be read in an evening, and then petered out with short collection of brief stories. On this front, Sontag wrote:

"Everyone asked Rulfo why he didn't publish another book, as if the point of a writer's life is to go on writing and publishing. In fact, the point of a writer's life is to produce a great book, and this is what Rulfo did.

What's curious here is the implication that it was the *success* of writing – the fact that he'd authored a great book – that put an end to Rulfo as a writer. Stated slightly differently, there are books that don't come from writing, so much as end it.

Somewhat more prosaically, in scattered interviews and discussions, Rulfo himself explained that his fulltime job and family life didn't provide enough money, or leave enough hours to produce more books. There was also the problem of desire: he admitted that didn't feel like writing. Finally, Rulfo, also stated that he'd published what he had to say.

### **III Derrida and interminable writing**

In the end it's hard to know, but up to here there are two ways that writing stops, with the absent book, and with the necessary book.

Then there are the interminables. The reason Derrida's books kept coming is everywhere in his pages, but it's especially explicit in *Plato's Pharmacy* where uncertainties about writing, memory, poisons and remedies demonstrate that once pages start, there's no natural stopping. Not directly because opposed terms infiltrate and corrupt each-other's meaning, but more purely because the scene of undecidability's production – whether it's called a *pharmakon* or *différance* – is also and equally the *origin* of writing. For Derrida, reversals in textual meaning are more than an effect of having written, they also condition the act, which is the essence of his assertion that Plato's philosophy - and then all philosophy - is *constituted* by the fatal redoubling of the *pharmakon*.

And this means that if Juan Rulfo is the one who authored the necessary book to stop writing, it's Derrida who most persistently undercuts the very idea of necessity. If Rulfo wrote enough because his book had to exist at a certain moment in literary history, then Derrida responds that beginning to write literature – or anything – means there are no firm histories. And where Rulfo said that he'd published what he had to say, and proved his conviction with inaction, Derrida responds that the condition of writing means Rulfo's certainty about what he'd authored is as elusive as the divide between realism and the magic realism of his novel.

### **IV Deleuze as distinct from Derrida and the necessary book**

Returning to Derrida, Deleuze and his request, and the eulogy, there's a question about when writing stops, and now there's the possibility that it won't. Next, that possibility is also a question: if writing goes interminable, are there different *levels*, distinct *kinds* of assertions that no writing will ever be enough?

The medievals and scholastics started down this path by distinguishing two kinds of interminability. The infinite is the line tracing a circle endlessly, and the unlimited is the line extending without constraint.

There is some analogy here to Derrida and Deleuze, but a more precise distinguishing of their respective endless writings begins with divergent conceptions of ontological difference.

While it's true that, together, Derrida and Deleuze avoid mirroring Platonism's identity when they conceive difference, Deleuze goes on alone to seek difference as non-oppositional, as something distinct from differing things. In grammatical terms, this translates into a distinction between nouns and verbs.

For Derrida, like the tradition he meticulously deconstructs, nouns are served by verbs; it's nouns, then verbs. Consequently, Derrida starts with a written account and a memory, and then goes on to remembering. He starts with a poison and a remedy, and then investigates the poisoning of the remedy, and the curing of the poisoned.

Deleuze goes the other way. Verbs are served by nouns: there's writing, and then comes authors and their books. Consequently, for Rulfo, it's not quite right to say that he authored *Pedro Páramo*, instead it was that the writing happened, and then an author emerged on one side, and a necessary book on the other.

Or again, Deleuze, who was a ragingly hard drinker, didn't start out that way. No one is born needing alcohol; it's the act of drinking that makes someone need more. So here too there's not a drinker, and alcohol in a glass, and then the glass coming to the lips. Instead, there's the verb *to drink*, followed by the people and things that serve the purpose. Because nouns are expressions of verbs, finally, writing and drinking aren't things you do, they're verbs that do you.

If that's right, then writing, drinking, and verbs generally should be conceived in the infinitive: they don't belong to anyone, they cut through experience, expressing themselves here or there through someone or another. This doesn't mean that there's no individuality, or that we're puppets to rampant verbs, it's just that the sense that we have of ourselves and what we've done comes afterwards, just as the experience of

writing an essay in philosophy is one where we only know what the pages are about – what the tone is and the aim – after it's done. Everyone, I suppose, who has written an essay has shared the experience of only knowing what parts need to be edited down, and which sections require elaboration when the real writing is, in essence, finished. Just taking this essay for example, the intention was a balanced comparison between Derrida and Deleuze, but that's not what happened. What came out was the essay I'm reading now, and only after it was finished did I go back and understand myself as a certain kind of author, as the sort who would write an essay like this, very different from the initial expectation.

Derrida could intervene here in ways that are predictable, intriguing and, probably, lengthy, but better to widen still further the split between he and Deleuze along the lines of transcendence, immanence and ethics.

### **V Ethics**

Derrida's most human work - his considerations of forgiveness, hospitality, gifts, justice and similar – are transcendental reflections. They're not only that, and they are only narrowly that, but Derrida's forgiveness, for example, can only be consummate to the word when that which is forgiven is, in fact, unforgiveable, beyond any forgiveness. If not for that, then we're only talking about a re-balancing of accounts: I suffer a wrong, and recoup in terms of dignity when I deign to forgive. True forgiveness, by contrast, the kind giving meaning to the act, only emerges when I can't possibly recover what I've lost, but let it pass anyway. Ethics, in the end, happens in that dialectically unsteady place between rebalancing accounts and absolution. That's why, for Derrida, ethics comes after transcendence: to exist, it depends on forgiveness as both envisioned and impossible.

On the other side, Deleuze is a philosopher of immanence in two senses. First, doing comes before being. This is verbs coming before nouns. Second, the doing that generates beings must always be a departure. Philosophy, as Deleuze defines it, is the imperative to create concepts that are always new. Now, these two senses are significant, but their unification is critical. What's tying together here is an ontology and an ethics: writing for Deleuze comes before the writer and the book, and for it to have value – *for it to have been worth doing* - it must escape what is already done.

Refining this, the imperative to the new doesn't exactly mean that I survey the books that are out there, and then find a way to author one that's distinct. This type of originality is thought starting from nouns, from books (and, in a sense, from transcendence, the hope for total originality). Instead, the imperative ought to be understood in terms of potency, as something I am able to do that recreates me as different from what I am. This is the sense in which Deleuze is a philosopher of perpetual becoming, of nomadism, and of solitude. It's the affirmation that the ethical reason we have things is to *depart from them*.

There is, finally, no more powerful way to envision writing as interminable. It's no longer that writing *fails* to stop; it is that writing will go on because books only exist and only hold value if they serve the production of the next one as a departure. Books *are* to the extent that they generate more writing.

## VI Conclusion

What makes Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* valuable? If we're answering from the extreme of interminability where verbs define nouns and departures define ethics, the *entire* value of *any* book derives exclusively from the potential to impel the generation of the next ones away from those we already have. For that reason, it's not quite right to say that the small novel succeeds, and therefore it helped inspire the vertiginous movement called Magic Realism, instead, it's *because* the novel inspired so much that it's successful.

Stated differently, on the level of value everything is first about provocation. That's why there's something to be said for the tourist trappings set up in the Mexican town called Comala that pretends to be the one in Rulfo's story. It's not factually accurate, the touristy Comala isn't the one in the book. But, that fact doesn't detract from the value of the place because the question about whether a trip to the counterfeit town is worthwhile depends entirely on what it does for those who go. Stronger, because the town is being written about here, the illusion is already justified. And it is even though I've never been there.

Of course there are other truths about Rulfo's book that are not illusory. We know when it was written, the name of the protagonist, that a mother died on the first page, that the reason for the trip to Comala was a lost father. No one cares about those facts though, and rightfully so. They're boring. They may be critical to the story, but that

importance doesn't cure the lethargy, so there's no value: truths aren't worthwhile if they're not potent.

Possibly, there's something of this in absence; maybe Socrates imagined that the book destined to inspire the most subsequent philosophizing is also the one that never got written. There is, certainly, intrigue in blank pages and their boundless possibilities, and if provocation is the aim, silence is a respectable strategy. Then again, maybe the last few sentences I just wrote were hallow speculations about the distant past, and not even remotely plausible. Anyway, it doesn't matter; it can't, because all that does matter is whether the proposal about the reason Socrates didn't write goes on to generate more writing. If it does, then then the claim is strong, right and good.

Finally, when Deleuze challenged Derrida's commitment to turning out pages, he opened a question that's as easy to answer as it is decisive for philosophy. The question is *how much writing is enough?* and the answer is none. Or, the necessary amount. Or, there's never enough because the meaning of any writing is undone by the logic of its own creation. Or, there's never enough because every book's value reduces to its potential to generate still more writing. No single answer dominates the others, but the first three belong to one history of philosophy, and the last to another. For the initial three, the *reason* we do philosophy, the reason we sit and write papers and books is that we want some kind of truth, even if it's as transient as those ironies found in Derrida's pages. For that last one, the reason we have truths of any kind in philosophy – and this counts even for the ones found in eulogies – is to serve thinking and writing by generating more.

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