

1967+50: The Age of Grammatology

Thomas Clément MERCIER · *The Oxford Literary Review*

The following text is the author's manuscript, an extended version of a paper that was published in 2018 in *The Oxford Literary Review*. The issue (40.1), edited by Peggy Kamuf, collected essays written around the theme 'The Age of Grammatology', following the conference of the same name organised by Nicholas Royle at the University of Sussex in June 2017. The contributors were meant to reflect on the 50th anniversary of the publication of Jacques Derrida's *De la grammatologie* (1967). I want to thank Nicholas Royle, Peggy Kamuf and Geoffrey Bennington for the invitation, for their comments and suggestions.

To cite this article:

'We Have Tasted the Powers of the Age to Come: Thinking the Force of the Event — from *Dynamis* to *Puissance*', *The Oxford Literary Review* 40.1 (2018): 76–94.

Link: <https://www.euppublishing.com/doi/abs/10.3366/olr.2018.0239>

Abstract:

Responding to the provocative phrase 'The Age of Grammatology', I propose to question the notion of 'age', and to interrogate the powers or forces, the *dynamis* or dynasties attached to the interpretative model of historical periodisation. How may we think the undeniable *actuality* of the event beyond the sempiternal history of ages, and beyond the traditional, onto-teleological chain of power, possibility, force or *dynamis* that undergirds such history?

This reflection draws on Jacques Derrida's deconstructive reading of the Aristotelian ontology of *dynamis-energeia* (virtuality-actuality). The essay also includes analyses of Cixous, Aubenque, Foucault, and Agamben, as well as a reading of early-Christian Scriptures, chiefly The Epistle to the Hebrews.

We Have Tasted the Powers of the Age to Come Thinking the Force of the Event — from *Dynamis* to *Puissance*

What is this word, ‘*might*’ [puissance]? What would this word, all fresh and new-minted, maybe yet unheard-of, be? Whence would it thus come, unrecognizable, a homonym only to itself? If one follows the secret of homonymy in all its guises, which will be one of my leads, how can one track down this deceitful double of the old word ‘*might*’ [puissance], whose familiar traits we believe we can recognize in the big family, one should say in the *dynasty* of the *dynamis*, of power, of the dynast, of the possible and of potentiality?¹

0. *Celebration & Commiseration*

We are gathered here to commemorate what the Call for Papers refers to as ‘a decisive moment in the history of what came to be called “theory”, “continental philosophy”, “post-structuralism” and “deconstruction” — that is, something like ‘1967’. But what’s in a date? What is the force, perhaps the violence, in/of such dating, naming or denomination? Doesn’t it start with the initial ‘we’, ‘we are gathered’, the plural pronoun speaking here in the indicative present and expressing a performative force of gathering and recollection?² Here I propose to question the notion of ‘age’ (*aiōn*, *aetās* or *saeculum*), and to interrogate the powers or forces, the *dynameis* or dynasties attached to the interpretative model of historical periodisation.

¹ Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That Is To Say...*, trans. Milesi Laurent and Herbrechter Stefan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 20. Translation modified: Jacques Derrida, *H. C. Pour La Vie, C’est à Dire...* (Paris: Galilée, 2002), p. 24.

² Derrida frequently analysed the logic of the calendar, the ‘ring’ of the anniversary. See for instance *Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (New York and London, Routledge, 1992), 393-4. See also Derrida’s interrogation of Foucault’s ‘we’ in relation to the non-contemporaneity of ‘the age’ in *Resistances: Of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault, and Michael Naas (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998), 109-10.

How may we understand the notions of ‘age’ or ‘event’ — for instance, ‘the age of grammarology’, or the event of what has come to be known as ‘deconstruction’?

This essay — that I envisage as a journey through the ages,³ a sort of comedy time travel, captive to the whims of the Doctor — takes its departure from this quotation from *De la grammatologie*:

Pensé dans son rapport caché à la logique du supplément, le concept de virtualité (comme toute la problématique de la puissance et de l'acte) a sans doute pour fonction, chez Rousseau en particulier et dans la métaphysique en général, de prédéterminer systématiquement le devenir comme production et développement, évolution ou histoire, en substituant l'accomplissement d'une *dynamis* à la substitution d'une trace, l'histoire pure au jeu pur, et, comme nous le notions plus haut, une soudure à une rupture.⁴

I emphasise this quotation in order to recall that, from *Of Grammatology* onwards, Derrida presented the thought of trace and supplement as unsettling not only the historical discourse, but also the teleological presuppositions of a certain ontodynamologic — notably in the form of the Aristotelian distinction between *dynamis* and *energeia*, between virtuality (potentiality) and actuality. Throughout his work, Derrida showed explicit wariness towards the concepts of ‘force’, ‘power’ and ‘potency’, and the correlated *dynamis-energeia* logic. He nonetheless returned to this vocabulary in late writings in order to describe an uncanny *puissance*, a certain ‘force of the event’, a ‘force without power’.⁵ However, from one ‘force’ to the other,

³ This voyage already happens here-and-now, before motion, before and beyond presence; it is a necessity of the writing-reading structure: ‘*Un texte a toujours plusieurs âges, la lecture doit en prendre son parti.*’ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris, Minuit, 1967), p. 102; *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Spivak, corrected edition (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 150. See also *The Death Penalty, Volume II*, edited by Geoffrey Bennington and Marc Crépon, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 11–13, on ‘the multiplicity of ages, our ages’.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *De La Grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), p. 256. English translation: ‘Thought within its concealed relation to the logic of the supplement, the concept of virtuality or potentiality (like the entire problematic of power and the act) undoubtedly has for its function, for Rousseau in particular and within metaphysics in general, the systematic predetermining of becoming as production and development, evolution or history, through the substitution of the accomplishment of a *dynamis* for the substitution of a trace, of pure history for pure play, and, as I noted above, of a welding together for a break.’ In Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak, Corrected Edition (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 187.

⁵ On this very paradoxical ‘force of the event’, see *Without Alibi*, edited and translated by Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2002), 233-5; and *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, translated by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005), xiii.

Derrida's deconstructive texts have modified the terrain. The strange force we are gesturing towards is non-ontological, non-performative, and, in a sense that will appear progressively, *prehistoric*. How may Derrida's deconstructive analyses of the logic of force and of the virtuality-actuality couple, in *Of Grammatology* and beyond, help us to interrogate the performative force of the historicising gesture?

I will return to *Of Grammatology* (and the above quotation) in the second leg of our journey. Before we get there, and being somewhat faithful to the parodically religious — or religiously parodic — tone of the Call for Papers, I will rewind the time machine a few centuries backward, turning to the Scriptures and to early-Christian theology. My aim is to highlight a certain co-implication between *dynamis* and faith. In doing so, I will mimic the call to faith, the *credo* of a *confidere* which the Call for Papers playfully toys with: 'annus mirabilis', 'age of grammatology', 'celebrate, commiserate'. This call or *appel*, this convocation, both announces and denounces, through the ironising play of parody, the communion that we are performing today... Here I am; here we are. — *Hineni*.⁶

1. *The 'Semi-Eschatological' Age*

The question is as old as the sempiternal history of ages: what does make a new age *successful*, so that it may *succeed* a previous age — as if the latter (that is, the former) had already expired?⁷ What are the conditions of possibility of this success and succession,

⁶ In 'At This Very Moment in This Work Here I Am', Derrida emphasises the citational and iterable character of Abraham's (and, indeed, Levinas's) *hineni* — which suggests not only the indication of (my) readiness, but also a certain legal commitment, an engagement to serve, and already some sworn faith. Derrida also questions the performative dimension of this 'here I am', and postulates that such performative (in fact, pre-performative) would have to be thought beyond the presence of the present, that is, beyond a performative ontology of success. See Jacques Derrida, *Psyche. Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, ed. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 173. See also pp. 176-7: 'That future anteriority *there* would no longer conjugate a verb describing the action of a subject in an operation that would have been present. [...] That is its dislocation: it [*elle*] does not deport some utterance, or series of utterances; it re-marks in each atom of the Said a marking effraction of the saying, a saying that is no longer a present participle, but already a passed passing [*une passée*] of the trace, a performance (of the) wholly other.' These questions of conjugation (and of subjugation – of the subjunctive) will return in our analysis of Derrida and Cixous's *puissance*, which unsettles the traditional discourse on *dynamis* and the ontological reduction of performativity as self-positional *power*.

⁷ 'The age of grammatology' also raises the following question: can we think 'the age' without already announcing its death, without commiserating and co-mourning its expiration-to-come? Isn't that the

and which representation of temporality do they suppose? These questions could not be ignored by the Scriptures of the New Testament. Here I will focus on the Epistle to the Hebrews, the content of which epitomises the questions at stake. The text is surrounded by many mysteries — its authorship is unknown, and there are debates regarding the identity of ‘the Hebrews’ whom it addresses. Scholars believe that it was written for Jewish Christians living in Jerusalem and facing persecution. But the performative intent of the Epistle is clear: it exhorts Christians to persevere in their faith despite adversity. One must keep believing ‘until the end’ (μέχρι τέλους, *mékhrí télous* – Hebrews, 3) — but which *telos*? That is the whole question.

Hebrews lays the foundation for a New Covenant, a ‘better testament’ (Hebrews, 7) destined to replace the old one⁸. This new alliance was already announced and promised in the Book of Jeremiah (31), which Hebrews quotes repeatedly. Just like every other call to faith, the Epistle is very repetitive. And it *repeats* in order to performatively *enact* the memory of a promise. Hebrews argues that the first coming of Christ, and specifically his Passion and Death, have brought about this new covenant

meaning of a celebration, a gathering, even the most festive in appearance? The idea that ‘deconstruction’ (described as some sort of delimitable substance) has now reached its expiration date was put forward by several contemporary authors. For example: Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, translated by Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1993); Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by Patricia Dailey (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2005); Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, translated by Carolyn Shread (New York, Columbia University Press, 2010); Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, translated by Daniel Ross (Cambridge and Malden, Polity Press, 2010). Despite singularities and differences, these *theses* on the expiration date of that thing called ‘deconstruction’ share a same target: grammatology as a thought of *trace* and *supplement*. They all point to the wear and tear (*usure*) of deconstruction, its loss in force, potency and energy — ‘deconstruction fatigue’, so to say. But what if deconstruction were *usure* itself — not only the erosion and expenditure of philosophy, but also its obscure reserve, the propulsive force of an irreducible being- or becoming-other? And how does such propulsiveness affect the notions of force, virtuality or potency in relation to ‘the age’ and to historical periodisation?

⁸ Far from being purely theoretical, the performative enactment of this new covenant calls for very concrete changes in matters of cult (what Aquinas refers to as ‘ceremonial laws’): among other examples, the sacrifice of Christ (the ‘Lamb of God’) makes animal sacrifices unnecessary in the context of worship, and the ‘circumcision of the heart’ is deemed more important than physical circumcision. I cannot explore in this paper the implications of these historical and religious differences relating to the cult, to cultural spaces and practices. Needless to say that these self-differential effects, within or between ‘ages’ or ‘religions’, should be analysed in terms of autoimmunity or autoaffection rather than through a teleological discourse on providence or predestination. See for instance “Faith and Knowledge” in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), especially pp. 83-8.

by, quite literally, *enacting* and *performing* it — thus enforcing the Will of the Lord and unifying the community of Christians. Here, the language of the Epistle is plainly juridical, as it states the conditions of legitimacy of a testament, of a will, by binding its ‘force of law’ (its *entrée en vigueur*) to the Death of God: ‘Where a will is involved, the death of the one who made it must be established. For a will takes effect only at death, since it is not *in force* as long as the one who made it is alive’ (Hebrews, 9 – my emphasis). *Death* and *force*, then — a death on which the obligating force of law depends.

The issue that Hebrews grapples with concerns the singular signification of the messianic in ‘our’ present age: if the first coming of the Messiah has indeed brought the New Covenant into act, why do Christians still have to be patient and endure persecutions? What of the promised kingdom of God? This seeming self-anachrony of the present Age, Hebrews argues, is due to the fact that we are living in an in-between Age, which is not *really* an Age — not *actually* an Age, not an Age *in act*. The present age is thought in the terms of a difference or *différance*, as an awkward middle ground between the former Age (the Old Covenant, referred to in Hebrews as ‘the Law’, *nomos*, that is, the Law of Moses, Torah, which loses its binding force with the First Coming of the Christ), and ‘the Age to come’ (Hebrews, 6), which will be brought about by the second coming of Christ: full presence and parousia, realisation of the kingdom of God⁹. In Hebrews, the difficulty of this self-anachrony of the present age is seemingly resolved by the use of the lexicon of *dynamis*. The present age is characterised by, yes, virtuality and potentiality: since the First Coming, we have ‘tasted the powers [*dynameis*] of the Age to Come’ (Hebrews, 6).

⁹ The motif of the age, of the passage from one age to the other, is indissociable from the theme of maturation, from childhood to adulthood — a theme (infancy/maturity) that is explicitly referred to in the Epistle, with reference to the New Covenant (Hebrews, 5). This theme also appears in Aristotle’s description of the *dynamis/energeia* structure (*Metaphysics* ̸.8: the child is in *potentiality* of becoming a man, its accomplishment or *energeia*), and in Rousseau’s *Emile*, though in a more disquieting mode: ‘So does the *child* become man when he opens himself to the “consciousness of death”’ (*Of Grammatology*, 184). See also Derrida, in ‘The Age of Hegel’: ‘It is the philosopher of a philosophy that thinks itself [*qui se pense*] as having left childhood behind, that claims to think, along with its own history, all the ages of philosophy, the whole time and teleology of its maturation’ (in Jacques Derrida, *Who’s Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy 1*, trans. Jan Plug [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002], p. 131). In this perspective, history, the historical discourse as history of ages (past, present or to come), would essentially constitute an attempt to grapple with (and to exorcise) the monstrosity of adolescence.

Here the translation of *dynamēis* as ‘powers’ somewhat obfuscates a certain internal resistance, that is, the difficulties and indeterminacy that the modality of *dynamis* (potentiality, potency, *puissance*, possibility) carries¹⁰. It is not my purpose to expose the whole Aristotelian discourse of *dynamis* and *energeia* in this essay, but I would like to recall the reasons why Aristotle had to recourse to this terminology. As Pierre Aubenque notes, ‘the notion of potency (δύναμις) immediately implies a reference to a power, and more precisely to a power-to-become-other [*pouvoir-devenir-autre*]’¹¹. Aristotle attempts to make sense of ‘the aporia of being-other’ which manifests itself in ‘the fundamental experience of motion’¹². Pierre Aubenque explains:

Motion introduces into being a scission through which being is separated from its own being. What *is* finds itself separated from *what* it is, since what it is may or may not occur to it without it necessarily not being anymore. [...] Why is being what it is and what it is not at one and the same time?¹³

Aubenque calls this essential separation the ‘scission of being’. The proper of what is alive, in motion, is to be itself and otherly at one and the same time. But this also requires considering the structural role of corruption (and contingency) in the definition of motion: ‘all power-to-be-otherwise [*pouvoir-être-autrement*] supposes a power-not-to-be [*pouvoir-ne-pas-être*] at its foundation’¹⁴. A being in motion is or will be what it was not, and is not or will not be what it was. The problem is that of being and non-being: how can we think motion without reintroducing the problematic

¹⁰ As testified by the epigraph to this essay, the questions I raise are inseparable from problems of translation. What ‘we’ call *dynamis* ‘today’, or what we attempt to refer to, in English, through terms such as ‘power’, ‘potency’, ‘potentiality’, ‘possibility’, ‘virtuality’, and so on, cannot be considered as entirely *faithful* to the Greek δύναμις, δύνασθαι, or δυνατόν. And this is to say nothing of Latin (*potentia*, *possibilitas*, *potestas*, *virtus*, etc.), French (*pouvoir*, *puissance*, *possibilité*, *virtualité*, etc.), German (*Macht*, *möglich*, *Möglichkeit*, *Vermögen*, etc.) — and of many other languages which *still* refer to this dynamologic in spite (or because) of its resistance to translation. Here the difficulty with translation could be a chance for a different thinking of δύναμις, one which would strive to take into consideration these issues of (un)translatability, before and beyond the etymological reference to the origin. Already in their Aristotelian elaboration these Greek terms are somewhat self-inadequate, thus opening the gates for thousands of years of interpretation and exegesis. In future works I’ll try to follow the tracks of this powerful dynamology, and to undo the chain of these false equivalents, in a sister essay dealing with Derrida’s and Agamben’s readings of Aristotle (working title: ‘Impotentiality, pure potency, *puissance*’).

¹¹ Pierre Aubenque, *Le problème de l’être chez Aristote: Essai sur la problématique aristotélicienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), p. 440. All translations from this book are mine.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 448

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

notion of the being of non-being? How can being originate in non-being? In order to answer these questions, Aristotle puts forward the notion that ‘being is said in many ways’¹⁵. By distinguishing between *dynamis* and *energeia*, Aristotle attempts to offer a philosophical formalisation of the aporia of being and non-being. Potency and act are two modes of being, two ways in which being is said: what is in potentiality *is*, although it *is not* in actuality. The aporia of being-other and becoming-other is somehow sidestepped. However, as Aubenque explains, this constitutes above all a ‘verbal solution’¹⁶ to the problem of motion and origin. It remains that ‘one cannot say anything about a being as long as it is in motion’¹⁷. In all rigour, motion is such that one cannot differentiate between essential and contingent qualities in a living being — or distinguish between what it is in potentiality from what it is in act (its accomplishment or *telos*), between completeness and incompleteness, as long as it is in motion. The discourse on being still supposes its immobility or death¹⁸. Only death would indicate what *properly* characterises a living being by revealing what is merely accidental to it: inanimate matter, corpse, remnant. The proper of life and motion reveals itself in nonlife, death — but it reveals itself by hiding itself, *in absentia*. ‘Aristotle does not solve the aporia; he thematises it’¹⁹. He puts it into words. This is nothing short of problematic because, according to Aristotle, discourse itself is motion — which leads Aubenque to the following conclusion:

The motion of discourse [...] mirrors [*est à l'image*] the motion of things. The simplicity of the simple offers itself to us only in the motion through which it divides itself. Because we are always in motion, we are forever apart from the origin of all things and each thing; but because the proper of origin is to become, that is, to separate from itself, the powerless effort of our discourse in the face of the forever-retreating origin of the scission paradoxically becomes the reflect [*image*] of this scission itself.²⁰

On an explicit level, the Epistle to the Hebrews seems to evacuate this scission of being, and our powerlessness in the face of it — *dynamis* is the key. We have tasted the

¹⁵ *Metaphysics* Γ.2. Quoted by Aubenque in *ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 467.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 467-70.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 445.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 484.

potencies (*dynamis*) of the age to come. But what does it mean to *taste* a possibility or potentiality? What kind of aliment is that? How can it be said to be satisfying and, say, *substantial*? What sort of *experience* does the experiencing of a potentiality suggest? Let's consider the implications of the metaphor of 'tasting': the present experience of the believer consists in pre-tasting the potential 'Age to Come', before or in view of full consummation, appropriation or assimilation — before parousia. This singular structure of experience supposes experiencing the to-come, but experiencing it as otherly and distant, through a sort of 'future-tasting', if I may say so, perhaps in the same way as one speaks of wine-tasting. This structure is what American Calvinist theologian Geerhardus Vos called the 'semi-eschatological', a structure he contrasted with Jewish eschatology:

But no such necessity for keeping apart the Messianic developments and the consummated state existed for the Christian mind. Here from the outset the emphasis had been placed on the *virtual* identity of the blessings and privileges pertaining to the rule of Christ with the eternal life at the end. While as a matter of history the opening days of the Messiah are seen to lie this side of the ultimate world-crisis, this is much more a chronological than a substantial distinction, the Christ is not kept outside of the future world, nor is the future world regarded as incapable of projecting itself into the present life. On the contrary the whole Messianic hope has become so thoroughly spiritualized as to make it indistinguishable in essence and character from the final kingdom of God. Through the appearance of the Messiah, as the great representative figure of the coming aeon, this new age has begun to enter into the *actual* experience of the believer. He has been translated into a state which, while falling short of the consummated life of eternity, yet may be truly characterized as semi-eschatological.²¹

Truly semi!... In other words, the teleological machinery of the *dynamis-energeia* structure allows the to-come to be somewhat already present. Vos calls this structure the 'already but not yet'.²² It allows this (self-)division of the present age to be defined

²¹ Geerhardus Vos, 'The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit', in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912), p. 212. I emphasise 'virtual' and 'actual'.

²² According to Vos, the 'already but not yet' characterises our present age ('the age that is') in its paradoxical relationship with 'the age to come'. See Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1986). Incidentally, Derrida speaks of 'the age' in similar terms in 'The Age of Hegel': 'If we don't think through the conceptual, dialectical, speculative structure of this *already-not-yet*, we will not have understood anything (in its essentials, as he would say) about the *age* (for example, that of Hegel). Or about any age whatsoever, but especially and par excellence that of philosophy or *for* philosophy' (*Who's Afraid of Philosophy? Right to Philosophy 1*, pp. 117-8). In the same essay (p. 123), Derrida interrogates 'the basic interpretation of the philosophical "age"'

as ‘more a chronological than substantial distinction’. In Vos’s account, this distinction does not affect the *substantiality* of the word of Christ and the teleo-eschatological discourse. And what does sustain this substantiality? Where does this distinction find itself jointed, welded? ‘In the *actual* experience of the believer’. The *actuality* of faith is what brings together the potentiality and the actuality of the age to come (‘the final kingdom of God’). It is a place of respite, the reserve from which *dynamis* finds itself connected to the teleology of the act, actuality, *energeia* or *entelechy*. But this also functions as an implicit reminder that the age to come has been inaugurated but falls short of being actualised or implemented. Its potentialities have been ‘tasted’ but have not been ‘consummated’. Hebrews exhorts Christians to keep believing, by telling them that faith is the very thing (in fact, the *only* thing) they can experience *in actuality*: actual faith, if such a thing exists, is faith in the non-actual. Faith would be ‘the act’ itself — while the kingdom of God, the thing in which one believes, is merely potential.

This brings us back to the notion that the Epistle is essentially performative: it has nothing to show for itself except its own exhortative power, its performative force — its jussive force, if you will: the force to (perhaps, if God wills) animate and excite faith. Faith must be actualised or remain actual because, when it comes to the kingdom of God, faith is all there *actually* is — the rest is potentiality, virtuality, act-to-come. This explains why Jesus can say things such as ‘seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you’ (Matthew, 6). The Epistle is a wager: it performs a call to *faith*, based on the *faith* that *faith* itself may, performatively, bring the thing in which one believes (the age to come) into actuality. We must *believe* that the performative force of faith bind potentiality with actuality, and the performative with its constative becoming. However, in this uncanny circulation between faith and performativity, *faith remains before the performative* — and *before force*. The force of faith is older than force and than *dynamis*.

So it will not come as a surprise that Hebrews also includes a definition of faith — one that is properly incredible:

as *epochality*’: ‘This *epochal* interpretation, with all its machinery, could be connected (either as proof or as derivation) to the Hegelian, onto-teleological interpretation of the philosophical “age” as moment, form or figure, totality or *pars totalis*, in the history of reason.’

Now faith [πίστις, *pistis*] is the foundation/substance [ὑπόστασις, *hypostasis*] of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand [νοοῦμεν, *nooumen*] that the ages/worlds [αἰῶνας, *eónas*] were formed by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible [μὴ ἐκ φαινομένων, *mê ek phainómenon*]. (Hebrews, 11)

Faith thus exceeds the visible, the phenomenality of the phenomenon: it has to do with the invisible. Faith is a *response* to the interruption of the phenomenon: it never sees the light of the phenomenon, simply because there where there is light, faith is not faith. Faith is faith only in the dark. Faith implies a leap, an *Augenblick*: it binds the visible, the phenomenal, to its invisible other. But because faith is also defined as a mode of mental perception or intellection (νοέω, *noéō*) of the unseen, it is said to bring *support* for the things hoped and unseen: it functions as substance, foundation — as *hypostasis*.²³ In Hebrews, the supposed actuality of faith connects the invisible (the age to come) to the visible. Hebrews carries the hope that faith may substantialise hope, make it substantial — but because of the very structure of faith, this hoped-for substantiality is itself highly ambiguous. No one can *actually* ‘see’ (or ‘taste’) potentiality. The experience of faith is meant to allow the precarious conjunction between potency and act, and should therefore *bridge* the age, the so-called ‘present’ age (‘the age that is’), to its future other. But in this sense faith *betrays* the *gap*, while supposedly welding it by claiming to overcome the ontological scission of the present. Faith is belief in the other to come, the coming other — but here otherness is understood as *possibility* or *power*, *power-to-be-other* or *power-to-become-other*. While faith sees (or tastes, pre-tastes) the invisible, here it consists in presupposing the *present possibility* of a being-other. The Epistle strives to make ‘being-other’ *possible*. The faith

²³ This notion of faith as ‘hypostasis’ is interesting because it posits faith as a principle of firmness, a founding power or force on which other potentialities may lean. In his commentary on Hebrews, Aquinas defines faith as one of the essential virtues of man (*virtutes* translates *dynaméis* in the Latin translation of Hebrews). But Aquinas also claims that faith is the foundation (*substantia*, hypostasis) of all other virtues. Faith is one virtue, one potency among others — and at the same time it undergirds all other virtues or potencies as their hypostasis. Faith is a *hypotency*, so to say. It belongs to a series of which it is nonetheless the underlying condition. Later we’ll see that Rousseau’s ‘imagination’ shares the same ‘quasi-transcendental’ relation with ‘virtual faculties’. In both Aquinas and Rousseau, this quasi-transcendental position of ‘faith’ or ‘imagination’ as hypotency signals the precariousness of the notion of potency, and maybe its intimate relation with impotence. Aquinas’ commentary on Hebrews is available on <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/SSHepbrews.htm> (consulted 15 March 2018). On seriality and quasi-transcendentality, see Derrida, *Resistances*, p. 79.

we are talking about here has thus to do with ontological exorcism²⁴: it attempts to stabilise a spectral haunting into an ontology of possibility. It strives to make potentiality present and to *possibilise* the self-otherness of the Age by reducing it to a present *power-to-be-other* (a *power-to-become-other*) — a power in which, nevertheless, one is called to *believe*.

In Hebrews, *dynamis*, this force of potentialisation and possibilisation, carries the weight of the argument and provides the Epistle with performative efficacy. The logic of *dynamis* and the whole teleo-eschatological machinery it brings about bridge the two ages in the present, the old one and the one to come. However, in doing so, the logic of *dynamis* tends to erase its own virtuality (attested by its reliance on faith) by reinscribing the event of the ‘to come’ within a teleology²⁵: the logic of *dynamis* and the call to faith on which it depends aim to bring the two ages together, to suture the gap, the ‘hap’ of a perhaps, and to substitute ‘a welding together for a break’ as Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology*. But the call to faith betrays the break. It monstrates impossibility at the heart of potency, potentiality, possibility (*dynamis*). In this sense, the Epistle announces its own deconstruction, and somewhat *already* ‘performs’ it — to the extent that it is *possible to perform* deconstruction: *already-not-yet*, as always. In the third leg of this journey, we’ll examine Derrida’s attempt, in late writings, to develop a more originary articulation between faith and *dynamis* in the form of a subjunctive *puissance*, which liberates faith from its dependence on the authority of present-being, that is, on the present *power* to become the act (*parousia*) to come. In order to do so, Derrida must think the actuality of the impossible event before its reduction to an

²⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 202: ‘To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration.’

²⁵ Although one can find in *Of Grammatology* the premises of Derrida’s deconstruction of the Aristotelian *dynamis-energeia* structure (its contradiction-solving role, and its dependence on a teleology of presence), this effort was made even clearer in ‘*Ousia and Grammê: Note on a Note from Being and Time*’: ‘This dialectical manipulation is already — as it will be always — governed by the distinction between the potentiality and the act, the contradictions resolving themselves as soon as one takes into account the relationship under whose rubric they are considered: potentially or in act. And this distinction between the potentiality and the act evidently is not symmetrical, being itself governed by a teleology of presence, by the act (*energeia*) as presence (*ousia, parousia*)’. See Jacques Derrida, *Margins — of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 54.

onto-teleological discourse on possibility. But before we get there, let's stop over in 'the Age of Grammatology'.

2. 'The Age of Grammatology'

The expression 'The Age of Grammatology' may designate...

A – ... the Age inaugurated by a book, the Book, *De la grammatologie*, and its date of publication, then: (1967 + 50). But what's in a date? What does it mean to write a date in a calendar? In 'Shibboleth', Derrida describes the uncanny 'power' (*puissance*) of coded marks such as dates:

These coded marks all share a common resource, but also a dramatic and fatally equivocal power [*une puissance dramatique, fatale, fatalement équivoque*]. Assigning or consigning absolute singularity, they must mark themselves off [*se dé-marquer*] simultaneously, *at one and the same time*, and from themselves, by the possibility of commemoration. In effect, they mark only insofar as their readability enunciates the possibility of a recurrence. Not the absolute recurrence of that which precisely cannot return: a birth or circumcision takes place but once, nothing could be more self-evident. But rather the spectral return of that which, unique in its occurrence, will never return. A date is a specter. But the spectral return of this impossible recurrence is marked *in* the date, it seals or specifies itself in the sort of anniversary ring secured by the code. For example by the calendar.²⁶

The date marks the event by *inscribing* its singularity, thus losing its presence as event, its actuality, through the promise of differential repetition. Commemoration, celebration, commiseration are doomed to miss the singularity of what cannot recur. The movement of this impossible repetition is described here in terms of 'power' (*puissance*) — but one which has to do with the spectre, with deadliness (*fatale*) and equivocality. I am tempted to believe that this *puissance* attached to 'coded marks' and writing cannot simply be reduced to *dynamis*, and might announce the *puissance* that I will approach in my concluding remarks. 'A date is a specter': this 'power' of spectralisation already happens *in* the date — and a fortiori in the Age supposedly inaugurated by such date — so that the origin itself is dubious and haunted. The date, just like the Age, presupposes the impossibility of dating. Whatever the strength of the Alliance, of the New Covenant gathered around this date and its commemoration,

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 393-4; and *Schibboleth – Pour Paul Celan* (Paris: Galilée, 1986), p. 37.

whatever the force of the faith we may display ('our' *confidere*), the event cannot *present* itself. It already finds itself dated, re-presented, virtualised or spectralised — possibly dead.

B – ... the Age of a science, of the 'science of writing' that would carry the name 'grammatology'. But this hypothesis is strongly challenged by the 'exergue' of *Grammatology*:

such a science of writing runs the risk of never being established as such and with that name. Of never being able to define the unity of its project or its object. Of not being able either to write its discourse on method or to describe the limits of its field.²⁷

The Age of Grammatology would suggest the possibility (maybe the potency) of 'a world irreducibly to come announcing itself in the present'²⁸. But it would be an age whose realisation or actualisation is structurally impossible, and this 'for essential reasons'²⁹: '[The *avenir*] is that which breaks absolutely with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, *presented*, as a sort of monstrosity.'³⁰ An age without date, or *exergue*: 'For that future world [*ce monde à venir*] and for that within it which will have put into question the values of sign, word, and writing, for that which guides our future anterior, there is as yet no exergue.'³¹ 'Grammatology' would name a science and an age without exergue and without *ergon*, or whose *energeia* (actuality) would be its own impossibility, the impossible 'itself' — monstrosity announcing itself in the present.

C – ... the Age of writing. But the same difficulties arise, especially because

historicity itself is tied to the possibility of writing; to the possibility of writing in general, beyond those particular forms of writing in the name of which we have long spoken of peoples without writing and without history. Before being the object of a history — of an historical science — writing opens the field of history — of historical becoming.³²

²⁷ *Of Grammatology*, p. 4.

²⁸ *De la grammatologie*, p. 14 (my translation); *Of Grammatology*, p. 5.

²⁹ *Of Grammatology*, p. 4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³¹ *Ibid.* See also p. 51.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 27.

And if the question of the origin (and of the historicity) of writing remains (as a question³³), the *responses* (which ‘generally come very quickly’³⁴) are interesting because of what they attest or testify. For instance, Derrida, commenting on Condillac’s politics of writing, writes:

When the field of society extends to the point of absence, of the invisible, the inaudible, and the immemorable, when the local community is dislocated to the point where individuals no longer appear to one another, become capable of being imperceptible, *the age of writing begins*.³⁵

If writing begins with absence and invisibility, it might entertain some intimate relationship with faith. The invisible would figure the atopic ‘place’ — but how could one situate and delimit ‘absence’ or ‘invisibility’? — of a shared origin between faith and writing.

In *Of Grammatology*, the word *dynamis* appears only once. I already quoted the relevant passage in my introduction, but here it is again with added emphasis:

Thought within its concealed relation to the logic of the supplement, the concept of *virtuality* or *potentiality* (like the entire problematic of *power* [*puissance*] and the *act*) undoubtedly has for its function, for Rousseau in particular and within metaphysics in general, the systematic *predetermining of becoming* as *production* and *development*, *evolution* or *history*, through the substitution of the *accomplishment* of a *dynamis* for the substitution of a trace, of pure history for pure play, and, as I noted above, of a welding together for a break.³⁶

This passage seemingly concludes and generalises Derrida’s deconstructive reading of Rousseau’s discourse on pity and on the virtual power of imagination. Imagination being the faculty of representation, it is essential for the activation of pity in its human form, because it allows man to imagine the suffering of the other. The power of imagination is such that it bridges between the one to the other, thus allowing the sociability of humankind. Hence, Rousseau defines imagination as one of man’s virtual faculties, but also as his primary faculty: a virtuality which precedes and

³³ *Ibid.*, p 28: ‘The grammatologist least of all can avoid questioning himself about the essence of his object in the form of a question of origin : “What is writing?” means “where and when does writing begin?”’

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 281-2. My emphasis.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

‘animates’³⁷ all other forms of potencies³⁸. This gives a crucial role to this faculty, ‘the most active of all’³⁹. But because imagination has the power to activate and excite man’s other potentialities⁴⁰, it seems to engender itself as a sort of prime motor: ‘In as much as it is “the most active of all” the faculties, imagination cannot be awakened by any faculty’⁴¹. While this role of originary potency, virtuality of virtuality, gives to imagination an apparently limitless field of deployment, it also makes it very paradoxical and unpredictable:

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

³⁸ In my initial abstract, before writing this text, I somewhat *promised* an engagement with Foucault, and in particular a discussion of his notion of ‘epistemological power’ — whose presupposition undergirds Foucault’s faculty, his power, to represent history as a history of ages defined by their *épistémè*, and thus to determine history as epistemological periodisation. Of this engagement and discussion, I can only indicate a few premises here. In Foucault’s archaeo-genealogical account of power, of history as a history of power, ‘epistemological power’ assumes a singular but crucial role, quite simply because it allows the combinatory connection of the power-knowledge nexus. It permits the articulation, *within* power (defined as essentially ‘polymorphous and polyvalent’), between what Foucault names ‘discursive’ and ‘extra-discursive practices’ of power. However, because of that nodal role, and just like Rousseau’s characterisation of ‘imagination’ as a virtuality of virtuality, ‘epistemological power’ is conceived *both* as a *specific* form of power *and* as a characteristic *co-extensive* with power ‘itself’, *pervading* and even *animating* all the other forms of power (economic power, political power, juridical power): ‘Finally, there is a fourth characteristic of power — a power that, in a sense, traverses and drives [*anime*] those other powers. I’m thinking of an epistemological power’ (Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 1954-1988. Volume II (1970-1975)*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald [Paris: Gallimard, 1994], p. 619 – my translation).

While re-reading ‘To Do Justice to Freud’ during the preparation of this paper, I was reminded that the question of ‘the age’, of ‘an age’, was explicitly thematised and addressed by Derrida in his reading of Foucault. Derrida’s collateral target, as is often the case, is the Foucauldian notion of *épistémè*. But perhaps even more interestingly for ‘us’, ‘today’, Derrida’s analysis is tightly connected to an interrogation of the ‘we’ (‘we are gathered here’, ‘here we are’, ‘we have tasted...’ — in any case an onto-theological ‘we’). The plural pronoun, again, which seeks to enforce, performatively, the present instance from which history may retrospectively be described as history of ages: ‘The “we” who is saying “we think in that place” is evidently, tautologically, the “we” out of which the signatory of these lines, the author of *The History of Madness* and *The Order of Things*, speaks, writes, and thinks. But this “we” never stops dividing, and the places of its signature are displaced in being divided up. A certain untimeliness always disturbs the contemporary who reassures him or herself in a “we”. This “we”, our “we”, is not its own contemporary. The self-identity of its age, or of any age, appears as divided, and thus problematic, *problematizable* [...], as the age of madness or an age of psychoanalysis — as well as, in fact, all the historical or archaeological categories that promise us the determinable stability of a configurable whole. Moreover, from the moment a couple separates [...], this decoupling fissures the identity of the epoch, of the age, of the *episteme* or the paradigm of which one or the other, or both together, might have been the signifiers or representatives’ (Derrida, *Resistances*, pp. 109-10).

³⁹ *Of Grammatology*, p. 186.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 186

Imagination alone has the power of *giving birth to itself*. It creates nothing because it is imagination. But it receives nothing that is alien or anterior to it. It is not affected by the 'real'. It is pure auto-affection. It is the other name of differance as auto-affection.⁴²

Imagination designates 'that power of anticipation that exceeds the givens of the senses and takes us toward the unperceived'⁴³. Not unlike faith, imagination has thus to do with the invisible beyond (of) phenomenality, and beckons the impossible. In *Emile*, Rousseau writes: 'It is imagination which enlarges the bounds of possibility for us, whether for good or ill'⁴⁴. Because of this differential relationship with the possibilities of the real, imagination allows the perfectibility of man — his becoming-other, so to say, or his 'power'-to-become-other. But Derrida immediately emphasises the co-implication of perfectibility and pervertibility in the concept of imagination:

This example makes the ambivalence of the power of imagining understandable: it surmounts animality and arouses human passion only by opening the scene and the space of theatrical representation. It inaugurates the perversion whose possibility is itself inscribed in the notion of perfectibility.

Pervertibility being a structural possibility in/of imagination, it troubles the teleological predestination of virtuality and *dynamis* and subverts their apparently automatic connection to the actuality of the act. And because imagination, as originary virtuality, precedes and affects all other virtualities in/of man, this structural pervertibility also affects and unsettles distinctions such as pity/love, animal/man, speech/writing, nature/culture, nature/history — oppositions on which descriptions of history as evolution or accomplishment (actualisation, entelechy) depend. For similar reasons, pervertibility forbids reducing the virtual power of imagination to a circumscribable substance, or to a property pertaining to such or such subject (starting with 'man', as opposed to 'the animal'), for instance in the form of a 'virtue' or a 'habit'.

In the same pages, Derrida notes that '[t]he relation with the other and the relation with death are one and the same opening'⁴⁵. Both relations depend on imagination, as

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp.186-7

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴⁴ Quoted in *Of Grammatology*, p. 186.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

power of autoaffection and re-presentation pointing to the impossible beyond of presence — which also supposes a certain *fiduciariness* of faith:

Function of representation, imagination is also the temporalizing function, the excess of the present and the economy of what exceeds presence. [...] When [imagination] appears, signs, fiduciary values, and letters surge [*surgissent*], and they are worse than death.⁴⁶

Indeed, imagination, ‘faculty of signs and appearances’⁴⁷, reveals that ‘the deadly representative redoubling-splitting-duplicating [*redoublement-dédoublement*] constitute[s] the living present, without simply adding itself to it’⁴⁸. Such spectral haunting is the condition for history: ‘as soon as presence, holding itself or announcing itself to itself, breaches its plenitude and enchains [*enchaîne*: ‘restricts’, or ‘starts the chain of’] its history, death’s work has begun’⁴⁹. This irreducible *entame* makes the teleo-genealogical discourse of history possible, but renders history as such ‘unrecognizable [*méconnaissable*]⁵⁰.

⁴⁶ *Of Grammatology*, p. 311; *De la grammatologie*, pp. 438-9 (translation modified).

⁴⁷ *Of Grammatology*, p. 185.

⁴⁸ *De la grammatologie*, p. 422 (my translation); *Of Grammatology*, p. 313. See also p. 184: ‘Imagination is at bottom the relationship with death. The image is death. A proposition that one may define or make indefinite thus: *the image is a death or (the) death is an image*. Imagination is the power that allows life to affect itself with its own re-presentation.’ Derrida also explores this co-implication between image and death in a text on Louis Marin, ‘By Force of Mourning’, which likewise concerns force, power and *dynamis* in their intimate relationship with death and interruption: ‘It would have to do with a possible that is in potential of being only on the condition of remaining possible as possible, and of marking within itself — the scar of a wound and the potentialization of force — the interruption of this going into action, this enactment, an absolute interruption that bears no other seal here than that of death: whence a thought of the *virtual work*, one might also say of a virtual space, of an *opus*, an *opus operatum*, that would accomplish the possible *as such* without effacing it or even enacting it in reality. The thought of a spectral power of the virtual work. One that envelops or develops within itself a thought of death. Only death, which is not, or rather mourning, which takes its place in advance, can open up this space of absolute *dynamis*: force, virtue, the possible as such, without which one understands nothing of the power of the image.’ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 146.

⁴⁹ *De la grammatologie*, p. 417 (my translation); *Of Grammatology*, p. 309.

⁵⁰ Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 257: ‘There is an *avenir* for justice and there is no justice except to the degree that some event is possible which, as event, exceeds calculation, rules, programs, anticipations and so forth. Justice, as the experience of absolute alterity, is unrepresentable, but it is the chance of the event and the condition of history. No doubt an unrecognizable [*méconnaissable*] history, of course, for those who believe they know what they are talking about when they use this word, whether its a matter of social, ideological, political, juridical or some other history.’ French version of the text: Jacques Derrida, *Force de loi: Le ‘fondement mystique de l’autorité’* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 61.

3. Puissance/*event*

Where does this leave the question of *dynamis*? Is there a potent future for potency? And will this future be described in terms of ‘age’? In *H. C. For Life, That Is To Say...*, Derrida attempts to approach a certain event — the event of something which seems to have happened to the French word *puissance* in Hélène Cixous’s writings. Derrida, *responding* to Cixous — unless it be the other way around — attempts to rethink the French term *puissance* as *derived* from the subjunctive *puisse*: ‘*Puisse cela arriver!*’, ‘*Might this happen!*’⁵¹:

it is as if one had to invent a new grammar, add a new present participle to this singular subjunctive modality, which in French is said *puisse*; henceforth *puissant* will not signify *powant* [being able to], from *pouvoir*, but *puissant*, from *puisse*, from *puisse* onward [*depuis ‘puisse’*]; not a present participle for *pouvoir*, no matter how little [*si peu*], nor for any *peut* whatsoever, but, according to some heresy of the subjunctive, an originary subjunctive, an equally present participle for *puisse*.⁵²

This subjunctive derivation should thus be conceived as an *originary derivation*: *pouvoir*, power, possibility and potentiality should be envisaged as derivations of a derivation — that is, stabilisations of the subjunctive *puisse* into categories of the indicative present:

Puisse [...] is the quasi-underivable trace that one must presuppose so that [pour] the other instances (for example, power, *posse*, *dynamis*, dynasty, potentiality, then act and effectiveness) *might* [puissent] precisely, appear.⁵³

Just like imagination in Rousseau’s account, the mighty *puissance* of *puisse* entertains a differential relation to effectiveness, to the reality of the act. This is why impotence (*impuissance*) is not the opposite of might or potency: ‘it is impotence itself that makes the impossible and that becomes omnipotent’⁵⁴. *Puissance* allows us to think ‘the relation between the phantasm and the event, and especially what *happens* or *arrives* with the phantasm’⁵⁵. In this paradoxical dynamology, the possibilisation of *puissance* (for instance, in the form of power or possibility) would decrease the potential force of

⁵¹ *H. C. For Life*, p. 45 (*H. C. pour la vie*, p. 44).

⁵² *H. C. For Life*, p. 70.

⁵³ *H. C. For Life*, p. 71 (*H. C. pour la vie*, pp. 64-5).

⁵⁴ *H. C. For Life*, p. 75.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

its potency (for instance, that of the phantasm) by attaching it to the actuality of a presence. In the same manner, *puissance* cannot be reduced to the performative power of a speech *act* (whose actual ‘success’ depends on conditions of legitimacy), although it precedes the performative and gives it its force⁵⁶.

Puissance thus precedes and troubles the distinction between the representation of the event and event of representation. That is why the *puissance* we are talking about here maintains a privileged relationship with believing and faith⁵⁷. But it is faith without being (it) (*sans l'être*): *puissance* does not *simply* believe in the possible or the actual, in *present* possibility or actuality; it links itself to the *impossible*, without which there would be no faith. As such, it suggests the powerless force of a certain fictionality or representativity preceding the distinction between potency and act, between faith and knowledge. Because *puissance* and faith, just like imagination and writing, maintain a reference to the representativity of the event, they also communicate with death.⁵⁸ However, this does not suggest a ‘being-for-death’ in the proto-Heideggerian sense, but it does not mean a ‘being-for-life’ either. It would signify a ‘for life’ before being, a life-*puissance* preceding and subverting ontological reductions⁵⁹:

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 76-7, and p. 134: ‘*Might* [puisse] [...] is even the performative par excellence, the performativity of a performative that precedes and conditions any other performative and therefore any event.’ See also ‘The University Without Condition’ in Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, ed. and trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), especially 233-5.

⁵⁷ *H. C. For Life*, pp. 2-5.

⁵⁸ I explore this co-implication between faith and the interruptiveness of death in a recent article: ‘Pensées magiques: Retour sur le “retour du religieux”’, in *revue ITER: L'à-venir de la religion*, 2018. <http://lire-travailler-derrida.org/revue/thomas-clement-mercier-pensees-magiques-retour-sur-le-retour-du-religieux/> — consulted 19 March 2018.

⁵⁹ This would constitute the fundamental difference between, on the one hand, Derrida’s notion of *puissance* of the im-possible, and, on the other hand, Agamben’s concept of ‘pure potency’ as *impotentiality*. Agamben explicitly inscribes the thought of ‘pure potency’ within an *ontology*: an ontology of life, or an ontology of potency — a potential ontology. If pure potentiality (in the form of deactivation, inoperativeness) supposes the potentiality-not-to (not to pass into the act, into the *ergon*, *energeia*), impotentiality is nonetheless reappropriated into an ontology of potentiality and into a logic of the proper: humankind’s *capacity* to *own* its *own* impotentiality is defined as *appropriation* of its *own* improperness (or facticity). This is important for our argument, because according to Agamben the conceptualisation of ‘pure potency’ is precisely what allows us to leave the ‘age’ of deconstruction behind — its supposed paralysis, powerlessness and blocked messianism: ‘Deconstruction is a thwarted messianism, a suspension of the messianic’ (*The Time That Remains*, 103). On the contrary, Derrida’s thinking of the event through notions such as *puissance* and the im-possible allows us to think a true messianicity without messianism, beyond Agamben’s anthropocentrism and his repetition (a mere

life *for* life (and not being-for-life) is therefore nothing else, no, than a living of death, but, but yes, still living death, again, living it, death, for oneself, and for the other, and for life. Later we will call this experience, or even experimentation: living for the sake of living, living for living, and in order to see — what it feels like, what it does, just to try. She keeps trying [*elle essaie*], as we can hear still, always.⁶⁰

Why maintain the term *puissance* despite all these transformations, after the mutations that Derrida — unless it be Cixous, Derrida-Cixous — perform on it? Is it, as often with Derrida, a matter of *faithful unfaithfulness*?

Derrida *responds*. He responds not only to Cixous's text, but also to an immemorial injunction, thus inscribing himself within a certain legacy: he receives the question of *dynamis* in the form of a heritage. Derrida attempts to account for the aporia of being and non-being that justified Aristotle's recourse to the *dynamis-energeia* lexicon in his theory of motion. This aporia has to do with death, with the undeniable 'work of death' — an instance of non-being at the heart of being, a contingency and corruptibility that Aristotle described as a 'power-not-to-be'⁶¹. One could say that Derrida tries to do justice to death, to 'death's work' — while that's precisely impossible. It is impossibility 'itself' because it escapes ontological formalisation — and this is why Derrida strives to think the undeniable and 'nonvirtualizable' 'actuality' of the im-possible other as an *actuality without presence*⁶²:

This im-possible is not privative. It is not the inaccessible, and it is not what I can indefinitely defer: it announces itself; it precedes me, swoops down upon and seizes me *here and now* in a nonvirtualizable way, in actuality and not potentiality.

reversal) of the ontological schemes of power, (pure) potency and possibility. Powerlessness is on the side of potency, not on that of the im-possible.

⁶⁰ *H. C. For Life*, p. 89. Translation modified: *H. C. pour la vie*, p. 79. The translation of *elle essaie* as 'she keeps trying' obfuscates many of the potentialities and plays of substitution made possible in the French text: the feminine pronoun *elle* may refer to Hélène Cixous ('she' who tries life *for* life, in view of life and as a substitute for life) — but it may also refer to life, life 'itself'. Furthermore, *elle essaie* is a homophone for *elle est C.* (*C. for* Cixous), which suggests a substitution of the essay, the trial (*essai*) of experience for the traditional essentialist definition of *être* (being), *elle est*: its or her 'being' is trial, trial before being. *Essayer avant d'être, sans l'être*.

⁶¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (θ, 10). See also Aubenque, *Le problème de l'être chez Aristote*, pp. 326-7.

⁶² See also Jacques Derrida, 'Remarks on Deconstruction and Pragmatism', in *Deconstruction and Pragmatism*, ed. Chantal Mouffe (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 85: 'I try to dissociate the theme of singularity happening here and now from the theme of presence and, for me, there can be a here and now without presence.' See also *H. C. For Life*, p. 77 (*H. C. pour la vie*, p. 69), wherein Derrida notes that the actuality of *puissance* cannot simply be reduced 'to actuality or activity, to *energeia* such as it is traditionally opposed to *dynamis*'.

It comes upon me from on high, in the form of an injunction that does not simply wait on the horizon, that I do not see coming, that never leaves me in peace and never lets me put it off until later. Such an urgency cannot be *idealized* any more than the other as other can. This im-possible is thus not a (regulative) *idea* or *ideal*. It is what is most undeniably *real*. And sensible. Like the other. Like the irreducible and nonappropriable *différance* of the other.⁶³

Post-Scriptum: Prehistory

In the faithful betrayal of this re-inscription of *dynamis* as *puissance*, has Derrida inaugurated a New Age? ‘The Age of Grammatology’? Perhaps, but such inauguration remains to be written and read, before and beyond epochal reductions. *Before* ‘this’ age, to which ‘we’ testify, something or someone comes. Before the age, one must respond. What is the force in/of such response? Can we think the *dynamis* of a response? Actually, shouldn’t we think *first* the answer of the response *before puissance* or *dynamis*, rather than the other way around? If force ‘itself’ is preceded by response, shouldn’t we attempt to think the implications of this originary address and derivation of force?

I have spoken of a Letter, the Epistle to the Hebrews. This address was also the occasion to think a certain fictionality and representativity of the event, a representativity common to religious, literary and philosophical texts — something they share precisely because of their dependence on the derivation of the address, a certain call to faith, a force of propulsion before and beyond presence. Although these texts (including *Of Grammatology*) can always be incorporated within a teleo-genealogical discourse or historical periodisation, they remain to be read, and as such they always-already are ‘Letters from prehistory’. They share something of what Cixous names *Toute-puissance-autre*⁶⁴: something like ‘literature’ itself, but maybe not quite ‘itself’, the othering force of an address exceeding literary or philological classifications and beckoning to a ‘poetics of the event’.⁶⁵ This *puissance*, this uncanny force or *dynamis* cannot be reduced to a ‘power-to-become-other’. Before being itself, before *being*, such force remains unconditionally dependent on the reception of the

⁶³ Jacques Derrida, *Rogues. Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 84.

⁶⁴ Hélène Cixous, *Manhattan: Lettres de la préhistoire* (Paris: Galilée, 2002).

⁶⁵ Derrida, *H. C. For Life*, p. 76.

address, on the reading of the text, the *response* it provokes — a response that supposes a structural derivation before presence, the im-possible other to come, death as an irreducible possibility. Attempting to arrest the force of this non-present potentiality by assigning it to a determined age would result in missing its true *puissance*, its ‘force of provocation’:

This also accounts for the philosophical *force* of these experiences, *a force of provocation* to think phenomenality, meaning, object, even being as such, *a force which is at least potential*, a philosophical *dunamis* — which can, however, be developed *only in response, in the experience of reading, because it is not hidden in the text like a substance*. [...] Potentiality [*la puissance*] is not hidden in the text like an intrinsic property.⁶⁶

...

*Ce que je voulais écrire, c'est POTENCE du texte.*⁶⁷

⁶⁶ “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida”, in *Acts of Literature*, pp. 45-7. My emphasis.

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Glas* (Paris, Galilée, 1974), 223b.