

Jacques Derrida's Speaking in the Mode of the Perhaps

(Hand-out)

„Denken heißt, alles in Frage zu stellen – auch das Denken, die Frage und den Prozeß. Nur verlangt das Infragestellen aber, dass etwas geschieht, dessen Grund noch nicht bekannt ist. Wenn man denkt, akzeptiert man das Vorkommnis als das, was es ist, nämlich als »noch nicht« bestimmt. Kein Vorurteil, keine Sicherheit. Man streift in der Wüste umher. Man kann nicht schreiben, ohne von dem Abgrund der ankommenden Zeit Zeugnis abzulegen. [One cannot write without bearing witness to the abyss of the time to-come.]“
J.-F. Lyotard, Zeit heute, in: *Das Inhumane*, 90.

1. Subsequent »Beginning«: The Perhaps in *Politics of Friendship*

from: *Politiques de la amitié* (Paris, 1994):

1. An arche-friendship [...] would be extraneous neither to the other justice nor to the other politics whose possibility we would like, perhaps, to see announced here.
Through, perhaps, another experience of the possible. [engl. 24 / dt. 50]
2. [Nietzsche:] »Perhaps to each of us there will come the more joyful hour when we exclaim: 'Friends, there are no friends!' thus said the dying sage; 'Foes, there are no foes!' say I, the living fool.« [quote from Derrida, PoF: engl. 28 / dt. 54]
Jacques DERRIDA, *Politics of Friendship* (Translated by George Collins; Verso, 1997).

2. Perhaps an »Event«

3. [...] those »perhapses« which have for decades explicitly marked the privileged modality, messianic in this instance, of the statements that matter the most to me (it so happens that I elucidated, at length, the meaning and even, if the word may be hazarded, necessity or ineluctability of this »perhaps« the year after *Specters of Marx*, in *Politics of Friendship*). [221; my emphasis, PZ]
Jacques DERRIDA, Marx & Sons, in: M. SPRINKER (Ed.), *Ghostly Demarcations. A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's »Specters of Marx«* (London-New York: Verso, 1999), 213-269.

Baltimore, Oct 21, 1966: (the very beginning of the lecture)

4. Perhaps (*Peut-être*) something has occurred in the history of the concept of structure that could be called an 'event,' if this loaded word did not entail a meaning which it is precisely the function of structural - or structuralist - thought to reduce or to suspect. Let us speak of an 'event,' nevertheless, and let us use quotation marks to serve as a precaution. What would this event be then? Its exterior form would be that of a *rupture* and *redoubling*. [...] | The event I called a rupture, the disruption I alluded to at the beginning of this paper, presumably (*peut être*) would have come about when the structurality of structure had to begin to be thought, that is to say, repeated.
Jacques DERRIDA, Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences, in: *Writing and Difference* (Transl. by Alan Bass; Chicago UP, 1978), 278-293, here: 278. 280.

Quotes from E. Levinas in: J. Derrida, *At this very moment in this work here I am* (1980):

5. [Levinas:] »Responsibility which, before the discourse bearing on the said, is probably the essence of language. [...] the language of thematisation, which at this moment [italics by J.D.] we are using, has perhaps only been made possible itself by means of that Relation [between the Soul and the Absolute; PZ], and is only ancillary.« [23]
Jacques DERRIDA, *At this very moment in this work here I am*, in: R. BERNASCONI / S. CRITCHLEY (Ed.), *Re-reading Levinas* (London: Bloomington, 1991), 11-48.

from: *Grimm'sches Wörterbuch*, Article on "Vielleicht" (*Perhaps*):

6. mhd. vil lichte wird nicht nur im sinne von »sehr leicht, ganz ohne schwierigkeit«, sondern schon in freierer bedeutung angewandt [...]. der unterschied gegen die heutige anwendung kann sehr gering sein; im allgemeinen wird in der älteren sprache der zusammenhang mit leicht facilis noch empfunden, daher mehr die sichere erwartung, vermuthung oder befürchtung, als die blosze möglichkeit bezeichnet. (p. 236) [...] vielleicht bezeichnet die angenommene möglichkeit [the assumed possibility; PZ], dasz eine aussage der wirklichkeit entspricht, oder dasz etwas eintritt oder sich ereignet. (p. 238)

Jacob und Wilhelm GRIMM, Art. Vielleicht, in: *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Vol. 26 (München: dtv, 1984).

from E. Levinas, *Enigme et phénomène* (1965):

7. The God “remaining with the contrite and humble” (Isaiah LVII, 15), on the margin of a “persecuted truth,” is not only a religious “consolation,” but the original fissure of transcendence. He is a node of an intrigue separate from the adventure of Being which occurs in phenomena and in immanence, a new modality which is expressed by that “if one likes” and that “perhaps,” which one must not reduce to the possibility, reality, and necessity of formal logic, to which skepticism itself refers. (67; translation modified, PZ)

Emmanuel LEVINAS, Phenomenon and Enigma,
in: *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Nijhoff, 1987), 61-73.

»enigma«: Quote from Aristotle, *Poetics* 1458a:

8. [»Enigma« as the ability ...] „to describe a fact in an impossible combination of words.“

Quote from: Jacques DERRIDA, White Mythology, in: *Margins of Philosophy*
(transl. by Alan Bass; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 243.

3. *Perhaps*, the Trace of the To-come

from: *Force de loi* (Cardozo Law School, Oct 1989): (the »criterion« for justice; PZ)

9. ‘Perhaps’, one must always say perhaps for justice. There is an *avenir* for justice (*Il y a un avenir pour la 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 (*altérité absolue*) is unrepresentable (*imprésentable*), but it is the chance of an event and the condition of history.

Jacques DERRIDA, Force of Law. The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority’,
in: *Cardozo Law Review* 11 (1990) No.5-6, p. 921-1045, here: 969f

4. The non-performative, or more-than-performative *Perhaps*

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Further quotations on the Perhaps for the discussion (in chronological order):

from: *De la grammatologie* (Paris, 1967): (the »beginning« of the argumentation; PZ)

10. The ‘rationality’ – but perhaps that word should be abandoned for reasons that will appear at the end of this sentence – which governs a writing thus enlarged and radicalized, no longer issues from a logos. Further, it inaugurates the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the significations that have their source in that of the logos. Particularly the signification of *truth*.

Jacques DERRIDA, *Of Grammatology* (transl. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), p.10.

from: *Politiques de la amitié* (Paris, 1994):

11. What is going to come, *perhaps*, is not only this or that, it is at last the thought of the *perhaps*, the *perhaps* itself. / Ce qui va venir *peut-être*, ce n’est pas seulement ceci ou cela, c’est enfin la pensée du *peut-être*, le *peut-être* meme. (fr. 46 / engl. 29)
12. Now, the thought of the ‘perhaps’ perhaps engages the only possible thought of the event [...] / Or la pensée du ‘peut-être’ engage peut-être la seule pensée possible de l’événement [...] (fr. 46 / engl. 29)
13. And there is no more just category for the to-come than that of the ‘perhaps’. / Il n’est pas de catégorie plus juste pour l’avenir que celle du ‘peut-être’. (fr. 46 / engl. 29)

Jacques DERRIDA, *Politics of Friendship* (Translated by George Collins; Verso, 1997).

from: *Perhaps or Maybe* (Discussion with Alexander Garcia Düttmann) - London, March 8, 1996:

14. The hypothesis I hand over to you is that with maybe you have a relation to the future, to possibility, to something possible which may occur or not occur, which nevertheless includes a reference to being – ‘it may be or not’ – and with this reference to being you have a number of philosophical ethical, and political consequences [...] Whereas in perhaps or perchance the reference to the event, to what happens, is more obvious. And then we would have to address the question of what an event means, what the happening of an event means in terms of perhaps rather than maybe. (my emphasis; PZ)
15. I would distinguish between the future and what is to come. The future means something which will be or shall be or should be, which will be present tomorrow. When I define a future I define something which will

happen, which is supposed to happen. but in order to be, tomorrow or after tomorrow, present as such. The essence of the future is an essential relation to being, to being present. 'It will be present in a moment', 'It will be present tonight or tomorrow or in the next millenium', but in the form the present.

Whereas the event as such, that is, what is to come [*à-venir, venire*], does not necessarily come under the form of something present, is not something which would fall under the ontological category of being present.

16. One of the reasons I insist on or grant some privilege to the modality of perhaps in reference to the 'to-come' [...] is because, in order to refer to an event to come *as* an event, a happening to come, I must not know or predict or be certain that it will happen. If I anticipate this event as future, if I know that it will necessarily happen, if I interpret it as an effect of a cause, then, unfolding such a programme, I simply erase the eventness of the event. So, in order for me to relate to what could come or even what should come in the form of an event, I must suspend any knowledge, any present certainty about what is to come.
17. [...] the category of perhaps is perhaps the best category to refer to what remains to come.
18. The modality of the maybe is in fact the modality of any relation to what remains to come.

Jacques DERRIDA, Perhaps or Maybe. Jacques Derrida in conversation with Alexander García Düttmann, in: *Pli. Warwick Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 6: Responsibilities of Deconstruction (1997), p. 1-18, here: p. 2.

from: Deconstructions: The Im-possible (NYU lecture, Fall 1997):

19. And you have undoubtedly noticed that for all these "impossibles" – invention, the event, the gift, decision, responsibility, et cetera – I always cautiously say, "if there be such a thing." Not that I doubt that there ever were such a thing, nor do I affirm that it does not exist, simply if there be – this is why I say *if there be* such a thing – it cannot become the object of an assertive judgment, nor of | an observing knowledge, of an assured, founded certainty, nor of a theorem, if you like, nor a theory. There is not theory on this topic. It cannot give rise to a theoretical proof, to a philosophical act of the cognitive sort, but only to testimonies that imply a kind of act of faith, indeed an act of "perhaps." Perhaps. Nietzsche says, and I quote him in *Politics of Friendship*, that the philosophers of the future will be the thinkers of the "dangerous perhaps." Philosophy, in its Hegelian form, has always tried to disdain or ridicule the category of the "perhaps." The "perhaps" would be for the classical philosopher an empirical and approximate modality that the philosopher should begin by being right about. It would be incompatible with the thinking of the necessary and the law. Now without wanting to *rehabilitate* this category or this modality of "perhaps" – I say *perhaps* rather than *maybe* in order, precisely, to liberate this reference to the event, the happening, from the thinking of being – I would be tempted to see in it only the element itself in which a possible/impossible decision always takes place, if it takes place. (28f)
20. With regard to the "perhaps," moreover, there exists a theological vein, in the work of Böhme, Bruno, Nicholas de Cusa, that defines God not as being – and precisely for which fact they break with what Heidegger calls the "ontotheological tradition" – but defines God as "before" and outside of being, *without being*. They define God as "perhaps." God is the perhaps. (31)
Jacques DERRIDA, *Deconstructions: The Im-possible*, in: Sylvère LOTRINGER / Sande COHEN (Eds.), *french theory in america* (New York-London: Routledge, 2001), 13-31.

from: As If It Were Possible, 'Within Such Limits' ... (1998):

21. But this experience of the "perhaps" would be that of the possible *and* the impossible *at the same time*, of the possible *as* impossible. If only what is already possible arrives, what can be thus anticipated and expected, it does not make an event. An event is only possible when it comes from the impossible. It arrives *as* the coming of the impossible, where a "perhaps" deprives us of all assurance and leaves the future to the future. This "perhaps" is necessarily allied to a "yes": yes, yes to whatever (whoever) arrives [(*ce qui vient*)]. This "yes" would be common to the affirmation and the response; it would even come before any question. A *peut-être* like "*perhaps*" [...] is perhaps that which, exposed to an event like the "yes," that is, to the experience of what arrives (*happens*) and of *who* then arrives, far from interrupting the question, allows it to breathe. (344)
Jacques DERRIDA, *As If It Were Possible, 'Within Such Limits' ...*, in: *Negotiations. Interventions and Interviews 1971-2001* (Stanford, California; Stanford UP, 2002), p. 343-370.

from: The University Without Condition (Stanford Presidential Lecture, April 1999):

22. I will not say that this thought of the impossible possible, this other thinking of the possible is a thinking of necessity but rather, as I have also tried to demonstrate elsewhere, a thinking of the »perhaps«, of the dangerous modality of the »perhaps« that Nietzsche speaks of and that phi-|osophy has always tried to subjugate. There is no future and no relation to the coming of the event without experience of the »perhaps«. What takes place does not have to announce itself as possible or necessary; if it did, its irruption as event would in advance be neutralized. The event belongs to a *perhaps* that is in keeping not with the possible but with the im-

possible. And its force is therefore irreducible to the force or the power if a performative, event if it gives to the performative itself, to what is called the *force* of the performative, its chance and its effectiveness.

The force of the event is always stronger than the force of the performative. (234f; my emphasis; PZ)

Jacques DERRIDA, The University Without Condition, in: *Without Alibi* (Stanford, California: Stanford UP, 2002), 202-237.

from: Voyous (Paris, 2003):

23. [On the meaning of »démocratie à venir«:] Le « à » de l'à venir hésite entre l'injonction imperative (appel au performatif) et le *peu-être* patient de la messianicité (exposition non performative à ce qui vient, à ce qu'on peut toujours ne pas, venir ou être déjà venu). (132)

24. [On the »hypothesis« of the second part of »Voyous«:] Quelqu'un en moi | me souffla : « Peut-être s'agirait-il de sauver l'honneur de la raison. » « Peut-être s'agirait-il, ce jour-là, au jour d'aujourd'hui, dans la lumière des lumières de ce jour, de sauver l'honneur de la raison. » Peut-être le faudrait-il, même. *Il s'agit de* veut dire *il faut*. Se glissant sous chaque mot, l'hypothèse ouvrit aussi un abîme sous chacun de mes pas. (167f)

Jacques DERRIDA, *Voyous. Deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Galilée, 2003).

Another political context:

from: Paul Celan, *Der Meridian* (Georg-Büchner-Prize, 1961):

(The "perhaps" marks a decisive shift in this speech – a shift from "art" to "poetry".)

25. Dichtung: das kann eine Atemwende bedeuten. Wer weiß, vielleicht legt die Dichtung den Weg – auch den Weg der Kunst – um einer solchen Atemwende willen zurück? Vielleicht gelingt es ihr, da das Fremde, also der Abgrund *und* das Medusenhaupt, der Abgrund *und* | die Automaten, ja in einer Richtung zu liegen scheint, – vielleicht gelingt es ihr hier, zwischen Fremd und Fremd zu unterscheiden, vielleicht schrumpft gerade hier das Medusenhaupt, vielleicht versagen gerade hier die Automaten – für diesen einmaligen kurzen Augenblick? Vielleicht wird hier, mit dem Ich – mit dem *hier* und *solcherart* freigesetzten befremdeten Ich, – vielleicht wird hier noch ein Anderes frei?

Vielleicht ist das Gedicht von da her es selbst ... und kann nun, auf diese kunst-lose, kunst-freie Weise, seine anderen Wege, also auch die Wege der Kunst gehen – wieder und wieder gehen?

Vielleicht.

Paul CELAN, *Der Meridian*. Rede anlässlich der Verleihung des Georg Büchner Preises, in: *Gesammelte Werke* III, 195f.

16a. Poetry: that can signify an *Atemwende*, a Breathturn. Who knows, perhaps poetry follows its path – also the path of art – for the sake of such a breathturn? Perhaps, since strangeness – the abyss *and* the Medusa's head, the abyss *and* the robots – seems to lie in a single direction, perhaps poetry right here the Medusa's head shrinks, perhaps right here the robots break down – for this unique brief moment? Perhaps here, with the I – the estranged I set free *here* and *in such wise* – here perhaps yet some Other becomes free?

Perhaps from here on the poem is itself ... and in his art-less, art-free way can now follow its other paths, including the paths of art – again and again?

Perhaps.

Paul CELAN, *The Meridian*. Speech on the Occasion of the Award of the Georg Büchner Prize (1961), in: *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (transl. by John Felstiner; New York-London: Norton, 2001), 407f.

Further references to the "mode of the »perhaps«"

Lit.: Jacques DERRIDA, *Eine gewisse unmögliche Möglichkeit, vom Ereignis zu sprechen* (Berlin: Merve, 2003), bes. 51f.

Rodolphe GASCHÉ, Perhaps - A Modality? On the Way With Heidegger To Language, in: *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 16 (1993) H.2, 496-511.

Rodolphe GASCHÉ, *Inventions of difference. On Jacques Derrida* (Cambridge-London: Harvard UP, 1994), 194. 228.

Geoffrey BENNINGTON, *Interrupting Derrida* (London-New York: Routledge, 2000), 25-27. 121-124. 160f.

Peter ZEILLINGER, *Nachträgliches Denken. Skizze eines philosophisch-theologischen Aufbruchs im Ausgang von Jacques Derrida*. (Mit einer genealogischen Bibliographie der Werke Jacques Derridas; Münster: Lit, 2002).

Peter ZEILLINGER, Vielleicht wird das Unmögliche daher notwendig gewesen sein, in: Erik VOGT / Hugh SILVERMAN / Serge TROTTEIN (Hg.), *Derrida und die Politiken der Freundschaft* (Wien: Turia+Kant, 2003, 59-79.

Krzysztof ZIAREK, Semantics of Proximity: Language and the Other in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, in: *Research in Phenomenology* XIX (1989), p. 213-247, esp. 242ff.