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Derrida's Jefferson[1]

Hannah Arendt claims that the American Revolution provides a standard against which political modernity can be analyzed, also that subsequent revolutions failed to engage the conceptual purity of the American model. In contrast to Arendt, Jacques Derrida, in "Declarations of Independence," renounces Jefferson's thought as inadequate, and excuses himself from engaging it on critical terms. Given the fact that Derrida later mobilizes Marx in order to explore similar concerns, now in terms of secularized messianism and from an Abrahamic angle, I analyze how Derrida's Marx constitutes a position from which to reassess Derrida's Jefferson.

Key words: Thomas Jefferson, Jacques Derrida, America, revolution, authority, parataxis

1

There is a curious consistency to how Jacques Derrida commemorates two great thinkers of revolution, Thomas Jefferson and Karl Marx, even though his estimations of the two are different: Derrida extols Marx in the very position where he finds Jefferson lacking.[2] While Jefferson seems to have mismanaged the revolutionary founding of a republic by misappropriating divine authority in the Declaration of Independence, Marx seems to have remedied Jefferson's mistake by properly associating the revolutionary thought with the secularizing aspect of "Abrahamic messianism" (Derrida 1994: 210). This is how the messianic in Marx is reduced to "an obstinate

1 Research for this essay was supported by the Croatian Science Foundation funding of the project *A Cultural History of Capitalism* (HRZZ-1543).

2 In "Declarations of Independence" ("Declarations d'Indépendance") and *Specters of Marx (Spectres de Marx)*.

interest in a materialism without substance," so that the messianic comes to "designate a structure of experience rather than a religion" (Derrida 1994: 212) – a structure of experience formative to political modernity.

That is not the only instance where Derrida's texts on Jefferson and Marx resonate, just as this particular resonance does not exhaust the scope of Derrida's argument. It does, however, indicate the structure of the contact: for Derrida, Marx redeems that which Jefferson mishandles in thinking the revolution, in the position where the revolutionary thought appears bound with theology and/or religion. Also, rather than discussing in depth the texts by Jefferson and Marx, or the revolutions associated with them, Derrida finds it more pressing to address a certain irruption into philosophy occasioned by Jefferson and Marx. It is as if revolutions cannot be addressed from within philosophy except as the irruptions that philosophy cannot and perhaps should not process to its satisfaction, so that revolutions keep demanding that philosophy attend to its discontents, much as Freud has confronted civilization with the same problem, in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*.

Hence the significance of the fact that Derrida's interest in Jefferson and Marx was markedly occasional and commemorative, to be admitted into philosophy with a certain structural delay. Derrida addressed Jefferson on the occasion of the bicentenary of the Declaration of Independence, and Marx just after the fall of the Iron Curtain, when Marxism seemed to have died along with Europe's socialist states. Occasion here points to the irruption and the contingency that are proper to history rather than to philosophy. Commemoration, on the other hand, implies that history, or historiography, is not altogether equipped to deal with that about the occasional which invokes death or the dead; instead, philosophy is invited to tend to this task, especially in modernity, when theology is denied the privilege of dominating the discourse on death.

That is why commemoration in Derrida is more often than not aligned with mourning. Mourning designates an investment in death that philosophy is asked to process as structural: away from the occasional and into a cornerstone of philosophy's intellectual economy. Mourning is, therefore, im-

plicit to acts of commemoration; it is an apparatus of sorts, before the fact or the occasion. Derrida described his own work in similar terms. To work on mourning, he observes, "is first of all – and by that very token – the operation which would consist in working on mourning the way one says that something functions on such and such an energy source, on such and such a fuel – for example, to run on high octane. To the point of exhaustion" (1995: 48).[3] In other words, one's intellectual situation is irreducibly indebted to mourning. This is how the intellectual situation itself takes on an Abrahamic aspect: because Abraham is subject to mourning to begin with, as soon as he acknowledges his covenant with God, by pledging to sacrifice Isaac, whom he loves more than himself, so that the eventual taking place of the killing or its not taking place is immaterial to the logic of Abraham's mourning.

This in turn is consistent with Abrahamic messianism, which Derrida attaches to Marx. Derrida alludes to this relation in the subtitle of *Specters of Marx*, when he joins the state of the debt and the work of mourning into a metonymy. He thereby promotes mourning-cum-debt into an intellectual interval, now between history and philosophy, not unlike the interval that Walter Benjamin explores in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama (Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels)*. Indeed, when Derrida speaks about "the obstinate interest in a materialism without substance," he could be describing the Benjaminian obstinate mourning, in the face of the world which has become all too material because it is all too intractable, the world rendered such by the thought of the Reformation, and ushered into modernity as a result. (Hence Benjamin's appreciation of the obstinate angel in Dürer's *Melencolia I*, who angrily contemplates the world reduced to debris, the world he cannot otherwise engage.)[4] Yet Derrida seems to imply that Marx, not Benjamin, is the author with whom to address both political modernity and the materialism peculiar to it: because Marx understood the irreducibly Abrahamic character

3 Derrida, says Geoffrey Bennington, "claims that he 'runs on' *deuil* the way a car runs on gas" (2010: 111).

4 See Benjamin 140–58.

of this materialism, and of this mourning, whereas Benjamin, with his focus on the intellectual impact of the Reformation, seems unduly swayed by history, so that commemoration and mourning in Benjamin's work remain reducible, as well as contaminated by the occasional.[5]

2

Derrida's reservations about Jefferson, and consequently about the political project of America, betray a similar line of reasoning. When Derrida critiques Jefferson's supplication to divine authority in the draft of the Declaration of Independence, it is not the invocation of God that he reproves so much as Jefferson's presumption to be the author of the Declaration – the authorship and the authorization which must remain suspended, this being the condition of founding a republic in modernity. According to Derrida, "there was no signer, by right, before the text of the Declaration which itself remains the producer and the guarantor of its own signature," so that signature "opens *for itself* a line of credit" (1986: 10). When Jefferson laments the "mutilation" of his draft at the hands of other signatories of the document, says Derrida, he in fact betrays his aspiration to being its only signatory – a position appropriate to God, insofar as "God is the best proper name, the best one, for this last instance and this ultimate signature" (1986: 12). "A complete and total effacement" of Jefferson's text, concludes Derrida, "… would have been better, leaving in place, under a map of the United States, only the nudity of his proper name: instituting text, founding act and signing energy. Precisely in the place of the last instance where God – who had nothing to do with any of this (…) – alone will have signed" (1986: 13).

Tellingly, Derrida's description of Jefferson's authorial plight is steeped in a vocabulary of mourning. Derrida iterates that Jefferson "suffered because he clung to his text"; he attributes to Jefferson "a feeling of wounding and

5 I argue elsewhere that the sophisticated narrative structure that Benjamin employs in the second chapter of *The Origin*, where he outlines a cultural history of mourning and melancholia, contributes precisely the Abrahamic horizon to mourning. See Jukić.

mutilation" as well as "unhappiness" and goes at length into a story about Franklin's "consoling" Jefferson "about the 'mutilation'" of the draft (1986: 12–13). Instead, "an institution – (…) in its very institutionality – has to render itself independent of the empirical individuals who have taken part in its introduction" and "has in a certain way to mourn them or resign itself to their loss [*faire son deuil*] even and especially if it commemorates them" (Derrida 1986: 8). In short, mourning is integral to institutions insofar as institutions, in their very institutionality, are founded around mourning their founders or, more to the point, around processing their residual empiricism into nothingness. Jefferson's mistake, in other words, was not mourning as such but mourning misplaced, misappropriated, and misunderstood – mourning taken up in terms of empiricism, just as an empiricism is thereby admitted to authority and institution. It is in this sense that Jefferson's fault appears graver than the one Derrida implicitly attributes to Benjamin. While Derrida's Benjamin seems unduly moored in the historical and the occasional but is otherwise sensible of the world as irretrievably lost, Jefferson engages the world not as fragmented debris yielding mournful contemplation, but as an experiment in empiricism, failing to appreciate the loss of the world and, ultimately, the Abrahamic horizon of its engagement.

That Derrida approaches Jefferson's mourning from an Abrahamic perspective can be evinced from the emphasis granted to the imaginary of mutilation. Derrida insists, several times, that Jefferson mourned the *mutilation* of his draft, as if the Declaration were a body or a corpse marked out for sacrifice. To be sure, Derrida points out that mutilation is the word he quotes in this context; "the word is not my own," he says (1986: 12). Yet, by reiterating the word so emphatically not his own, he in effect *repeats* mutilation *to begin with*; his rhetorical strategy is to remove mutilation from the historical time and situate it in the time of Abrahamism. As a result, the mutilation of the Declaration, in Derrida's text, is not unlike the suspended mutilation of Isaac's sacrificial body: even though Abraham never carried out the sacrifice of his most beloved son on Mount Moriah, he in effect carried it out as soon as he pledged to do it to God. This is how mutilation is revealed to be al-

ways already contained in the Covenant (the original pledge), in the form of a most preemptive mutilation of the self. In short, mutilation for Derrida is contained in a kind of preemptive repetition, not unlike the repetition that Freud associates with the death drive.[6] Abrahamic mourning is thereby revealed as absolute, just as sacrifice precedes any relation to authority or the act of institution.[7]

This is how Derrida demonstrates that his interest lies with the issue of authority and institution rather than with religion or divinity per se; he seems concerned with divinity only insofar as it is structurally complicit in the foundation of authority. It is in this sense that "Declarations of Independence" is a companion piece to *Specters of Marx*, where Derrida attempts to read Marx in light of Abrahamic messianism, as well as to "Force of Law," Derrida's long essay subtitled "The Mystical Foundation of Authority," where he argues that the foundation of authority necessarily supersedes the historical logic in favor of "the 'mystical' limit" (2002: 242), religious or not.[8] Again, it is in this position that Derrida betrays an affinity with Freud, who depends on a similar secularization of Abrahamic logic for his invention of the death drive as the seat of authority.

Jefferson's fault appears to be just that: in Derrida's view, Jefferson failed to consider the fact that sacrifice/mutilation precedes any relation to authority or the act of institution, so that his unhappiness about the mutilation of the draft testifies ultimately to a deplorable political shortsightedness. Yet Jeffer-

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6 With the plural "Declarations" in the title of his essay, in place of the singular Declaration, Derrida replaces the singularity of the Declaration with a structure of repetition. The same applies to specters in *Specters of Marx*.

7 See Derrida 2008 for a comprehensive analysis of the story of Abraham.

8 Derrida himself identifies "Declarations of Independence" as the text which anticipates the horizon of "Force of Law" (2002: 235). In "Force of Law" he expounds on the meaning of credit, the word he emphatically associated with the Declaration of Independence. "The word *credit*," Derrida points out, "justifies the allusion to the mystical character of authority. The authority of laws rests only on the credit that is granted them. One believes in it; that is their only foundation. This act of faith is not an ontological or rational foundation. Still one has yet to think what *believing* means" (2002: 240).

son contributes a different perspective altogether: his covenant seems to be the Lockean one with the people, the social contract, so that any government resulting from this contract remains steeped in the contingent and the occasional, equally at the expense of mysticism and of foundation.[9] It is significant that Derrida speaks of law where Locke would insist on contract, the contractuality here designating precisely the contingent and the occasional that law could not support. Equally, where mutilation to Derrida eventually spells out debt and credit, to Jefferson it seems to spell out waste, expense and bad economy. (It is almost as if Derrida stands for Freud's mourning and for the Freudian death-drive, where Jefferson would stand for Freud's melancholia.)

3

Both Freud and Derrida were annoyed with America, even though they recruited their most dedicated patients and/or disciples from among the Americans and were keen to cater to the American intellectual market; this suggests that their annoyance with America had to do with America per-

9 How empiricism contributed to the ideation of America is suggested by Arendt, who remarks that the signers of the Declaration of Independence engaged "the horizontal version of the social contract," championed by Locke. The Lockean social contract relates to "the only form of government in which people are bound together not through historical memories or ethnic homogeneity, as in the nation state, and not through Hobbes's Leviathan, which 'overawes them all' and thus unites them, but through the strength of mutual promises" (1972: 86–87). After the fashion of the Latin societas, says Arendt, this is "an 'alliance' between all individual members, who contract their government after they have mutually bound themselves," which is how society "remains intact even if 'the government is dissolved' or breaks its agreement with society, developing into a tyranny" (1972: 86–87). Quoting further from Locke, Arendt emphasizes that "'the power that every individual gave the society, when he entered into it, can never revert to the individuals again, as long as the society lasts, but will always remain in the community'" (1972: 87). Arendt traces this political logic to "the American prerevolutionary experience, with its numerous covenants and agreements" – the very model that Locke "actually had in mind" when he said that "'in the beginning, all the world was America'" (1972: 85). This, of course, implies that Jefferson's grief is not misplaced, as Derrida would have it, but derives from a different grammar of affect as it were, one commensurate with the horizontality of the contract in which it participates.

ceived to be an (inferior) order of exegesis and understanding.

Derrida's response to America in "Declarations of Independence" is acutely symptomatic of this structure. In 1976 Derrida was invited by the University of Virginia, an institution founded by Jefferson, to deliver an address on the occasion of the bicentenary of the Declaration of Independence. He accepted the invitation, to then refuse to address the occasion except "in the form of an excuse" (1986: 7). Put differently, he spoke about Jefferson only in order to excuse himself from speaking about Jefferson, in the heart of Jeffersonian America, so that Jefferson and America remain framed by the discourse of excuse and poor judgment, if not insult. Yet Derrida never bears the brunt of the blame and the guilt that are implicit to excuses. Instead, he assigns to Jefferson the guilt and the blame that he has mobilized, by targeting what he perceives to be Jefferson's poor judgment, as if Jefferson were the one who should have offered an excuse. In fact, one could well speculate that Derrida produced the excuse at the beginning of his address only so as to secure the guilt and the blame for further circulation.[10]

This, of course, is a rhetorical operation appropriate to literature, not to philosophy or law – or appropriate perhaps to the zone of resonance where literature, philosophy, and law feed off each other. Derrida suggests as much when he emphasizes that it was initially proposed to him that he should at-

10 That the circulation of guilt was the effect for which Derrida was aiming can be inferred from his perspective on forgiveness: "Far from bringing it to an end, from dissolving or absolving it, forgiveness can (...) only extend the fault" (2008: 126). J. Hillis Miller concedes that Derrida begins by emphatically breaking his promise to speak about the Declaration of Independence, but insists that the broken promise was meant to reciprocate the revolutionary gesture of the signatories of the Declaration (who broke their colonial promise, to England) – now in the context of academic discourse. To be sure, Hillis Miller is at pains to reconcile what he claims is Derrida's revolutionary gesture with Derrida's subsequent excuse, the speech-act not easily reconciled with revolutionary rhetoric; he eventually explains Derrida's rhetorical choice as one of irony (118). Yet, even Hillis Miller feels obliged to quote the Abrahamic Derrida, to the detriment of his own argument, when Derrida remarks: "I fully intend to discuss with you (...) the promise, the contract, engagement, the signature, and even *what always presupposes them, in a strange way: the presentation of excuses*" (ibid.; emphasis added).

tempt an analysis of Jefferson "at once philosophical and literary" (1986: 7), this being the intellectual tradeoff suited to approaching Jefferson's writings. Derrida, however, dismisses the tradeoff and relegates it to the "improbable discipline of comparative literature" (1986: 7). To Derrida, comparative literature is not only an improbable discipline, but also one to which he responds with astonishment and intimidation: "At first, I was astonished. An intimidating proposition. Nothing had prepared me for it" (1986: 7). He seems to object not to literature but to the proposed metonymic confusion of literature and philosophy, to their taking place "at once" or, more precisely, to their sharing the same, undifferentiated space. Instead, his rhetoric in "Declarations of Independence" suggests that guilt and blame should precede a confluence of literature and philosophy, so that their coming together is always already inflected in their relation to law. Put otherwise, the confluence of literature and philosophy seems pre-inscribed for Derrida in an Abrahamic relation, a hypothesis Derrida fleshes out when he, later, joins the secret structural to "the elective Covenant [*Alliance*] between God and Abraham with the secret of what we call literature, the secret of literature and secrecy in literature" (2008: 121).[11]

Significantly, "comparative literature" stays in English in Derrida's French text, as if to emphasize that comparative literature is Anglo-American in character *and* foreign to the Abrahamic relation that Derrida cultivates for literature. By extension, Anglo-American literature itself appears to be foreign to this relation. This can be evinced from a lengthy interview Derrida gave in 1984, about deconstruction in America. "Anglo-Saxon literature," he remarks, "which is after all the vehicle for deconstructive movements in

11 "I think of Abraham," says Derrida, "who kept the secret – speaking of it neither to Sarah nor even to Isaac – concerning the order given him, in tête-á-tête, by God. The sense of that order remained secret, even to him" (2008: 121). This is the secret inflected in literature as Derrida sees it, so that the sense of literature remains outsourced precisely in the position where it cannot circumvent order (or guilt, or blame). Symptomatically, in "Force of Law" Derrida speaks of "juridicoliterary reflection" which belongs with "critical legal studies," to then enter a conjunction with "a deconstruction of a style more directly philosophical or motivated by literary theory" (2002: 236).

English departments, I know poorly. (And it's in English departments that things are happening more than in departments of French or philosophy)" (1985: 23). "When I read deconstruction in English," he says, "it's something else": "What happens in the United States becomes absolutely vital. It is a translation supplement that is absolutely called for by something which must have been lacking in the original. With the effect of strangeness, of displacement" (1985: 23).

Derrida's tone seems more conciliatory now, as if to suggest that America may be admitted to deconstruction without excuse. Moreover, in the same interview, Derrida defines deconstruction as "a coming-to-terms with literature" – a process in which "deconstruction is also a symptom" that "takes a philosophical form most often" or, rather, the form which is "[p]hilosophical and literary" (1985: 9, 18). While comparative literature is thereby almost legitimized, one should not overlook the rhetoric of pathology that is assigned to the assemblage of literature and philosophy: this assemblage is a symptom, just as America contributes to deconstruction the effect of strangeness and displacement, however called for. In this fashion the earlier excuse, with its free-floating rhetoric of guilt and blame, hovers still in Derrida's argument, nowhere so pointedly perhaps as when Derrida acknowledges American Puritanism as imperative to understanding deconstruction in America – as if to contain Jefferson's misappropriation of God. In Derrida's own words, "We can't understand the reception that deconstruction has had in the United States without background – historical, political, religious, and so forth. I would say religious above all" (1985: 2).[12]

12 "[T]he teaching of religion, and above all its institution," says Derrida, "is something very strong in the universities in this country"; "because of this the protestant, theological ethic which marks the American academic world acted all the more 'responsibly,' basically taking deconstruction more seriously than was possible in Europe" (1985: 11–12). Arendt, in contrast, even as she acknowledges the impact on Locke of American pre-revolutionary covenants, emphasizes that the Lockean contract, with its imprint on the founding of the American republic, should be distinguished from "the Puritan version of consent" (1972: 86).

4

Derrida's position forms an interesting angle to Carl Schmitt's argument about the birth of modernity out of the spirit of Protestantism. Schmitt (2006) contends that a new political era dawns after the uniform theological platform in Europe has been compromised with and by the Reformation, compromising in its wake the legitimizing procedures, as well as the figure of the sovereign.

According to Schmitt, the crisis of authorization thus brought to the fore is best grasped from within literature. Literature registers this crisis as the irruption of time into its very structure; by processing the irruption, literature arrives at a position from which to reconstitute itself into an apparatus critical to negotiating the rationale of politics and authorization in modernity. For Schmitt, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is exemplary in this sense. Indeed, Schmitt draws upon Benjamin's discussion of *Trauerspiel* and of the German literary Baroque in order to promote *Hamlet* as a specimen story of political modernity, with mourning once again acknowledged as this modernity's intellectual situation.

In line with Benjamin but more particularly, Schmitt insists that this is also how to think revolution, as the event structural to politics in modernity. "Shakespeare's drama coincides with the first stage of the English revolution," he says, which "lasted a hundred years, from 1588 to 1688," during which time England did not "set up a state police, justice, finance or standing army in the way Continental Europe did" (2006: 54, 56). Moreover, Schmitt relates the English Revolution to England being "the country of origin of the industrial revolution, without having to pass through the straights of Continental statehood" (2006: 55–56), thus associating the industrial revolution with the political one. This is in line with Arendt (1963: 162), who, quoting from William Blackstone, claims that "absolute power becomes despotic" not when or because it retains a link to "transcendental quality," but when or because it cuts itself loose from it, so that no transcendence is available to this power which "'must in all governments reside somewhere.'" ("This exposure of the dubious nature of government in the modern age," Arendt continues,

"occurred in bitter earnest only when and where revolutions eventually broke out" [1963: 162].) In his observations about the English Revolution, Schmitt admires precisely the irreducible *somewhere* of this power: it resides not in any place, metaphor, person, or destination, not in state police, state justice, standing army …, but is metonymic to various places and positions – it works in a capillary fashion and is prey to a political microphysics. While this may be a platform from which to reassess Marx's intellectual legacy, in political economy and cultural history alike, it is also a conduit to discussing the American political experiment, as the American revolutionaries could not but mobilize, critically, the intellectual and the political assumptions of the English.[13]

Like Schmitt, Derrida is drawn to *Hamlet*, especially in *Specters of Marx*, in the position where Shakespeare's play registers the irruption of time as the lynchpin to its intellectual constitution. Hence Derrida's repeated references to the time which is "out of joint" – the irruption that he perceives as hosting specters and mourning on a scale on which no particular unhappiness, like the one he attributes to Jefferson, counts as significant or signifying.

Yet *Hamlet* attracts Derrida also in the position that Schmitt could not sustain. While *Hamlet* to Schmitt is the harbinger of the English Revolution, Derrida reads *Hamlet* as the literature of injunction: to Derrida, *Hamlet* makes sense insofar as Hamlet, as well as the play as a whole, responds to the injunction issued at the outset by the ghost of the father.[14] As a result, Hamlet's melancholy discourse, exhausted in homicidal/suicidal pledges and promises, constitutes but a massive excuse in the face of the ghost's injunction. Excuse is again unleashed for circulation, with Derrida's Hamlet recip-

13 Schmitt loses sight of the metonymic character of the American Revolution when, elsewhere and in passing, he ascribes to Jefferson a metaphorical understanding of God – "the reasonable and the pragmatic belief that the voice of the people is the voice of God – a belief that is at the foundation of Jefferson's victory of 1801" (2005: 49).

14 When Derrida (1994: 10, 11) insists that the specter in Hamlet "*begins* by *coming back*," that it "*figures both* a dead man who comes back and a ghost whose expected return repeats itself, again and again," the repetition he thereby promotes is exactly the repetition of the Freudian *Todestrieb*.

rocating Derrida's Abraham in the face of God, now as Abraham and Isaac in one. (Conveniently, this is also how Derrida's *Hamlet* is absolutely literary, insofar as literature to Derrida is Abrahamic.)[15]

5

Derrida's response to *Hamlet* is decidedly hypotactic and metaphorical. In fact, the hypotactic structure of Derrida's argument evokes Erich Auerbach's reading of the Abrahamic episode in the Old Testament.

According to Auerbach, the style of representation in the Old Testament is hypotactic, in contrast to the parataxis of the Homeric world. In Homer, parataxis means that phenomena are "externalized" and "connected together without lacunae in a perpetual foreground" (11). Hypotaxis, on the other hand, means that "the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent," so that "the whole, (…) directed toward a single goal (and to that extent far more of a unity), remains mysterious and 'fraught with background'" (11–12). While hypotaxis is determined by that which is causal or at least temporal, says Auerbach, parataxis is defined by its mobilization of "and" (70–71); in brief, parataxis is words and phrases added on rather than subordinated to each other – subordination is the aspect of the hypotactic grammar.[16] This is why "Homer can be analyzed," says Auerbach (13), "but he cannot be interpreted" – the interpretation being a fit for the Abrahamic narrative. There is a marked political aspect to the hypotactic style: "The Scripture stories do not, like Homer's, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us – they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels" (Auerbach 15). This observation is important for yet another reason: it explains why an Abrahamic idea of literature may want to subordinate comparative literature to literature in an

15 Seyla Benhabib (15–16) writes about the metaphysicalization of revolutionary violence in Derrida.

16 I rely here on Edward Said's description of parataxis in his introduction to the fiftieth-anniversary edition of *Mimesis* (Auerbach x).

absolute sense.

This may also explain Derrida's unease about Jefferson. The constitution of Jefferson's thought is paratactic, most insistently perhaps in his adherence to Greek and Roman antiquity, which finds its intellectual situation in Epicurean philosophy and the poetry of Lucretius. The intellectual debt of the Founding Fathers to Roman authors is a well-documented fact; Arendt (1963) especially insists on consulting the habitus of Roman antiquity as the horizon appropriate to understanding the American Revolution.[17] Jefferson contributes to this horizon a markedly materialist inflection, refracted through Epicureanism; Stephen Greenblatt reports that Jefferson "owned at least five Latin editions of *On the Nature of Things*, along with translations of the poem into English, Italian, and French," noting that "[t]he atoms of Lucretius had left their traces on the Declaration of Independence" (262, 263). In a way, this is how Jefferson and Derrida replicate the pair of the first chapter of Auerbach's *Mimesis*: Jefferson's Lucretian materialism is to Derrida's Abrahamic "materialism without substance" what Homer's paratactic narrative grammar is to the hypotactic narrative grammar of the Old Testament. [18]

Parataxis becomes political for Jefferson or, more to the point, politics

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17 In a comment about the American Founding Fathers, she writes: "If their attitude towards Revolution and Constitution can be called religious at all, then the word 'religion' must be understood in its original Roman sense, and their piety would then consist in *religare*, in binding themselves back to a beginning" (1963: 198). (See also Honig 110 about the revolutionary firstness.) While this appears to dovetail with Derrida's argument about "the mystical foundation" of all authority, revolutionary included, there is a rupture to this logic, because the imperatives of Roman religion did not overlap with those of the Judeo-Christian tradition, just as the two did not cultivate similar relations to philosophy. (See Veyne 1997 about the specifics of Roman religion, and philosophy.) Arendt is explicit about this: "One could indeed ... assert that the Constitution strengthens the American government 'with the strength of religion'. Except that the strength with which the American people bound themselves to their constitution was not the Christian faith in a revealed God, nor was it Hebrew obedience to the Creator who also was the Legislator of the Universe" (1963: 198).

18 Karl Popper notes "that a direct historical connection leads from Democritus and Epicurus via Lucretius not only to Gassendi but undoubtedly to Locke also" (289). Interestingly, Marx wrote his doctoral dissertation on Epicurean natural philosophy.

for Jefferson becomes paratactic, parataxis describing precisely the revolutionary character of politics. Jefferson seems to have understood revolution as the shift whereby authority is translated from hypotactic into paratactic conditions. Jefferson's concept of freedom, implicit to his vision of the new continent for the new man, is paratactic in character, because freedom is thereby imagined primarily as the freedom of movement – the proposition Arendt (1963: 25, 275) hails as definitive of revolutions. Paratactic in character was also the American revolutionary "application of Montesquieu's theory of a division of powers within the body politic," which, says Arendt, "played a very minor role in the thought of European revolutionists at all times" (1963: 24), to whom national sovereignty reigned supreme.[19]

When Derrida says that he can address Jefferson only in the form of an excuse, he is in fact subordinating the paratactic logic of the American Revolution to a hypotactic horizon. Derrida's forefronting of excuse signals that translation and subordination are indeed taking place, simultaneously, so that the translation of the paratactic into the hypotactic turns out to be possible only as a case of subordination.[20] In other words, Derrida could not have

19 There is another detail, reported by Arendt, which testifies to the paratactic character of the American Revolution: "The unique and all-decisive distinction between the settlements of North America and all other colonial enterprises was that only the British emigrants had insisted, from the very beginning, that they constitute themselves into 'civil bodies politic'. These bodies, moreover, were not conceived as governments, strictly speaking; they did not imply rule and the division of the people into rulers and ruled. (…) These new bodies politic really were 'political societies', and their great importance for the future lay in the formation of a political realm that enjoyed power and was entitled to claim rights without possessing or claiming sovereignty. The greatest revolutionary innovation, Madison's discovery of the federal principle for the foundation of large republics, was partly based upon an experience, upon the intimate knowledge of political bodies whose internal structure predetermined them, as it were, and conditioned its members for a constant enlargement whose principle was neither expansion nor conquest but the further combination of powers" (1963: 168).

20 This may also be the position from which to address Derrida's repeated references to impasses and losses as structural, not incidental, to the act of translation, so that translation itself – especially from (his) French into (American) English, and vice versa – surfaces in Derrida as an Abrahamic, hypotactic practice, whose boon is always already implicated in

spoken about Jefferson except in the form of an excuse; every other mode of address would have eroded the order of his discourse, what is more, it would have eroded its secret: that there may be a subordination to deconstruction. In fact, Derrida's Jefferson invites a comparison with Heidegger's Hölderlin: Theodor Adorno (1992) argues that Heidegger depended on subordinating the paratactic logic of Hölderlin's references to Greek antiquity in order to admit Hölderlin's poetry to his philosophy's language. It is a small wonder, therefore, that Derrida, in "Declarations of Independence," should readily sacrifice Jefferson to his interest in Nietzsche, just as he readily subordinates his interest in Schmitt's political theory, in "The Politics of Friendship," to his interest in Heidegger.

This, of course, is hardly a conclusion, because it heralds a more comprehensive discussion of Derrida's America, and of deconstruction in America. After all, Derrida himself has identified Hölderlin as a key to his understanding of America. I am alluding to Derrida's sustained references to America in *Memoires for Paul de Man*, where America serves to house Hölderlin for deconstruction and for what turns out to be Paul de Man's decisive encounter with Heidegger, and with the imaginary of Nazism.[21] This again raises the issue of the politics of deconstruction, spiraling back to Derrida's rejection of Jefferson on political grounds. [22] Instead of approaching this spiral from within Derrida, I imagine taking it up as the twenty-first chapter of Auerbach's *Mimesis*.

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the symbolism of sacrifice.

21 See Derrida 1989: 15-18, also Warminski 1985.

22 My reference here is also to Derrida's remark that addressing the Declaration of Independence, along with the Declaration of the Rights of Man, calls for "a juridico-political study" – a "task inaccessible to me" (1986: 7). What appears to be taxing about the two texts is their commitment to politics, too much politics as it were. Derrida suggests as much when he observes that some of the questions he would have liked to tackle – but now excuses himself from doing – "have been elaborated elsewhere, *on an apparently less political corpus*" (1986: 7, emphasis added).

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