Derrida constantly repeats the gesture of warning us against the police, only to tell us later that we need not worry: they are our friends, it was not a warning. E.g., he says that if the absence which is said to characterize written communication was shown to be a condition of all signs, the traditional conception of writing "would appear to be noncritical, ill-formed, or destined, rather, to insure the authority and the force of a certain historical discourse" (Sec 7). The words preceding "or" are best ignored.* Still, the second half of the sentence suggests the cultural critique of false consciousness: surely nobody wants to be caught insuring "the authority and the force of a certain historical discourse"! Derrida was asking to be misunderstood or overemphasized in creating the implied reader of his essay—and I do not think this escaped his attention, or that he is so clumsy a writer as not to be able to control the tone that will convey his meaning.

This duplicity is at work behind every definite statement in Limited Inc—Derrida's project is eminently ambiguous, since it both suggests and denies that it has implications for the theory of interpretation. He announces the break with the conception of communication as communication of consciousnesses, the disqualification ("or the limiting"!) of the concept of context, etc. (Sec 8-9), only to let them in through the back door. From the structural possibility of infelicitous speech acts, Derrida concludes that "the opposition success / failure [échec] in illocution and in perlocution thus
seems quite insufficient and extremely secondary [dérivée]" (Sec 15). They can only be said so by someone who can speak of "the teleological lure of consciousness" (Sec 18) as if an account of communication which did not use the concept of consciousness were possible.

Derrida speaks of Austin's theory as if it conceived of people as preternaturally self-conscious and hyper-legislatively-minded creatures: "In order for the context to be exhaustively determinable, in the sense required by Austin, conscious intention would at the very least have to be totally present and immediately transparent to itself and to others, since it is a determining center [foyer] of context" (Sec 18). But, as Derrida himself notes in "Limited inc a b c," consciousness does not imply self-consciousness. And the context does not have to be exhaustively determined. Rather, it is assumed to be determined unless an interlocutor asks for further specification, or behaves in a way that shows that his assumptions about the context are different. In a characteristic gesture, Derrida accepts the notion of consciousness and normal circumstances, but giving them a marginal place in his theory: "those effects do not exclude what is generally opposed to them. . . ; on the contrary, they presuppose it, in an asymmetrical way, as the general space of their possibility" (Sec 19). "They presuppose it" in a metaphysical consideration of language—not in a description of language use, like speech act theory. This move also equivocates, by introducing in a theory of language use a set of considerations which are quite irrelevant to it. Normal circumstances, serious or felicitous speech acts work as normative principles precisely in that they do not presuppose their "other"—they are the unmarked case.** Speakers assume that an utterance is literal unless they have a reason to think otherwise. A literal utterance is not interpreted through its contrary, or exhaustively compared to its context. The intrinsic, unmarked, normal context which is a part of the locutionary meaning of a sentence is enough to interpret it if it does not run against the extrinsic context of the utterance. On the contrary, to interpret a lie as a lie we cannot help but set it against its other, the true statement it purported to be.

To the extent that Derrida obscures this circumstance, he is not putting forward a theory of interpretation—he is noting the presence in theories of interpretation of the same logic of purity and impurity which is present in other semiotic areas, like the construction of sexuality or the cultural notions of East and West. This analysis does not have the same implications in all of
these fields. I can easily conceive a theory of culture without chauvinist cultural hierarchies; it is much more difficult to devise a workable theory of communication which renounces the notions of literal meaning or felicitous speech act as regulative elements used by the speakers. At least Derrida has not provided one. He wants to be both Fish and Hirsch. In ordinary speech, he allows the presence of intention or literal meaning as "derivative" effects; when he analyzes the source of the derivation, he can't help using the notions of presence, center and consciousness.

The blind spot which opens the visibility of the text is its absent center.*** The principles of writing and supplementarity Derrida finds in Rousseau's writing are, it seems, central in these texts. They represent the *mise en abyme* of that textuality: "Et nous verrons que l'abîme n'est pas ici un accident . . ." (Dlg 233). Moreover, this blind spot is a (present) center in Derrida's critical commentary. Derrida continually uses the language of essence and presence. Is deconstruction yet another discovery of centers? What is the sense of "formulating," "producing laws" or essays with an "axial purpose," putting forward "ultimate justifications" or constituting a "theory of structural necessity" (Dlg 233)? By "preserving" the "vulgar concepts" (of writing, intention, etc.) and setting them in a wider frame, Derrida's theory still has a thrust towards totalization.****

To the extent that a theory is an intentional construct and its *raison d'être* is the conscious recognition or establishment of relationships, Derrida's writing is a misguided experiment in *mise en abyme*—I suspect that his silence on this aspect of his writing is a wilful desire to have his text victimized by the same law it denounces, but his equivocations about the implications of the extended concept of writing make him play down the role of his own text as an intentional construct. The text is unnecessarily victimized. Its effectivity is therefore doubly impaired, conceptually and rhetorically.

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Notes

* Cf. "Limited Inc abc..." 98. Derrida's use of "or," "or rather" (do they introduce the same in a different phrasing? the radically other?) is highly instructive as a practical example of *terrorisme obscurantiste*, or rather of deconstructive undecidability.

** As to the debate on the status of fiction, Searle and Derrida speak at cross-purposes because neither of them is willing to move into the reasonable middle-ground: that producing fiction (i.e., 'non-serious' speech acts) is itself a serious speech act. A theory along these lines is put forward by Mary Louise Pratt, *Toward a Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977.

*** De la grammatologie 234. Or is it the absent center of the text as it is seen by the critic? This view, which would seem to use a more critical version of presence, does not seem to be favored by Derrida.

**** The counter-movement, which denounces the absurdity of this kind of enterprise, is fraught with false steps. For instance, in "Limited inc" 39 he speaks of "the interminable character" of speech act analysis, because the analysis itself must be a speech act. Derrida might equally well denounce the absurdity of a book on syntax on the basis that it must use syntactic constructions to describe syntax.

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Works cited


