

Martin Jay and Jacques Derrida

— After *Downcast Eyes*

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This paper depicts the relationship between Martin Jay and Jacques Derrida. The latter was a twentieth-century French philosopher, whose ideas Jay had examined in his book *Downcast Eyes*. In the Introduction, Jay says that before the publication of his book he had discussions with several French thinkers “thus experiencing a more active fusion - or at least interaction - of horizons than is given to most historians.” (p. 18) Among them, Derrida seems to be the only philosopher who responded manifestly to Jay’s book. Through this short presentation, that traces the direct and indirect exchanges between them, I would like to clarify the issues that arose between these two philosophers.

1. A letter from Derrida

Firstly, I will explain the exchanges between them using Jay’s essay on Derrida. In the essay titled “Still Waiting to Hear from Derrida” (*Essays from the Edge: Parerga and Paralipomena*, The University of Virginia Press, 2011), Jay looks back on his relationship with Derrida as follows: “During the composition of the book, I had a chance to speak with both of them [Derrida and Irigaray] and sent copies when it was completed. Irigaray never responded, but in October 1993 I was thrilled to receive a letter from Derrida

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acknowledging its arrival. Until then my relations with him had been oblique and distant..." (p. 124.) Although Derrida's letter was too difficult to decipher completely because of the handwriting, Jay was convinced that it was pertinent to his idea of undecidability and said: "But rather than pursue the task further, I allowed the letter to remain in its largely undeciphered state.... Indeed, a dozen years later, I am still not completely certain what Derrida was actually saying about my account of his work!" (p. 126.) This essay was written after Derrida's death; therefore, it can be considered a tribute to him.

According to the preface to the book containing this essay, it was after the publication of this essay that Jay learned about the manifest response of Derrida: "Ironically, it was only following Derrida's death and the publication of this column that his judgement was more clearly revealed to me in a footnote to his 2000 book, *On touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, which came to my attention only after it was translated into English." (p. 6) Hence, Jay found Derrida's comment on *Downcast Eyes* in his *On touching*, which I will consider next.

2. Derrida's response: denigration / deconstruction of vision

Derrida says in a footnote of *On touching—Jean-Luc Nancy* (translated by Christine Irizarry, Stanford University Press, 2005):

I would also like to refer to the invaluable book by Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). (I feel particularly close to what the latter wrote on the score of 'phallogocentrism,' although, in this rather unstable logic, which is

prone to reversals, a deconstructive thinking of spacing just as regularly has to call on the visible against a certain interpretation of the audible.) (p. 341)

It is evident that Derrida responded in a positive manner to Jay's argument concerning him. Derrida evoked Jay's book a total of three times, and so, it is easy to think that *Downcast Eyes* was an important reference for Derrida.

However, Derrida added some remarks in parentheses, which I will examine a more closely. Here, he insists on "spacing" (*espacement*) which is related to the "visible." In order to make clear what he means, I refer to the book entitled *Deconstruction Engaged. The Sydney Seminars* (Power Publications, 2001), which is based on a seminar by Derrida held at Sydney in 1999 (one year before *On touching* was published). Part One of this book, entitled "Deconstructing Vision," has Derrida talking with Terry Smith on the topic of the vision, and mentioning *Downcast Eyes* twice. Here, Derrida talks of the primacy or authority of vision in the European philosophy from Plato onwards, as follows: "This authority has been noted by many people in different ways, including myself to some extent, with certain reservations to which I will return later." (p. 19) In this way, Derrida acknowledged the ocularcentrism in European philosophy. Then, he asserted that the structure of vision is complicated due to the following two factors. Firstly, this structure contains a certain invisibility at the core of the visibility. According to Derrida, this problem is related to the *Visible and Invisible* of Merleau-Ponty, which Jay also examined in chapter five of *Downcast Eyes*.

Secondly, this authority is connected not only to the vision but also to the touching. About this topic, Derrida says the following:

Now the second complication occurs. Things are not that simple. Not only because invisibility is the medium of the visible, but also because the dominant authority of the *intuition* (...), the authority of intuitive knowledge has not, never has been, simply the authority of vision, of seeing what is visible, as sensible or as intelligible. It also involves *touching*, the assumed immediacy of contact. (p. 20)

Here, Derrida explains the reason that he has certain reservations against what Jay called the denigration of vision. According to Derrida, ocularcentrism does not mean a problem of a hierarchy, order, or competition among the senses (vision, hearing, touching, etc.) in such a way that one sense dominates other senses. Instead, it is a problem of the authority of immediacy of contact that all senses contain at the core. Thus, when Derrida tells us that the authority of vision involves touching too, it does not mean that touching takes the place of vision, but at issue is an immediacy of intuition, for example, even in “hearing oneself speaking,” or the simultaneity of touching/being touched.

Derrida is trying to find a spacing—or trace—at the core of such an immediacy, without delving into the primal, undifferentiated state of senses like Merleau-Ponty, and by seeking out a technological, prosthetic structure that makes the senses manifest as such.

This is why from the beginning - ... a long time ago I started trying to elaborate a concept of writing, of trace, of *différance*, *gramme*, or *other* reading which should be as foreign as possible to this endless competition between the so-called intuitive senses (...). By insisting on *spacing* (...) as an interval of conjunction/disjunction, as interruption, and by reference to another trace (...), I tried in fact not to denigrate vision, nor indeed

space, as Martin Jay has supposed we are all doing in France in the 20th century. (p. 22)

If this spacing is aimed at opening the visibility, then it is not to denigrate the vision, but to condition the possibility of vision.

3. Fused horizons between Jay and Derrida

I can say from the above that, whereas what Jay named “the denigration of vision” is an antiocularcentric movement, Derrida’s “deconstruction of vision” consists in oscillating (or *soliciting* in Derrida’s sense) the hierarchy of the senses. However, instead of insisting on the differences between them, I would prefer to suggest their more complicated relationship.

On the one hand, I should point out that Jay has an insightful understanding of Derrida’s attitude. According to Jay, it is not appropriate to use the word “critics,” but “double reading,” which is nothing but “other reading” (Derrida), to characterize his attitude to vision. Moreover, Jay is very aware that Derrida’s attitude does not accept the hierarchy of the senses: “however much he may have been unhappy with ocular immediacy, he was no less critical of similar effects produced by other senses. Insofar as presence was suggested by the speaker hearing his own voice, aurality could be as much of a source of deception as sight” (p. 501) “insofar as any sense might produce the effect of presence, it was in need of deconstruction.” (p. 502) “Instead, like Nietzsche, he fought against any hierarchizing of the senses, seeking instead to explore their interdependence.” “But it was touch and hearing that seemed most compelling.” (p. 511)

On the other hand, it would be pertinent to consider whether *Downcast*

Eyes was not only a reference for Derrida, but also a springboard to elaborate his *On touching*. *On touching* first appeared as an article in 1993 in English and was then published as a book in 2000 with a substantial addition. In the process of this addition, it would be important to consider whether Derrida received some inspiration from *Downcast Eyes*. For example, what he illustrated as “haptocentrism” (not ocularcentrism) in the history of Western philosophy, at the borders of (not in) France and England or Germany, seems to be one philosophical parody of *Downcast Eyes*:

For one of the theses or hypotheses of this book (for laughs, of course) is that something took place - an *affair*, a plot, a sort of conspiracy, a philosophical intrigue of touch, in Europe, along certain boundaries (more figures of touch) and at the borders of France, between France and England, to which I just alluded, and between France and Germany - with Kant and Husserl on one side, and Maine de Biran, Ravaisson, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze on the other (p. 137)

It would be a curious task to read those two books by relating each of their perspectives, one to another.