

PAPER MACHINE

Jacques Derrida

Translated by Rachel Bowlby

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The Word Processor

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: We're going to begin with "Heidegger's Hand."¹ You explain how in Heidegger manual work, *Handwerk*, is a noble employment because it is not, "like other professions, organized in relation to public usefulness or making a profit," and that this employment "will also be that of the thinker or the teacher who teaches thinking." In addition, this employment is always "in danger," particularly of being downgraded by the machine. Heidegger is obviously thinking of the typewriter. But what does this machine do in the story, then, this machine that is no longer an obstacle, that makes the text too readable, too easy, too clear for the one who lends an ear to it—since you have also spoken at length of "Heidegger's Ear"?²

JACQUES DERRIDA: If only to move away from it, Heidegger's posture or postulation had to be analyzed at the outset. It belongs to a major interpretation of technology that calls forth numerous questions—calls them forth, really, where they are not so easy to hear as we would sometimes like to think . . .

To narrow things down to writing, I wanted to point out in what way Heidegger's reaction was at once intelligible, traditional, and normative. The tradition of these norms is often respectable, and its reserve considerable when it remains vigilant in the face of technological mutations. But it also gives rise, sometimes in its least naive form, to a confident dogmatism, an assurance that we have to interrogate. For instance, Heidegger deplores the fact that even personal letters are now typewritten and that the

singular trace of the signatory is no longer recognizable through the shapes of the letters and the movements of the hand. But when we write “by hand” we are not in the time before technology; there is already instrumentality, regular reproduction, mechanical iterability. So it is not legitimate to contrast writing by hand and “mechanical” writing, like a pretechnological craft as opposed to technology. And then on the other side what we call “typed” writing is also “manual.”

You would like me to speak about my own experiences. Well, yes, like so many other people I have gone through this history, or I have let it come my way. I began by writing with a pen, and I remained faithful to pens for a long time (faith is the right word here), only transcribing “final versions” on the machine, at the point of separating from them. The machine remains a signal of separation, of severance, the official sign of emancipation and departure for the public sphere. For the texts that mattered to me, the ones I had the slightly religious feeling of “writing,” I even banished the ordinary pen. I dipped into the ink a long pen holder whose point was gently curved with a special drawing quill, producing endless drafts and preliminary versions before putting a stop to them on my first little Olivetti, with its international keyboard, that I’d bought abroad. I still have it. My idea must have been that my artisanal writing really would break its way through into that space of resistance, as near as possible to that hand of thought or word evoked by the passage in Heidegger that I later tried to interpret in “Heidegger’s Hand.” As if that liturgy for a single hand was required, as if that figure of the human body gathered up, bent over, applying, and stretching itself toward an inked point were as necessary to the ritual of a thinking engraving as the white surface of the paper subjectile on the table as support. But I never concealed from myself the fact that, as in any ceremonial, there had to be repetition going on, and already a sort of mechanization. This theater of the prosthesis and the marking very quickly became a theme for me, in all its dimensions, more or less everywhere from “Freud and the Scene of Writing” to *Archive Fever*.³

Then, to go on with the story, I wrote more and more “straight onto” the machine: first the mechanical typewriter; then the electric typewriter, in 1979; then finally the computer, around 1986 or 1987. I can’t do without it any more now, this little Mac, especially when I’m working at home; I can’t even remember or understand how I was able to get on before without it. It’s a quite different kind of getting going, a quite different exercise of “getting to work.” I don’t know whether the electric typewriter or the

computer make the text “too readable” and “too clear” for us. The volume, the unfolding of the operation, obeys another organigram, another organology. I don’t feel the interposition of the machine as a sort of progress in transparency, univocity, or easiness. Rather, we are participating in a partly new plot. Heidegger points out that the work of thinking is a handiwork, a *Handlung*, an “action,” prior to any opposition between practice and theory. Thought, in this sense, would be a *Handlung*, a “maneuver,” a “manner,” if not a manipulation. But is that a reason for protesting against the machine? Having recourse to the typewriter or computer doesn’t bypass the hand. It engages another hand, another “command,” so to speak, another induction, another injunction from body to hand and from hand to writing. But it’s never at any moment, at least for the time being, a matter of handless writing, writing while keeping your hands in your pockets. Far from it. Handless writing is perhaps what we are doing now as we record our voices. But hands are not only in hands. Basically, the history I have just outlined is not marked by a breaking off of manual gestures or by the event of a hand being cut off; instead it would be another history of the hand, a history still maintained within the hand, a history of a hand-held writing,⁴ even if, of course, the hand’s destination is being slowly displaced, in a long-term history. Ultimately it’s the hand we’re talking about, and its relationship with the eye, with the rest of the body, and so on. We would instead have to think about other twists of manual labor, about virtually instant transitions, the time of the mutation, in a flash, by sleight-of-hand. Between the pen-tool and the pencil-tool on the one hand, and machines on the other, the difference is not the hand, because it is maintained and stays relevant, it’s also the fingers. With mechanical or electrical writing machines, with word processors, the fingers are still operating; more and more of them are at work. It is true that they go about it in a different way. You do it more with the fingers—and with two hands rather than one. All that goes down, for some time to come, in a history of digitality.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: In the four-handed book you wrote with Geoffrey Bennington, there is a photograph showing the Bodleian Library miniature that is the subject of *The Post Card*, in which we see Plato planted behind Socrates, and Socrates writing with a quill and a stylet in his hands. In the photographed scene, the person holding the “quill” is you. Perhaps that’s about the invention of a new form of dialogue. A dia-

logue that would be as “serious” as dialogue because it is weighed down with all the heaviness of writing, and would equally be more playful because there’s a whole play aspect to the computer, the computer game. Wouldn’t this be a sort of advance?

DERRIDA: Can we speak of progress here? Certainly there is a transformation of the scene and, yes, a play aspect. The photograph itself, which wasn’t my idea, was a provocation I thought I should agree to. The point was to mime the scene, already a strange one, of an authoritarian Plato standing up, right behind a seated Socrates in the process of writing, “scratching”—relocating the scene in our modern time. The primary reason that we had the idea of this *tableau vivant* is that the long footnote that it was to accompany, namely *Circumfession*, was written on the computer, from the very beginning. Bennington also gave himself the task of setting up what he called, in relation to my work, a database or “Derridabase,” according to an IT model, if you like, enabling any reader, without there being any quotations, to find all the propositions and all the places in the corpus of texts, through a sort of ultraformalized index. So Bennington was himself playing with that machine. In *Circumfession* I also gave myself the somewhat random constraint of a software program that, when I got to the end of a paragraph of such and such a length, roughly twenty-five lines, told me: “The paragraph is going to be too long; you should press the Return button.” Like an order coming from I know not whom, from the depths of what time or what abyss, this slightly threatening warning would appear on the screen, and I decided to come quietly to the end of this long sequence, after the breathing space of a rhythmic sentence, which did have punctuation, as if rippling with commas, but was uninterrupted, punctuated without a period, if you like—so submitting the fifty-nine long sentences to an arbitrary rule made by a program I hadn’t chosen: to a slightly idiotic destiny. We both played with this machine that is the computer; we pretended to obey it even as we were exploiting it. As you know, the computer maintains the hallucination of an interlocutor (anonymous or otherwise), of another “subject” (spontaneous and autonomous, automatic) who can occupy more than one place and play plenty of roles: face to face for one, but also withdrawn; in front of us, for another, but also invisible and faceless behind its screen. Like a hidden god who’s half asleep, clever at hiding himself even when right opposite you.

I was very late in coming to this figure of “word processing.” I resisted for a long time. I thought I would never manage to submit to the rules

of a machine that basically I understand nothing about. I know how to make it work (more or less) but I don't know *how* it works. So I don't know, I know less than ever "who it is" who goes there. Not knowing, in this case, is a distinctive trait, one that does not apply with pens or with typewriters either. With pens and typewriters, you think you know *how* it works, how "it responds." Whereas with computers, even if people know how to use them up to a point, they rarely know, intuitively and without thinking—at any rate, *I* don't know—*how* the internal demon of the apparatus operates. What rules it obeys. This secret with no mystery frequently marks our dependence in relation to many instruments of modern technology. We know how to use them and what they are for, without knowing what goes on with them, in them, on their side; and this might give us plenty to think about with regard to our relationship with technology *today*—to the historical newness of this experience.

To come back to the computer. On the one hand it seems to restore a quasi immediacy of the text, a desubstantialized substance, more fluid, lighter, and so closer to speech, and even to so-called interior speech. This is also a question of speed and rhythm: it goes faster—faster than us; it surpasses us, but at the same time, because of our state of ignorance about what goes on in the night of the box, it surpasses understanding as well: you have the feeling that you are dealing with the soul—will, desire, plan—of a Demiurge-Other, as if already, good or evil genius, an invisible addressee, an omnipresent witness were listening to us in advance, capturing and sending us back the image of our speech *without delay*, face to face—with the image rendered objective and immediately stabilized and translated into the speech of the Other, a speech already appropriated by the other or coming from the other, a speech of the unconscious as well. Truth itself. As though the Other-Unconscious could make use of our speech at the point when it is so close to us, but as though it could just as well interrupt or destroy it. And we maintain a silent awareness of this; we are never safe from accidents, more common with the computer than with the typewriter or the pen. A mere power cut, or a careless or clumsy move, can wipe out hours of work in an instant. That increase in spontaneity, freedom, and fluidity would then be like the bonus to go with precariousness, with a screen display at risk, even calmly distressing; the reward for a sort of alienation. I understand this word neutrally: it would be to do with a "making strange," a mechanical Other-Unconscious sending us back our own speech from a quite different place. Love and hate: this new machine

might install another explanation of the body, the eye, and the hand—of the ear too, with the dictation of a foreign body, with the law, with the order of the Other-Unconscious.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: When a writer writes a text, it goes through a whole series of intermediate stages. There used to be—there still are for many writers—writing by hand, then typing, then the proofs, first and second proofs, then the appearance of the book, and at each point, except at the end, it is possible to make changes, possible to make corrections, possible to come back to it. With “word processing” too it is possible to come back, but this possibility is immediate. It no longer happens in stages.

DERRIDA: It’s a different kind of timing, a different rhythm. First of all you correct faster and in a more or less indefinite way. Previously, after a certain number of versions (corrections, erasures, cutting and pasting, Tippex), everything came to a halt—that was enough. Not that you thought the text was perfect, but, after a certain period of metamorphosis, the process was interrupted. With the computer, everything is rapid and so easy; you get to thinking that you can go on revising forever. An interminable revision, an infinite analysis is already on the horizon, as though held in reserve behind the finite analysis of everything that makes a screen. At any rate it can be more intensely prolonged over the same time. During this same time you no longer retain the slightest visible or objective trace of corrections made the day before. Everything—the past and the present—everything can thus be locked, canceled, or encrypted forever. Previously, erasures and added words left a sort of scar on the paper or a visible image in the memory. There was a temporal resistance, a thickness in the duration of the erasure. But now everything negative is drowned, deleted; it evaporates immediately, sometimes from one instant to the next. It’s another kind of experience of what is called “immediate” memory and of the transition from memory to archive. Another provocation for “genetic criticism,” as it is called, which has developed around drafts, multiple versions, proofs, and the like.

All in all, it’s getting a bit too easy. Resistance—because ultimately, there’s always resistance—has changed in form. You have the feeling that now this resistance—meaning also the prompts and commands to change, to erase, to correct, to add, or to delete—is programmed or staged by a theater. The text is as if presented to us as a show, with no waiting. You see

it *coming up* on the screen in a form that is more objective and anonymous than on a handwritten page, a page which we ourselves *moved down*. So from bottom to top is how things go: this show happens almost above us, we see it seeing us, surveying us like the eye of the Other, or rather, simultaneously, it also happens under the eye of the nameless stranger, immediately calling forth his vigilance and his specter. It sends us back the objectivity of the text much faster, and so changes our experience of time and of the body, the arms and the hands, our embracing of the written thing at a distance. The written thing becomes both closer and more distant. In this there is another distancing or remoteness, *re-mote* here meaning a distancing of the removed, but also a distancing that abolishes the remote. So another distancing, and I assume that it *alters* every sign. That doesn't mean that it perverts or degrades the sign, but it renders *other* our old sorting out, our familiar altercation, our family scene, if I may call it that, when the written thing first appeared. I couldn't specify here in what way this hospitality changes. It occurs each time and differently for each one of us. People often ask me, "Has your writing changed since you have been writing on the computer?" I'm incapable of replying. I don't know what criteria to measure it by. There's certainly a change but I'm not sure that it affects what is written, even if it does modify the way of writing.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: I've been reading you for a long time, and I don't see a violent change.

DERRIDA: Nor do I. But I'm aware of another dramaturgy, if I can put it like that. When I sit down at the table and switch on my computer, the scenario is different but I don't know if that translates into a change in what is written. It was well before computers that I risked the most refractory texts in relation to the norms of linear writings. It would be easier for me now to do this work of dislocation or typographical invention—of graftings, insertions, cuttings, and pastings—but I'm not very interested in that any more from that point of view and in that form. That was theorized and that was done—then. The path was broken experimentally for these new typographies long ago, and today it has become ordinary. So we must invent other "disorders," ones that are more discreet, less self-congratulatory and exhibitionist, and this time contemporary with the computer. What I was able to try to change in the matter of page formatting I did in the archaic age, if I can call it that, when I was still writing by hand or with the old typewriter. In 1979 I wrote *The Post Card* on an electric

typewriter (even though I'm already talking a lot in it about computers and software), but *Glas*—whose unusual page format also appeared as a short treatise on the organ, sketching a history of organology up to the present—was written on a little mechanical Olivetti.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: We speak about "word processing," *traitement de texte* [literally, "text treatment"]. It's not altogether innocent to speak of "treatment" or "processing."

DERRIDA: The word *traitement* always comes to mind when I think of particular situations. For instance when I teach, since I prepare my seminars on the computer, it is much easier for me, with the help of the "cut and paste" facility, to reorder the seminar at the last minute, in a few seconds, and then at the beginning to read out a section that only came to seem necessary at the end, leaving it as though suspended above the scene; so I move a paragraph or a whole page by adjusting the arguments or articulating them together, economically. All that was possible before, I do know, but the same action was slow, heavy, and sometimes off-putting. The word processor saves us an amazing amount of time; we acquire a freedom that we perhaps wouldn't have acquired without it. But the transformation is economic, not structural. There are all these time-saving devices in the finishing off or polishing stages: playing with italics; separating paragraphs; intervening directly in lexical statistics, if I can call it that, by finding the number of occurrences of a given word. I've recently started using the mechanical spell-check. It's instructive, too: what are the words that are not regarded as normal or acceptable in French usage, and so remain censored, these days by the contemporary dictionary incorporated in the machine, as they would be by some other readership, some other media power for instance?

You said something about the time of proofreading. I do slightly miss the long time, the intervals, and the rhythm that then used to mark the history of a written text, all its comings and goings before publication. It was also the chemistry of a conscious or unconscious process of maturation, the chance of mutations in us, in our desire, in the bodily closeness with our text in the hands of the other. Today, as you know, we send a disk to the publisher at the same time as a manuscript: before all that goes off to the printer's, a new actor checks out the disk and makes copyediting suggestions. The proofing-improving is shared, on disk, with this invisible intermediary, but it is never written on a paper support in an exchange with the printer.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: You are a teacher; you give lectures. You prepare each lecture on the computer, you write it and then you read it out. So then there is an echo of that lecture but the echo can merge with that of the machine.

DERRIDA: When you are preparing a seminar or a lecture, over a period of weeks, you see a body of letters in page form reappearing in front of you, at once objective, stable, independent, and yet floating, a bit fantasmatic—a body of letters that you no longer bear within you, and at any rate no longer completely within you like the more internal image of those old handwritten drafts. This display in fact returns the murmur of an echoing text that comes from out there, the ultrasound of oneself as another. This is the movement we were talking about a moment ago, this accelerated but suspended, fluid or aerial objectification. And I would point out parenthetically that some of my American colleagues come along to seminars or to lecture theaters with their little laptops. They don't print out; they read out directly, in public, from the screen. I saw it being done as well at the Pompidou Center [in Paris] a few days ago. A friend was giving a talk there on American photography. He had this little Macintosh laptop there where he could see it, like a prompter: he pressed a button to scroll down his text. This assumed a high degree of confidence in this strange whisperer. I'm not yet at that point, but it does happen.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: We are coming to the complete abolition of the paper support. And even the complete abolition of the interlocutor. There is no longer anything except the text.

DERRIDA: The movement is apparently contradictory: more lucid and vigilant, but also more fantasmatic or dreamlike. The computer installs a new place: there one is more easily projected toward the exterior, toward the spectacle, and toward the aspect of writing that is thereby wrested away from the presumed intimacy of writing, via a trajectory of making alien. Inversely, because of the plastic fluidity of the forms, their continual flux, and their quasi immateriality, one is also increasingly sheltered in a sort of protective haven. No more outside. Or rather, in this new experience of specular reflection, there is more outside and there is no more outside. We see ourselves without seeing ourselves enveloped in the scroll or the sails of this inside/outside, led on by another revolving door of the unconscious, exposed to another coming of the other. And it can be sensed, differently, for the "Web," this W/W/W or World Wide Web that a network of computers weaves all about us, across the world, but also all about us, *in us*.

Think about the “addiction” of those who travel day and night in this WWW. They can no longer do without these world crossings, these voyages by sail [*à la voile*], or veil [*au voile*], crossing or cutting through them in its turn.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: With the computer, word processing, and the immediacy of the screen, aren't we caught up in an endless, indefinite text? Whereas the book has the merit of cutting short, at one go.

DERRIDA: Yes, we don't know what tomorrow will be made of,⁵ but you feel that the publishing machine, the market for books, printing, and even libraries—in short the ancient world—still all play the role of a cut-off point. The book is both the apparatus and the expiration date that make us have to *cut off* the computer process, put an end to it. This stoppage dictates the end to us, the copy is snatched away from us—“Here, now you must make an end of it”—and there is a date, a limit, a law, a duty, and a debt. It *has* to be transferred to another kind of support. Printing has to happen. For the time being, the book is the moment of this stoppage, the pressure to switch off. The day is coming, will come, when the off-switch or cutoff point—the *interrupteur*—which will never disappear (it is essentially impossible), will no longer be the order of another kind of support, paper, but another audiovisual device, perhaps the CD-ROM. This will be like another arrangement of the cutoff points. The word *interrupteur*—cutoff point—doesn't have a negative meaning in my view. There have to be cutoffs, that's the condition of any form, the very formation of form.

For my own part, I can say that ultimately I accept mutations. And by the same token I accept a certain fetishism of the book that their increasing rarity will be bound to further. *Of Grammatology* named and analyzed the “end of the book,” but not at all in celebration of this.⁶ I believe in the value of the book, which keeps something irreplaceable, and in the necessity of fighting to secure its respect. Fortunately, or unfortunately—I don't know which to say—we will see what could be called, with a change of emphasis, a new religion of the book. Another bibliophilia will follow in the tracks of the book, everywhere that it will have to yield its place to other kinds of support.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: Will there be the equivalent of bibliophilia in relation to CD-ROMs or floppy disks?

DERRIDA: Probably. Some particular draft that was prepared or printed on some particular software, or some particular disk that stores a stage of a work in progress—these are the kinds of things that will be fetishized in the future. I already know writers who keep the first versions of an essay or novel or poem on disk. Once these computer archives have been locked (because it will always be easier to use them without leaving any trace), they will have a very different kind of allure. You can feel that is on the way too. Even the computer belonging to the “great writer” or “great thinker” will be fetishized, like Nietzsche’s typewriter. No history of technology has wiped out that photograph of Nietzsche’s typewriter. On the contrary, it is becoming ever more precious and sublime, protected by a new aura, this time that of the means of “mechanical reproduction”; and that would not necessarily contradict the theory of mechanical reproduction put forward by Benjamin. Some computers will become museum pieces. The fetishizing drive has no limits, by definition; it will never let go.

As for those people who, nowadays, don’t themselves use either typewriters or computers, you can count them on the fingers of one hand. I do know some . . .

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: So do I. Our friend Pierre Vidal-Naquet . . .

DERRIDA: Hélène Cixous, Michel Deguy . . . When you give your work to be typed, you reconstitute a sort of “master-secretary” relationship, whether you like it or not. A dictation relationship—one thinks of Goethe, for instance. But there are many of us who do without a secretary. Structurally, the secretary is no more. Those who want to go on marking the authority of their position call on secretaries, even if they also know how to use a computer. I can’t imagine a French president, a high official or a minister, typing on their computers. In the old-fashioned way they correct by hand the speech prepared by someone else, and give it back to be made into a “clean” copy. So now, as it happened once upon a time through alphabetic writing, a kind of democratization is happening through the use of the machine (provided you can pay for the thing! the prices don’t go down that quickly . . .).

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: You can tell who’s the master—the one with no machine on the desk.

DERRIDA: It’s the old figure of the master—the political leader, the

thinker, the poet. No machine. No direct relationship with the machine. The relationship with the machine is secondary, auxiliary, mediated by the secretary-slave—too often, and it's not accidental, by the *woman* secretary. We should speak about the word processor, power, *and* sexual difference. Power has to be able to be mediated, if not delegated, in order to exist. At any rate—and this is not always different—to appear.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: It could be said that the text that appears on the screen is a phantom text. There is no longer any matter, any ink. Now there is only light and shadows, whereas the book is a dense, material object.

DERRIDA: The figure of the text “processed” on a computer is like a phantom to the extent that it is less bodily, more “spiritual,” more ethereal. There is something like a disincarnation of the text in this. But its spectral silhouette remains, and what's more, for most intellectuals and writers, the program, the “software” of machines, still conforms to the spectral model of the book. Everything that appears on the screen is arranged *with a view* to books: writing, lines, numbered pages, coded indications of forms (italics, bold, etc.), the differences of the traditional shapes and characters. There are some tele-writing machines that don't do this, but “ours” still respect the figure of the book—they serve it and mimic it, they are wedded to it in a way that is quasispiritual, “pneumatic,” close to breathing: as if you had only to say the word and it would be printed.

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: This is perhaps taking us a bit far from word processing, even if, in one way, it is an extension of the problematic. The original subject was: “What does the word processor represent for you, a philosopher?” The contribution made by the writing machine, the typewriter, was not all that radical, as you have stressed yourself.

DERRIDA: As to knowing what word processing changes for philosophy, and not only (it hardly matters, in fact) for my work, I'm always wondering what would have happened to Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Nietzsche, and even to Heidegger (who really knew without knowing the computer), if they had encountered this “thing,” not only as an available tool but also as a subject for reflection. From Pascal to Descartes to Leibniz to Heidegger, by way of Hegel, philosophers have certainly thought about calculating machines, thinking machines, translating machines, formalization in general, and so on. But how would they have interpreted a culture with the

tendency to be dominated, even in daily life, and across the entire universe, by these types of technological devices for writing and archiving? Because everything is involved here—the relationships of thinking to the “image,” to language, to ideas, to archiving, to the simulacrum, to representation. How would Plato have had to write what we call the “myth of the cave” so as to take account of these transformations? Would he only have had to change the rhetoric of his teaching, or would he have had to think quite differently about the ontological structure of the relationships between ideas, copies, simulacra, thought and language, and so on?

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: Until quite a recent period, which we could locate at the end of the Middle Ages, the transcription we have, the text, is never the author’s, from his hand to the quill. With the signed manuscript there appeared a new configuration that would last for a number of centuries and which we are now coming out of, to return to the point of departure, the separation of the powers of thought and writing.

DERRIDA: There is certainly a sort of parenthesis there, several centuries long. In Greece in the fifth and fourth century B.C.E., in Plato’s time, the manuscript was not an object of veneration. The signature did not yet figure; it only started to be fetishized much later on. This is not the end but we are probably moving to another regime of conservation, commemoration, reproduction, and celebration. A great age is coming to an end.

For us, that can be frightening. We have to mourn what has been our fetish. The compensations and the fetishistic substitutes confirm that the destruction is going on (you know, I don’t believe there are limits to fetishism, but that’s another story, if not another subject). We are frightened and rejoicing witnesses. We have experienced the transition from the pen to the typewriter, then to the electric typewriter, then to the computer, and all this in thirty years, in a single generation, the only one to have made the whole crossing. But the voyage continues . . .

LA QUINZAINE LITTÉRAIRE: Word processing doesn’t only raise problems about writing but also, in the shorter or longer term, problems about transmission.

DERRIDA: Yes, serious problems. Because of what we were saying just now, that the text is instantly objectified and transmissible, ready for publication, it is virtually public and “ready for printing” from the moment of its writing. We imagine, or we tend to believe or make people believe, that

everything recorded in this way then counts as a publication. What circulates on the internet, for instance, belongs to an automatic space of publication: the public/private distinction is increasingly being wiped out there, with the lawsuits, the allegations of rights and legitimation that proliferate from that, but also the movements toward the appropriation of the *res publica*. Today this is one of the big political issues—it *is* politics. For better and for worse, in a way that was justifiable in some cases, less justifiable in others, the barrier, the “cutoff,” the book’s stopping point, still protected a process of legitimation. A published book, however bad, remained a book evaluated by supposedly competent authorities: it seemed legitimate, and sometimes sacred, because it had been evaluated, selected, and consecrated. Today, everything can be launched in the public sphere and considered, at least by some people, as publishable, and so having the classic value, the virtually universal and even holy value of a public thing. That can give rise to all sorts of mystifications, and you can already see it, even though I have only very limited experience of what happens on the internet. Say about deconstruction, these international Web sites welcome and juxtapose extremely serious discussions, or ones that are publishable, and then chitchat that is not just dreary but also without any possible future. (It is true, and don’t let’s ever forget it, that that can also happen at conferences or in journals, academic and otherwise.) There are already learned journals on the internet. They reproduce all the conventional procedures for legitimation and publication; the only thing missing is the paper, so they save on printing and distribution costs. Inversely—and this is true of the media in general—as discussion is more open and anyone can have access to it, there is on the other hand some possibility of critique being encouraged and developed where sometimes those exercising the classical form of evaluation could play a censoring role: the choices of editors or publishing outfits are not always the best ones; there are repressions; things get marginalized or passed over in silence. A new freeing up of the flow can both let through anything at all, and also give air to critical possibilities that used to be limited or inhibited by the old mechanisms of legitimation—which are also, in their own way, word-processing mechanisms.