

Book Review

Russell Daylight, *What if Derrida Was Wrong About Saussure?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 224 pp.

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Russell Daylight, *What if Derrida Was Wrong About Saussure?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 224 pp.

The short answer to the question posed as the title of Daylight's book is: "Yes, Derrida was wrong about Saussure, in many ways." Daylight spends the majority of his book counting them, the most salient of which are interrelated: (1) Derrida identifies Saussure's phonocentrism as a logocentrism too hastily by imputing Husserl's primordial intuition, or pre-expressive substratum of sense, to Saussure's mere privileging of the voice over writing; (2) Derrida claims that Saussure employs a transcendental signified, a static referent independent of signifiers, when Saussure's *Course* repeatedly states that there is no signified without a signifier, thus dismantling the possibility for such a transcendental signified, whether real or ideal; (3) Derrida misconstrues Saussure's terms by casting them within a metaphysics of presence, thus forcing Saussure into a mold amenable to his broad critique of classical metaphysics. Now, while Daylight's book is mainly critical, he concludes it on a positive note that he promises in the beginning of the book, namely, that "the act of resisting Derrida's reading of Saussure opens up rich possibilities in linguistic and political thought" (18). The result is a penetrating book of interest to scholars across fields as diverse as linguistics, cultural studies, comparative literature, and philosophy. In summary fashion, I will begin this review by outlining Daylight's informed and careful arguments against Derrida's influential but uncharacteristically incautious appraisal of Saussure, and conclude by considering the "rich possibilities" that his book reveals.

Daylight begins his book, appropriately, with a discussion of Derrida's characterization of "classical semiology" as a discipline belonging to the tradition of the metaphysics of presence. Classical semiology considers the sign as something that "takes the place of the thing in its absence" (19). Spoken words are understood as signs that "take the place of" what they refer to, or their referent, in the absence thereof. Written words would thus be "signs of signs," in the sense that in the absence of a spoken word, the written word can "take its place." This is a tradition extending back to Aristotle's analysis of language in *On Interpretation*:

Spoken words are the symbols of mental experience and written words are the symbols of spoken words. Just as all men have not the same writing, so all men have not the same speech sounds, but the mental experiences, which these directly symbolize, are the same for all. (Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*: 16a, 2-4; cited in Daylight, 20).

Here, the phonic symbol is the first-order symbol of mental experience, and the written symbol is a second-order symbol, and thus speech is said to have a proximity to mental experiences, which Derrida comprehends as an “immediate relation” or “absolute proximity” to being. Although the mention of Aristotle in a discussion of semiology might seem anachronistic to some readers, in the sense that the Aristotelian world in which *symbolon* has its meaning might seem a far cry from the world in which the terms sign, signifier, and signified operate, Daylight seems to appreciate Derrida’s effort in *Of Grammatology* to reveal the “relationship between classical metaphysics and the concept of the sign” (21). Daylight proceeds to note that in Aristotle both spoken and written words are conventional, and so their “proximity” to being is problematized. In other words, for Daylight, the precise relation that obtains between spoken words and being in Aristotle is not sufficiently demonstrated by Derrida’s notion of “absolute proximity.” This is important because for Derrida logocentrism is at once phonocentrism: “absolute proximity of voice and being, of voice and the meaning of being, of voice and the ideality of meaning” (*Of Grammatology*, 11-12; cited in Daylight, 21). Daylight, however, aims to separate phonocentrism, which he defines as “the privilege of speech over writing,” and logocentrism, which he defines as “the belief in mental experience without the need for language,” in order to ask whether or not Saussure might be phonocentric without being logocentric.

The feature that allows Derrida to delimit a period of philosophy from Aristotle to Hegel and even to Husserl by the term “classical metaphysics” is the “concept of the sign.” This sign is a concept that polarizes two terms, the word and the thing, the signifier and the signified (although it is mentioned that the thing can be real or ideal, material or mental, following the mental orientation of Saussurean linguistics, Daylight’s book examines chiefly signified ideas). For Derrida, the employment of the concept of the sign implies a logocentrism because the signified pole is intelligible, which is to say, accessible only within the logos. Derrida identifies such a logocentrism in Husserl in what he finds to be a “pre-expressive substratum of sense” or a “primordial intuition,” an intelligible field that does not require the intermediary of a signifier. Daylight then notes that Derrida seems to implicitly use Saussure as a critical power when advancing a semiological critique upon Husserl’s pre-expressive field of mental life. For Derrida, mental life itself consists of representations, and so a system of signs is brought to bear upon Husserl’s phenomenological analysis of consciousness.

Saussure is shown to be a critical force in Derrida's analysis because, as Daylight shows, for Saussure there are no pre-linguistic ideas, and so he dismantles the conception of language as posterior to ideas. For Saussure, there is a determining reciprocity between the signifier and the signified that must be taken seriously. However, as Daylight forcefully argues, this is precisely what Derrida fails to seriously apprehend.

This oversight in Derrida's engagement with Saussure is identified by Daylight as a neglect to consider Saussure's theory of value: "Saussure calls language "a system of pure values," in which meanings only have solidity, or reality, in relation with other meanings, and in a relationship with sound" (39). That is to say, for Saussure language is a system of differences where each linguistic item comes to have meaning in relation with other linguistic items, so that there is no extra-linguistic support for language; rather, language is understood as the process that first creates meanings differentially. But this means that there is no stable referent to which language adheres. Although Saussure privileges speech over writing in the sense that he understands writing to simply be a second-order signifier for spoken signifiers, it does not follow that his phonocentrism entails a logocentrism because there is no intelligible signified that is independent of signifiers, which is simply to reiterate that signifiers are always in determinate reciprocity with what they signify. Daylight acknowledges Derrida's critique of phonocentrism in classical metaphysics:

The exclusion of writing is not an accident of history, but rather a necessary preliminary condition for metaphysics if it is to allow the self-present voice – or the mental, unspoken, experiential, internal voice – an immediate and pre-linguistic relationship with nature, truth, and the logos (64).

Thus, the logocentric voice provides metaphysical access to truth. But this view of an interior voice connected to meaning relies on a notion of consciousness as the site of intelligibility that is plainly not Saussure's, if only because (1) signifiers and signifieds are mutually determinate, and (2) the author of *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles dans les langues indo-européennes* understood the evolution of language as not simply contained within consciousness but rather as enjoying a wider social and political environment, and thus intelligibility itself changes alongside this wider site of language evolution.

Although it is clear for Derrida that the concept of the sign implies a pre-expressive substratum of sense, whether it be mental experience in Aristotle or the primordial intuition of Husserl, it is less clear for Daylight that the same applies to Saussure. If signifiers and signifieds are codetermining or codependent, then language and thought are too intimately bound to accept Derrida's hasty identification of phonocentrism and logocentrism in Saussure. Moreover, the field of language for Saussure

is profoundly social, it is constituted by a community of language users, whereas for Husserl the individual voice of consciousness is the handmaiden of thought. Thus, Daylight is able to conclude that “Saussurean speech is not the phenomenological voice” (84). In Saussure, there is no “transcendental signified” that is independent of signifiers, which could serve as a ground for signifiers. Linguistic value emerges from a differential system where the units of language are not positive but rather the products of differences. Thus, value replaces identity in Saussure, and as such, there is no identifiable ground, no extra-linguistic or transcendental signified that is required by Saussurean linguistics. Consequently, Saussure, in Daylight’s close reading, already exceeds the classical tradition within which Derrida attempts to capture him. Finally, it is only by neglecting Saussure’s theory of value that Derrida is able to misconstrue Saussure’s semiological terminology into the structure of the phenomenological voice in Husserl, thus forcing Saussure into a mold amenable to his broad critique of classical metaphysics.

To be fair, however, once Daylight acknowledges that Saussure is phonocentric, a reader of Derrida might have trouble understanding how Saussure escapes the Derridean criticism that spoken *and* written signs are constituted in a play of differential relations (in the sense that writing would not be a derivative of speech). In other words, Derrida’s criticism that spoken words are themselves a sort of inscription, in that the spoken word and the written word share the structure of writing because they both facilitate a discursive articulation that constitutes the order of things without reference to pre-given signified, would seem to remain applicable to Saussure. Although, as Daylight carefully shows, Saussure makes certain statements that would seem to limit the extent of Derrida’s criticism, it may continue to be the case that Saussure relies on a conceptual framework that exceeds the limitations prescribed by those statements. In a passage in *Of Grammatology* that I do not recall seeing in Daylight’s book, Derrida writes that “it is when he is not expressly dealing with writing, when he feels he has closed the parentheses on that subject, that Saussure opens the field of a general grammatology” (*Of Grammatology*, 43). Not only does this reveal a Derrida much more admiring and complementary to Saussure than Daylight’s portrayal, but it also serves as an indication of Derrida’s more general philosophical posture as attempting to demonstrate that an author’s discourse commits him to certain positions that he is attempting to break from. In this fashion, Saussure’s depreciation of writing might inadvertently reveal a power of writing behind speech itself.

In order to consider the Saussurean resources that Daylight’s book reinvigorates through his restitution of Saussure from Derrida’s cavalier treatment, it seems appropriate at this point to provide a few remarks on what might be called the “style” of his book. “What if Derrida was wrong about Saussure?” occupies a mixed genre, somewhere in between

comparative literature and the legal case, in the sense that Daylight attempts to vigilantly argue against Derridean slanders in order to recover the real Saussure. He accomplishes this by cataloguing Derrida's comments on and allusions to Saussure and mounting evidence either for or against, but mainly against, Derrida's reading. The verdict is that Derrida was at least negligent, if not deliberately obfuscating, in the case of Saussure, which at times is presented as a symptom of an anxiety of influence (Derrida dismisses entire facets of Saussure's originality, misconstrues his system, and even curiously fails to mention Saussure while employing a very Saussurean maneuver). And so the book sometimes seems to betray a sort of philosophical idolatry endemic to its genre of scholarship, which seeks to represent an original Saussure over and against his illegitimate appropriation by Derrida. I mention all of this only because the most interesting aspect of this book to me, as a reader not invested in either of the figures, defendant or prosecutor, is that the final depiction of Saussure seems to be at odds with the testimony provided in the book. Allow me to explain.

The chief resource in Saussure that resists the Derridean project is elaborated in terms of origin, antecedence, and the transcendental signified of presence and consciousness that Derrida imputes to Saussure. Daylight writes:

Each term in Saussurean theory...requires, presupposes, and delineates the others in a system of pure values, and hence each term of Saussurean linguistics is caught up within the linguistic field which it announces...I have asked, what if the conditions of the linguistic system *did not* precede, *were not* antecedent to, the linguistic system? What would that mean? (167).

That is to say, if there is no transcendental signified in Saussure, would not Saussure have anticipated the Derridean project of comprehending a language system as a play of differences without antecedent conditions? Derrida maintains that it is the very concept of the sign, with its essential poles of a signifier and signified, that classifies Saussure within a metaphysical logocentric tradition, but he at once maintains that the sign facilitated a new theory of discourse, "a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside of a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely" (SS&P: 280; cited in Daylight, 167). From the Derridean elimination of the signified, from the endorsement of signifiers only signifying other signifiers, Daylight shows that Derrida's appraisal of Saussure is "equivocal" or two-sided, which comes from the double-position of the sign itself – as a halfway house between metaphysics of presence and the dismantling of that tradition, half jurist-priest and half demonic-rogue. By showing that meaning was not constituted by any essence or transcendental referent, but rather by a system

of differences without any positive item, Saussure went against the metaphysical, logocentric concept of the sign.

But Derrida found a residual classicism in Saussure because his semiological system required a center, namely, the consciousness of the language user, holding the system together from a position beyond the play of differences. Nonetheless, the Saussurean sign, by virtue of its differential function, afforded him the possibility to think beyond this center, toward an a-centered pure play of differences. Daylight argues that for Saussure, “there can be no “category of the subject” or “concept of the sign” or “primordial difference”; these entities do not exist” (169). But what, then, are we to make of his restitution of Saussure from Derrida’s perversion? That is to say, the testimony of Daylight’s book aims to restore an original, pure, signified Saussure (with his synchronic system of language) from Derrida’s salacious appropriation; however, the final depiction of Saussure as a theorist who begins with a differential system of language seems to be at odds with the motivation of the book to restore Saussure, if simply because such a restoration is precluded by Daylight’s own reading of Saussure’s system. That is to say, if taking Saussure seriously requires us to admit that the word never stays the same in virtue of the fact that value is determined by differential relations within an ever-changing system of language, what Saussure “means” is precisely what is beyond restitution, and can only be re-evaluated by figures like Derrida who have, in fact, mobilized a change in the linguistic system of differences. Of course, Daylight could respond, in a similar turn, that his signifiers are contributing to the continual re-evaluation of Saussure in order to reconfigure the language system so that the figure of Saussure would mean something else, but in doing so would he not at once undermine his published project? In the final analysis, have the “rich possibilities” that Daylight opened by resisting Derrida resolved themselves in a dismantling of the conditions for the possibility of his own testimony?

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