

# “Who inscribes Whom?”: Blood, Ink, and Deconstruction

“¿Quién inscribe a quién?": sangre, tinta, y deconstrucción

James Martell

Lyon College

[james.martell@lyon.edu](mailto:james.martell@lyon.edu)

## Resumen

Si en la Antigua Grecia la “injusticia” tomaba la forma de una mujer tatuada, Adikia, y si, según Derrida, “la deconstrucción es justicia” o, en otras palabras, *Dike*, ¿podríamos entonces hablar—siguiendo esta tradición—de un tatuaje deconstructivo o derrideano? El corpus derrideano lleva una buena cantidad de tatuajes en el cuerpo. Algunos son externos, como frases de otros tatuajes o cuerpos tatuados; otros son internos y describen sus propias extremidades, como las columnas de *Glas*. Frente al principio clave de visibilidad a través de la invisibilidad de nuestra era, la sangre y la tinta del tatuaje son, tal vez, la respuesta deconstructiva, o por lo menos el indicio de una respuesta a la ceguera de nuestras inscripciones. Estas inscripciones en cuerpo y en corpus (palabras e imágenes, papel y piel en múltiples superficies o pantallas) no reiterarán las fronteras (ese nunca ha sido el deseo de las tribus tatuadas). Sin embargo, podrían reestructurarlas, convirtiéndolas en líneas de fuga deleuzianas y guattarianas “entre lo nacional y lo global e incluso entre lo terrenal y lo extraterrestre, entre el mundo y el universo” (*Paper Machine* 57), reproduciéndolas a través de múltiples insemینaciones de tinta, en lugar de limitar las superficies. En términos derrideanos, desarrollando una pluralidad de substratos por cada deseo de (una) khôra.

Palabras clave: Derrida, tatuaje, justicia, deconstrucción, plasticidad, teoría, filosofía, estética

## Abstract

If, in Ancient Greece “injustice” took the shape of a tattooed woman, Adikia, and if, according to Derrida, “deconstruction is justice,” or in other words, *Dike*, could we speak—following this tradition—of a deconstructive or Derridean tattoo? The Derridean corpus has a fair share of tattoos in its body, some external, as citations of other tattoos or tattooed bodies, and others internal, describing its own limbs, like the columns of *Glas*. In front of the key principle of visibility through the invisibility of our digital age, the blood and ink of the tattoo are perhaps the deconstructive answer, or at least an intimation of a response to the blindness of our inscriptions. These body and corpus’ inscriptions (words and images, paper and skin on multiple surfaces or screens) will not reaffirm any border (that has never been the desire of the tattooed tribes). However, they might restructure them, turning them into Deleuzian and Guattarian lines of flight “between the national and the global, and even between the earth and the extraterrestrial, the world and the universe” (*Paper Machine* 57), reproducing them through multiple ink insemینations, instead of limiting the surfaces; in Derridean words, making a plurality of substrates of every desire for (a) khôra.

Keywords: Derrida, tattoo, justice, deconstruction, plasticity, theory, philosophy, aesthetics



Amphora with handles of Greek culture, Attic, red-figure, around 520 BC Chr.  
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## Ancient Marks

“Injustice,” perhaps the worst event for deconstruction—since, as Derrida explained, “Deconstruction is justice” (Force de loi 944)—was anthropomorphized by the Ancient Greeks in a goddess called Adikia (Ἀδικία).<sup>1</sup> As a “rare bilingual Nikosthenic amphora” from 520 BC shows, Adikia was represented “covered with dotted circles that recall a Thracian woman’s tattoos” (*A Companion to Greek Art* 469). In this amphora—as in other representations—she is not only tattooed but also ugly and being attacked with a hammer by the beautiful—and un-tattooed—Dike. By representing Adikia in this way, the Vienna amphora implies that “Injustice” is not a Greek thing or persona. Since it/she has tattoos, it must be Thracian. This image of the tattooed-other is repeated in Greek art on another amphora (445-440 BC), this one held at the Louvre, depicting the death of Orpheus at the hand of a tattooed Maenad, sword in hand, advancing to perform an injustice: killing and dismembering Orpheus for being *too faithful*. In these two vases, the tattooed skins are thus markers of what is contrary, opposite to what is deemed proper (Greek), and of the violence between them; a violence sometimes executed *by the other*: the Maenad killing Orpheus; sometimes exercised *against the other*: Justice/Dike inflicting punishment on its negative image: In-Justice/Adikia. Thus, what the marked skin of the Thracian woman as Maenad and as Adikia tells us is that whomever it covers is “not us” (Greeks), and this is due to violence itself, or, conversely, why violence must—*in front of* these violent marks—ensue.

Now, notwithstanding what the Greeks wanted to tell themselves about their own image as defined against the doubly marked other, tattoos among Thracians were not that widespread, especially after the local authorities of their tribes organized in kingdoms or States “where there was a preference for certifications separated from the body, easier to inspect, as administrative data [civil status, contracts,

<sup>1</sup> “Heidegger will attempt to demonstrate his claim that originally, and for example for Heraclitus, *Dikè*—justice, droit, trial, penalty or punishment, vengeance, and so forth—is Eris (conflict, *Streit*, discord, *polemos* or *Kampf*), that is, it is *adikia*, injustice, as well.” “Force de loi,” 927. Cfr. Also J. Derrida, “Heidegger’s Ear: Philopolemology (Geschlecht IV)” in John Sallis (Ed), *Reading Heidegger: Commemorations*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993) 163-218.

judicial sentences...]" (*Tattoo* 26). In other words, once power structures were spread, and differentiated enough, the markings that identified roles and ranks of individuals were displaced unto detached objects, leaving the skin and its secrets covered under clothes and lack of ink. What is more, at this time tattoos were not only abandoned but also condemned, since the states and elites "[strove] to discipline forms of personal display to stop them fuelling challenges to established authority: so excessive décor and luxury were condemned in clothing, but also, when it existed, in the practice of tattooing" (*Tattoo* 26).

Thus, around the 5th century BC—when Heraclitus was alive—tattooed skins appeared in Greece and surrounding territories as the battleground of a series of forces (socio-political, economic, agonistic, of identity and auto-immunity drives, etc.) attempting to mark and delimit all kinds of borders: cultural, of class, gender (Thracian men did not have tattoos), species, kinds or degrees of being (the Thracian goddess Bendis lost the tattoos the women had), of acts of justice and injustice, of individuals and their identity proofs, etc. Now, if at this time "injustice" took the shape of a tattooed woman, Adikia, and if, according to Derrida, "deconstruction *is* justice," or in other words, Dike, could we speak—following this tradition—of a deconstructive or Derridean tattoo? As I have shown elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> the Derridean corpus has a fair share of tattoos in its body, some external, as citations of other tattoos or tattooed bodies, and others internal, describing its own limbs, like the columns of *Glas*. However, if there is a particularly conspicuous tattoo of deconstruction, on its skin yet simultaneously internal to it (as all tattoos are in their penetration of our skin), this is the colorful tattoo that appears in *Monolingualism of the Other*.

### **Dream of a Tattoo**

In this text where Derrida reflects on his personal history as an Algerian-born French speaking philosopher, this colorful tattoo describes Derrida's relation to

<sup>2</sup> See James Martell, "Idiomatic Images: Derrida and the Forgotten Japanese film *Irezumi*." *The Oxford Literary Review*. 39.2 (2017).



his “adopted” mother-tongue in the agonistic terms of a dream to affect said language. This dream is described meticulously, and this description has the shape of a series of polysemous periphrases and surfaces that can be seen as another spiraling tattoo within the book. The dream is literally *of affecting French*, “his” only language, of making it/her (la langue) arrive somewhere (to it-, her-, himself; the referent of “lui” is open) by making something (itself/herself?) arrive to it/her (self). Now, this is the dream not only of this action or event (arrival), but also of its recording. In other words, in this dream this arrival as an event where something like an incomprehensible guest/host (a “newcomer without origin”) will make her/it arrive to it/him/her (guest/host), this complex and multilayered movement of arrival between different surfaces records and thus saves (by marking on the body of it/her) “the ineffaceable archive of this event: not necessarily an infant but a tattoo, a splendid form, concealed under garments in which blood mixes with ink to make see (*en faire voir*) of all colors to the sight” (*Monolingualism* 51-52, trans. modified). Thus, this dream-tattoo—like those marks of identity of the Thracian, Syrian and Arab tribes of the 5th c. BC—would be both, a gaudy event “to make see of all colors to the sight” (52), as well as a secret, “[t]he incarnate archive of a liturgy whose secret no one will betray” (52). In this way, if this dream ever came true for Derrida it would have marked—as an archive—inseparably both: the injustice *and* the justice. The dream itself as recording of its event would have been the violent markings done by Derrida to the French language—his (adopted) “mother-tongue”—a violent event described by him as a convulsion of the language’s body symptomatically attacking/pleasuring it/her-self—like a two headed Dike/Adikia playing the host/guest with (or within) its/her own skin:

(...) making something arrive to it, therefore, something so interior that it/she would no longer be in the position to protest without having to protest, by the same token, against its/her own emanation, that it/she cannot oppose it otherwise than through hideous and un-avowable symptoms, something so interior that she/it comes to take pleasure on it as in her-/itself, at the moment it loses her-/itself by finding her-/itself, by converting her-/itself to her-/itself, as the One who turns on itself, who returns home, at the moment when an incomprehensible guest/host, a new comer (*arrivant*) without assignable origin, would make her/it arrive to it-/him-/herself, the said language, forcing the language to

speak, it-/herself, in its/her/his language, in another way. (51, translation modified to keep the ambiguity of the transitional verbs and actions together with the confusion between the affected surfaces).

As we can see, like the tattoos between the Greeks and surrounding tribes' (the tattoos that allowed the Greeks to differentiate and delimit themselves from said tribes), this colorful Derridean tattoo is also a violent inscription or the mark of violence (Adikia) itself: on language and on the purposely untroubled understanding of it. Its colors (even when printed as writing, this dream has never been simple writing, that is to say, black ink on a white surface) are an inseparable mix of ink and blood. In fact, as Derrida describes it, this mixture of blood and ink is what produces the tattoo's coloration.

### **Writing as Transfusion**

Now, this tattoo-dream where the blood mixes with the ink had appeared in Derrida's corpus before this colorful incarnation in *Monolingualism*. Just five years before this book, Derrida wrote in *Circonfession* of a similar dream where his language became blood: "from this dream in me, since always, of another language, an entirely raw language, of a half-fluid name too, there, like blood (...) what blood will have been for me, I wonder if Geoff knows it" (4-6, FR 8). The secret of this dream is remarked here by the rhetorical question towards "Geoff," who, as we know, is representing not only Geoff(rey) Bennington but also Bennington's text *Derridabase* as the textual software (logiciel) and matrix that is supposed to encapsulate and comprehend (without secret) all of Derrida, both his material body and his literary and philosophical corpus. Consequently, questioning whether this insoluble mixture of text and body, "Geoff," knows what blood would have been for him, is remarking his/its unavoidable ignorance of this secret, together with the impossible desire of transmitting—as in a transfusion—this secret, together with what blood would have been for Derrida and how much of his blood was already mixed in the ink of "his" philosophy.

However, this dream of *Circonfession* is not only about a passive movement where language will be so raw that it becomes fluid, like blood. It is also an active dream where Derrida himself takes the syringe as a writer, or in other words, where he takes it instead of a pen, in order to penetrate the skin and bring the inside (*le dedans*) out, that is to say, himself or his essence.

and I always dream of a pen that would be a syringe, a suction point rather than that very hard weapon with which one must inscribe, incise, choose, calculate, take ink before filtering the inscribable, playing the keyboard on the screen, whereas here, once the right vein has been found, no more toil, no responsibility, no risk of bad taste nor of violence, the blood delivers itself all alone, the inside gives itself up and you can do as you like with it, it's me but I'm no longer there (10-12, FR 13)

This exposed blood, like the tattoo of all colors, exposes for Derrida “what will have been most alive in [him], the vein” (12-13, FR 14), and through this vein, in tandem with its plurivocity (luck, style, inspiration, trait), Derrida insinuates the beginning of a response to Geoff regarding the earlier question of what would have been blood for him. This insinuation is nevertheless not an answer. It is rather, like an image, just a simultaneity: the synchronicity of the question and of a personal search of Derrida, the search for a sentence where he himself might be located: “this improbable question of what blood has been for me since ever, since, seeking a sentence, I have been seeking myself in a sentence” (13). This simultaneity of the question and search is also the simultaneity of the circon-revolved period (like the skin of Adikia—or the nickname of Odysseus—*Circonfession* is composed of 59 circles, periods or turns) or of the circle at the end of which Derrida could say “I.” Now, this revolved circle—according to him—when complete, would have encircled not only his identity (“je”), it would also have the form of his language *as another* (his dreamt language), of that around which he (his “I” and his language) would have always turned, his circumcision:

my language (langue), another, of what I have turned around, from one periphrasis to the next, knowing that it took place but never, according to the strange turn of the event of nothing, what can be got around or not which comes back

to me without ever having taken place, I call it circumcision, see the blood but also what comes, cauterization, coagulation or not, strictly contain the outpouring of circumcision. (13-14)

We have to read here—and always—very carefully. Look at the blood and the circle(s), the text says. Are they really closed? Has the syringe-pen left the skin? At the end of this, the 2nd period of *Circonfession*, the circles open again, just like those on the skin of Adikia (or the circles between her and Dike), which as long as there is injustice and violence—or justice in injustice—will never close. In the same way, the drive of the paragraph that made Derrida draw the circles of his deconstruction as justice “never circumpletes itself, as long as the blood, what I call thus and thus call, continue coming in its vein” (15, FR 16-17, trans. modified).

### **The Paper is Me**

However, where exactly does this blood appear? After it goes through the pen that is a syringe, on which surface does it land and get absorbed, on which surface do we see it, and is it the same one, the only surface? The 59 periphrases or periods are printed on the white pages of *Derridabase/Circonfession*, but Derrida’s bloody, wounding and winding description of them locates them both *on his language* and *on his body*, effacing the difference between body as *corps* and as *corpus*, making of *Circonfession* another tattooed column of *Glas*, or a similar colourful tattoo like the one of *Monolingualism*. This proliferation or spreading of the tattoo is not surprising when we consider how much of Derrida’s work has been on the question of the surface, on the “on” where we write, perforate, penetrate, inscribe, and inject ink. From “Freud and the Scene of Writing,” through *Forcener le subjectile* and *Khôra*, up to *Paper Machine*, Derridean deconstruction has remarked itself by remarking the surface of its inscriptions. As an extravagant nomad, or a Flaubertian savage (“It might be that we are all tattooed savages since Sophocles” reads the opening epigraph of “Force and Signification”, the first essay in *Writing and Difference*), Derrida’s corpus distinguished itself since the beginning by mixing through its veins (luck, style, inspiration, traits) his own blood (as) life with the



ink of its thought, making of his work from the start (*Dissemination, Of Grammatology, Voice and Phenomenon*) a gaudy tattooed body challenging acceptance within the halls of serious philosophy. In other words, since the beginning, like the “a” of *différance*, Derridean writing strived always *to be seen* and not only heard. This question of philosophy’s visibility—especially with regards to its traditional surface of inscription—was brought again by Derrida into the fore in 2001, with the publication of the series of texts that constitute *Paper Machine*.

In this volume, in the interview “Paper or Me, You Know...” (“Le papier ou moi, vous savez...”), he showed how even a text as early as “Freud and the Scene of Writing” was already remarking the tattoo in its examination of the links between writing, memory, and sexuality: “in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, the blank sheet of paper becomes the mother’s body, at least when it is being written on with pen and ink” (53, FR 255). As we know, at the time of this interview (1997), with the acceleration in the development of the Internet, multimedia, and with the progressive substitution of paper for electronic supports, the status of paper as a traditional surface or body of inscription was questioned like never before. However, while the virtualization or “electrification” of the surface might seem at first glance a disappearance of the *visual* presence of the document, Derrida pointed out the opposite tendency, a spreading ubiquity of phenomenality itself, brought by the

powers of concentration and manipulation, the powers of information expropriation (electronic mailings almost instantly available to every international police force—insurance, bank accounts, health records; infinitely faster and uncheckable filing of personal data; espionage, interception, parasiting, theft, falsification, simulacra, and simulation). (57, FR 259)

In other words, what the substitution of the traditional material surface of the paper for the multi-layered virtuality of electronic information brought was a threat to the surface or place of appearing and of appearances itself. That is to say, as a threat to the place or site of phenomena: “These new threats on the frontiers (that also get called threats on ‘freedom’) are *phenomenal*; they border on phenomenality itself, tending to phenomenalize, to render perceptible, visible, or audible; to expose everything on the outside” (57, FR 260, my underlining). If this change is really—and

Derrida was sceptic about this—creating a new relationship to the surface of inscription of our identities (to our own narcissism), we have here a phenomenality apparently contrary to the one experienced by the Thracian, Syrian, and Arab tribes of the 5th century BC, who abandoned tattoos when centralized power became consolidated. At present, on the contrary, when the structures of power and information become less centralized, they do not become more dispersed, but rather more concentrated and effective. Exposed “outside” for everyone to see and take (banks, database miners, sellers and buyers of identity information), the phenomenality of our traits of identity becomes more *visible* the more they disappear—as electronic information—from our eyes. These threats to all of our borders and limits

do not only affect the limit between the public and the private—between the political or cultural life of the citizen and their innermost secrets, and indeed the secret in general; they touch on the actual frontier—on the frontiers in the narrow sense of the word: between the national and the global, and even between the earth and the extraterrestrial, the world and the universe—since satellites are part of this “paperless” setup. (57, trans. modified; FR 260)

In front of this maximum of visibility through invisibility (all of our traits are lost in an ocean of zeros and ones), the blood and ink of the tattoo are perhaps the deconstructive answer, or at least an intimation of a response. These body and corpus’ inscriptions (words and images, paper and skin on multiple surfaces) will not reaffirm any border (that has never been the desire of the tattooed tribes). However, they might restructure them, turning them into Deleuzian and Guattarian lines of flight “between the national and the global, and even between the earth and the extraterrestrial, the world and the universe” (*Paper* 57), reproducing them through multiple ink inseminations instead of limiting the surfaces, in Derridean words, making a plurality of subjectiles of every desire for (a) khôra. Finally, on these surfaces it will be difficult to distinguish between Dike and Adikia (where do these marks come from? Who inscribes them on whom?). Nevertheless, if Derrida was right, and deconstruction is justice, then even Adikia and the Maenad will have their saying, even if essentially mute or non-discursive, inscribed on their/our skin.

## James Martell

He is the co-editor—together with Arka Chattopadhyay—of Samuel Beckett and the Encounter of Philosophy and Literature (Roman Books, 2013), and—together with Fernanda Negrete—of Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui’s special issue “Beckett beyond Words” (2018). His book *Modernism, Self-Creation, and the Maternal: The Mother’s Son* (Routledge) will be out in June.

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