Derrida reading Saussure: the text, the source text, and an errant reading

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In my paper I revisit Derrida’s reading of the Course in General Linguistics in order to shed some light on the text, the source text, and the reverent reception of foundational texts. First, I propose to critically reconsider the Derrida’s own critical reading of structural linguistics as a species of metaphysics of presence and phonocentrism in light of source materials from Saussure’s Nachlass. I contend that the charges raised by Derrida to the foundational text in structuralism (the Course) are contingent on a symptomatic neglect of the source text. However, the goal of my reading is not simply corrective or ameliorative; I seek a profound rapprochement between deconstruction and linguistics. Second, I examine a tension between Derrida’s stated end of the book and the beginning of writing, and the concurrent attachment to the single volume of the Course within his deconstruction of Saussure’s linguistics at the expense of manuscript writing from the Nachlass. I propose that the Course continued to exercise an ideological function of Saussure’s work in Derrida’s reading, as it did in the earlier structuralist reception (by Levi-Strauss and Lacan), and that such a reading constitutes a reverent or worshipful reception of the text as a doctrine (albeit an inherently deconstructible one). I conclude by considering that Saussure’s manuscript writing is an exemplar of the unbound textuality Derrida advocates and that it calls for a different, errant reading.

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1 This paper draws on my book Saussure’s Philosophy of Language as Phenomenology: Undoing the Doctrine of the Course in General Linguistics (Oxford UP, 2015).
Few scholars have challenged Derrida’s indictment of Saussure’s linguistics as a species of\textit{metaphysics of presence} and a naïve\textit{phonocentrism} advocating the absolute primacy of speech sound over the other modalities of cultural signification such as writing. In Derrida’s interpretation, the\textit{Course} is a historical document exemplifying the prejudices that had plagued the entire Western philosophical tradition: an illusion of direct and natural access to signification in thought and speech; an attachment to a set of violent hierarchies (such speech and writing; purity and contamination; identity and difference; life and death) that guide the scientific endeavor in linguistics unbeknownst to the scientist him- or herself. The\textit{Course} is therefore a classic case study of how human sciences rest on unexamined metaphysical assumptions. It provides an instance of how western thought values the illusory presence of \textit{here and now} in speech and silent thought over the separation in space and time between the author and the audience, the signifying intention and the subsequent reception introduced by the medium of writing. It is difficult to imagine how Saussure’s linguistics could have made a difference to the study of cultural signification in the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century if it is as burdened by the western metaphysical legacy as Derrida claims it is.

I propose to complicate Derrida’s influential reading by revisiting relevant sections from\textit{The Course} (dealing with the relation between speech and writing discussed in Introduction, chapter I), and situating them in relation to the\textit{Nachlass}.

\footnote{For a related discussion of onomatopoetic expression as presumably indicating a primacy and autonomy of speech sounds within the language system see Stawarska 2015, chapter 2.} I put pressure on the presumed primacy of sound and/or speech as a site of unmediated signifying presence in Saussure’s linguistics by documenting that Derrida’s textual evidence is suspect in comparison with the sources. Ultimately,
Derrida’s and Saussure’s approaches are broadly in agreement, with Derrida’s emphasis on “entrainment” and “contamination” finding an echo in the systemic and socially situated character of the sign system noted by Saussure (this point is developed in Stawarska 2015a).

In Derrida’s reading, Saussure was wedded to the metaphysics of presence in that he privileged the *phone*, speech and/or sound, construed as a site of direct signifying presence where the “natural bond” between sound and sense operates (Derrida 1998, 35). The *phone* is a positive phonological plenum that is only optionally inserted into the “plexus of eternally negative differences” with the other signs in the language system (Agamben 1993, 155). A speaking subject enjoys therefore a (presumed) sensory and intuitive plenitude in that *he hears himself speak*, and thereby has immediate access to the auditory process as well as the intended meaning. This positivity of sense-in-sound would be threatened by any indirect reporting of the original speech, notably by its transmission in a written text.

Derrida writes:

The epoch of the logos … debases writing considered as mediation of mediation as a fall into the exteriority of meaning. To this epoch belongs the difference between signified and signifier … [which] belongs in a profound and implicit way to the totality of the great epoch covered by the history of metaphysics… This appurtenance is essential and irreducible; one cannot retain the convenience or the “scientific truth” of the Stoic and later medieval oppositions between *signans* and *signatum* without also bringing with it all its metaphysico-theological roots. (1998, 12-13)

Following Derrida, the western philosophical tradition models signification on the metaphysical notion of presence (Agamben 1993, 155). The opposition between a *signans* (signifier) and a *signatum* (signified), dating back to the Stoa and medieval logic, safeguards a
problematic notion of a pure and primary signified, that is, “a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers” (Derrida 1981, 19). This concept would be directly expressed and understood via the medium of speech sound, in a direct bond of sense and sound. The medium of writing poses therefore a direct threat of separation and artifice to the signifying presence: the written word is no longer tethered to its originating source in concepts present to the thinking and speaking subject but can circulate in the absence of the author and communicate against his original intent.

A critical reading of relevant passages from the Course complicates Derrida’s charge that metaphysics of presence weighs Saussure’s views of speech and writing. Importantly, the passages Derrida repeatedly cites as textual evidence, and the ones he deems especially colorful, are all of editorial making. Let me document this by reading Derrida’s reading of Saussure alongside the Nachlass.

Derrida wonders: “[H]as it ever been doubted that writing was the clothing of speech? For Saussure it is even a garment of perversion and debauchery, a dress of corruption and disguise, a festival mask that must be exorcised” (1998, 35). To prove the point, the philosopher cites from the Course: “Writing veils the appearance of language: it is not a guise for language but a disguise (non pas un vêtement mais un tra/vestissement)” (Saussure 1986, 29; Derrida 1998, 35). Yet no such comparison of writing to travesty (tra/vestissement), literally a cross-dress that distorts or debases, can be found in the sources (Engler 1989, 85). The idea that writing dresses down language in a misleading and inferior garb is an editorial projection.

Derrida proceeds to highlight the “historico-metaphysical presuppositions” at work within the presumed natural bond between sound and sense (1998, 35). He cites from the Introduction: “the superficial bond of writing is much easier to grasp than the natural bond, the only true bond,
the bond of sound” (Saussure 1986, 26; Derrida 1998, 35-36). The entire statement is, however, an editorial insertion devoid of manuscript support (Engler 1989, 73). Similarly, the oft-invoked “tyranny of writing” does not figure in the sources either (they mention the “influence” of writing instead) (Engler 1989, 88).

In Derrida’s interpretation, the natural bond between sound and sense leads Saussure to consider writing (together with artificial languages like Esperanto) as a monstrosity. He writes (Derrida 1998, 38):

> The perversion of artifice engenders monsters. Writing, like all artificial languages one would wish to fix and remove from the living history of the natural language, participates in the monstrosity. It is a deviation from nature …. Saussure’s irritation with such possibilities drives him to pedestrian comparisons: “A man proposing a fixed language that posterity would have to accept for what it is would be like a hen hatching a duck’s egg.”

Following Derrida, the scene featuring a hen hatching a duck’s egg is a dramatic illustration of the unnaturalness of artificial languages and the writing systems for ordinary languages alike. Especially the latter alter the natural character of language by fixing the flow of speech in a barely recognizable form. As such, they are to be condemned as monstrous deviations from nature.

Derrida’s above citation (Saussure 1986, 76) is an editorial rendition of a similar analogy found in the sources: “language (la langue) is a bit like a duck hatched by a chicken” (Engler 1989, 170; my translation). Importantly, this analogy is part of a broader discussion of sociolinguistic change which concludes that every language, including an artificial language like Esperanto, is subject to the “fatal law” of social convention and intergenerational transmission (170). Every language escapes the control of an individual subject (such as the creator of Esperanto), and becomes integrated into a shared “semiological life” whose laws may be far removed from the
laws of its creation or constitution (170). Signs are circulated within the present day speech community and passed down successive generations (170); language necessarily evolves during this socio-historical process. Linguistic change is therefore integral to semiological life. Hence the analogy: “language (la langue) is a bit like a duck hatched by a chicken” (170).

The analogy serves to highlight the fact that language lives an adoptive life, and can be nested in multiple environments. Like a freshly laid egg, it can be incubated and nurtured by a very different animal than its progenitor. The cross-species kinship illustrates the idea that diversity and migration are intrinsic to semiological life. The social model applicable to language cannot in principle be based on biological continuity and sameness. The adoptive kinship analogy illustrates that language is fully immersed in its social context and that its future course cannot be programmed in advance. Contrary to Derrida, the model of adoptive kinship does not suggest a “perversion of artifice” and a “deviation from nature”; the nature of language is to travel, to abandon the nest, to be at sea. Language ignores birthrights and it thrives on artifice. “A duck hatched by a chicken” does not tell a cautionary tale about monsters and it is not designed to induce horror by staging unnatural kinship arrangements. If anything, the analogy serves to invoke wonder about the availability of language to multiple adoptions within the open-ended course of socio-semiological life.

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Consider now the tension between Derrida’s stated end of the book and the beginning of writing, and the concurrent attachment to the single volume of the Course within his deconstruction of Saussure’s linguistics at the expense of manuscript writing from the Nachlass. Could Saussure’s unpublished writing offer an exemplar of the unbound textuality Derrida
advocates? Does Saussure’s intellectual biography provide a testimony to the end of the book? That is going to be my concluding hypothesis.

Derrida’s reception of the Course breaks with its dominant scientific structuralist appropriation but it similarly upholds the volume as Saussure’s work. Of Grammatology (1998) proposes a general critique of the “civilization of the book.” It deconstructs the common expectation that a book “with its ponderable shape and its beginning, middle and end” can be possessed through knowledge; it unsettles the human quest for a foundation that the book seems to provide (1998, xi). These expectations get displaced in favor of an unbound text: “The text has no stable identity, no stable origin, no stable end. Each act of reading the ‘text’ is a preface to the next” (xi). Deconstruction declares the end of the book and celebrates the beginning of writing.

Despite the stated suspicion regarding passionate attachments to the book, Derrida’s deconstruction of Saussure’s linguistics remains firmly bound to it. The idea that Saussure remained hostage to Western metaphysics in that he privileged speech and/or sound (phone) over writing and that he upheld the traditional notion of the sign (signatum) as a primary locus of signification are developed in sole reference to the book of the Course, and never cite materials from the Nachlass. Derrida (1998, 329, 38n) was well aware of the existence of the latter from Godel’s Les Sources Manuscrites (1957). Arguably, they complicate his reading and can ultimately bring Saussure’s linguistics into proximity with Derrida’s deconstruction (Stawarska 2015a). And wouldn’t the unfinished and fragmented character of the Nachlass better correspond to an unbound text than the Course “with its ponderable shape and its beginning, middle and end”?

Derrida seems to have considered the question. He writes:
It is not impossible that the literality of the *Course*, to which we have indeed had to refer, should one day appear very suspect in the light of unpublished material now being prepared for publication (1998, 329, 38n).

Writing in 1967, Derrida acknowledges that one day the *Nachlass* will call the validity of the Vulgate into question, and a critical approach to the canonical text will be needed. This possibility raises, however, a serious concern for Derrida’s own reading of Saussure’s linguistics in *Of Grammatology*. The doctrine he had painstakingly deconstructed may turn out to have failed to meet the basic standards of academic scholarship (empirical validity of claims and correct attribution of sources). As a result, the doctrine may turn out to not be fit for a deconstructive treatment after all. Derrida casts the difficulty thus:

Up to what point is Saussure responsible for the *Course* as it was edited and published after his death? It is not a new question. Need we specify that, here at least, we cannot consider it to be pertinent? Unless my project has been fundamentally misunderstood, it should be clear by now that, caring very little about Ferdinand de Saussure’s *very thought itself*, I have interested myself in a text whose literality has played a well-known role since 1915, operating within a system of readings, influences, misunderstandings, borrowings, refutations, etc. What I could read – and equally what I could not read – under the title *A Course in General Linguistics* seemed important to the point of excluding all hidden and “true” intentions of Ferdinand de Saussure. If one were to discover that this text hid another text – and there will never be anything but texts – and hid it in a determined sense, the reading I have just proposed would not be invalidated, at least for that particular reason. Quite to the contrary. (329, 38n)
Derrida raises a question as to whether the Course represents Saussure’s own true thinking or whether Saussure can be responsible for it. Even though he ultimately deems the question to not be pertinent (leaving the reader to wonder what the exact reasons for raising this particular question are) Derrida nonetheless provides a response where he defends his reading of the Course as being valid. His reading is not bound to true authorial intentions – whatever they may be – but to the text (and to the text’s open relation to other texts, so a hyper-text and an inter-text).

The way that Derrida framed the charge, however, allows for an easy defense. Few contemporary readers, I believe, seek to uncover Saussure’s very thought itself within the Course in General Linguistics or are likely to assign responsibility to a deceased scholar for a posthumous work published in his name. The former charge could well be leveled at the editors of the 1916 Course who sought to infer Saussure’s own ideas from after the grave but it should not by default be directed at the future readers of his book. A search for hidden authorial intentions and innermost ideas has become obsolete in light of the disappearance or the “death” of the author in present day literary theory and reading practice. However, the question of the author is not limited to authorial intentions and it includes also the more pertinent and difficult question regarding the author function.

What enables the identification of the Course in General Linguistics as a text? How is this particular text demarcated from other texts related to it? Why is Derrida passionately attached to this one at the exclusion of others? Following Foucault’s analysis of the author function (Foucault 2002), a text like the Course functions ideologically as a Great Book that laid the foundations of structuralism; it requires a backing from a great author to be constituted and received as such. Derrida may have expressly attended to the play of internal relations within the Course only, but the identity and the interest of the text he deconstructs remains bound to the name of Ferdinand de
Saussure, its presumed genial creator. Great Books and great authors work in tandem, not because of imputed authorial intentions but due to the ideological function performed by the author who is crowned with heroic epithets such as the Past Master, the founder of structuralism, etc. The *Course* cannot be historically attributed to Saussure (it was ghostwritten after Saussure’s death by Bally and Sechehaye, two Genevan linguistics who did not attend Saussure’s lectures in general linguistics and prevented the students who did from publishing their lecture notes)\(^3\) – whatever his true intentions may have been. Still, Saussure-the-great-author serves the ideological function of delimiting general linguistics to a canonical text and excluding the writings that do not fit the bill of Great Books.

It therefore matters greatly that Derrida confines his reading to the *Course* and neglects materials from the *Nachlass*. In so doing, his deconstruction of Saussure’s linguistics remains attached to the ideology of great books more firmly than his stated preference for unbound text suggests. Derrida reads like a citizen of the civilization of the book. His reading belongs to a long tradition of a reverent or worshipful reception of the text as a doctrine; it matters little that Derrida is a critic of scientific structuralism and that he exposes the tensions and contradictions at work within the human sciences inspired by structural linguistics (notably the structural anthropology developed by Levi-Strauss) as well as within the scientific program of general linguistics presented in the *Course*. Derrida is after the doctrine, albeit an inherently deconstructible one, and presumes its possibility, if only as the author’s dream. His deconstructive practice is therefore bound by the limits of a single volume and does not enter into the web of manuscripts, lecture notes, and the correspondence that constitutes the open-ended textual field of Saussure’s linguistics. Derrida declares the end of the book and celebrates the beginning of writing. Still, he does not read the

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3 See Stawarska 2015, chapter 7 for more detail.
writing that arguably had already deconstructed the book, that is, the writings from Nachlass that deconstruct the official doctrine of oppositional pairings between the signifier and the signified, la langue and la parole, and synchrony and diachrony from the Course (and later adopted within scientific structuralism). A critical reading of a canonical text like the Course is better pursued intertextually than by focusing on a single volume. The reader can travel within the textual labyrinth constituted by Saussure’s writings in general linguistics (published under this title, 2006), and other related texts (student lecture notes in general linguistics; Saussure’s correspondence). Needless to say, the latter task of reading is inherently difficult. One risks losing one’s ground, getting lost in the maze of the manuscripts. There is no clearly marked beginning, middle, and end to orient in the process. And yet, these writings offer an exemplar of unbound textuality and they call for a different, non-reverent and non-deferential reading – an errant reading, a reading on the move, a reading that does not settle anywhere or anything.

Consider a note intended for a future reader of Saussure’s abandoned book in general linguistics:

We have arrived at each thing which we considered as a truth by so many different ways that we confess not knowing which one is preferable. It would be necessary … to adopt a fixed and defined starting point. But all that we have tended to establish in linguistics is that it is wrong to consider a single fact in linguistics as defined in-itself. There is therefore no starting point, and we are sure that the reader who follows our thinking attentively from one end to the other of this volume will recognize that it was in fact impossible to follow a rigorously defined order. We are obliged to submit to the reader the same idea, up to three or four times, in a different form, because no one starting point provides a more indicated foundation for the demonstration than the other (Saussure 2006, 136, cited above).
This fragment can indicate Saussure’s failure to write a book that could have been practically rectified. It can also indicate a profound realization that the traditional book format, with its architecture of parts and chapters, framed by introductions and conclusions, imposes an untenable limitation of rigorous order, linear succession, and single mention, onto writing. As the existing archives and recent publications document, Saussure was writing thousands of manuscript pages; he filled close to two hundred notebooks with notes. He wrote on topics ranging from ancient Hindu mythology to Germanic legends and anagrams within Greek and Latin poetry and Latin prose. He did not turn these writings into a book.

Specifically, Saussure wrote 995 manuscript pages commonly known as the Harvard Manuscripts, dated to the period between 1881 and 1885 (Saussure 1995, xiv). A portion of this material bears the handwritten title *Phonetique (Phonetics)*, and is generally believed to constitute notes for a book on phonetics that Saussure never completed. These notes form an important part of the overall project to develop a theoretical view of language as a system (Saussure 1995, 120). They are concerned with how linguistic ideas are articulated in conjunction with the way in which the ear distinguishes between material sounds; this articulation, made at the level of perceived speech, supposes an understanding of language as a system of relational terms. In addition to this study, and other technical issues in linguistics, the Harvard manuscripts include reflections on Vedic literature, ancient Indian theosophy, and Vedic and Hindu mythology (Thibault 2005).

Another substantial body of Saussure’s manuscripts is preserved in the Bibliothèque Publique et Universitaire in Geneva. This collection includes Saussure’s extensive notes on the

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4 Selected excerpts with interpretative commentary have been published by Herman Parret as “Les manuscrits saussuriens de Harvard,” in *Cahiers Ferdinand de Saussure*, no. 47, 1993.
Germanic legends of *Niebelungslied*, which are dated to a period from late 1903 to 1913. In the notes, Saussure approaches the Germanic legends as systems of signs whose constitutive elements take on a symbolic status as they became gradually removed from their historical source. The legends are therefore textual sites of signification, irreducible to the historical events they narrate. Saussure planned and eventually abandoned a book on the subject even though he filled eighteen notebooks with notes.\(^7\)

The linguist was consumed with a quest to reconstitute the anagrams or “the words upon words” in Saturnine Latin poetry. This project dating back to 1906–1909 seeks to tease a second text out of the fragments isolated in the interior of a poem, typically from proper nouns. This research was extended to Greek and Latin epic, lyric, and dramatic poetry, and Latin prose. While a search for anagrams can be dismissed on empirical grounds (it is a self-fulfilling prophecy that easily accumulate evidence in favor of its hypothesis as it progresses), it raises an interesting question of whether a hidden text, “words upon the words,” can be traced within a text – and if so, is it due to a deliberate choice or a product of chance (Starobinski 1971, p. 119). Saussure filled close to 140 notebooks with reflections on the anagrams, without publishing any of it.\(^8\)

Finally, the linguist assisted in spiritualist séances featuring the celebrated medium Helen Smith and wrote reports on her glossolalia or speaking in tongues. He is invoked repeatedly in Theodore Flournoy’s *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages* (1994) as an expert of Sanskrit, the language purportedly spoken by the Helen Smith, who, when in trance, adopted the personality of a Princess Simandini. Smith had a

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\(^8\) Jean Starobinski made this material available in an interesting study of the scientific status of Saussure’s research on the anagrams, his doubts surrounding the entire process and its eventual termination, in: *Let mots sous les mots: les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure* (Gallimard, 1971; translated as *Words upon Words: The Anagrams of Ferdinand de Saussure*, Yale UP, 1979).
spiritual double, Leopold, who wrote down Princess Simandini’s messages in this language. Saussure sought to analyze the written messages, which he identified as “Sanskritoid”; his reports are cited in Flournoy’s book.

Saussure’s self-avowed *epistolophobia* (fear of writing, or better, of publishing written work) and the prolonged public silence should not be dismissed as a simple failure to produce scientific work. Instead, it should be received in all its resonance and acknowledged as a process of thinking deeply and writing endlessly about language. The language of poetry and prose, of legends and myths, even the messages passed in a spiritualist trance, are all part of the vast text that must be carefully read, and where each act of reading leaves a written mark and is a preface to the next.

Saussure’s retreat from public life calls to mind Nietzsche’s descent into the abyss before conceiving a radical reform, a new philosophy of morals (Bouquet 1997, 67). According to Agamben:

Saussure represents …. the precious instance of a philologist who, caught in the net of language, felt, as Nietzsche did, the insufficiency of philology, and who had to become a philosopher or succumb. Saussure did not abandon linguistic study as Nietzsche had done, but, closing himself for thirty years of silence that appeared inexplicable to many, interrupted only by the publication of mélanges of brief technical notes…. pursued to the limit an exemplary instance of the impossibility of a science of language within the western metaphysical tradition. (1993, 152-3)

If Saussure’s publishing impasse testifies to the “impossibility of a science of language within the western metaphysical tradition,” his writing explores alternatives to substance metaphysics and its unexamined legacy within scientific linguistics. The scientist must follow the
thread of an endless text, and read and write without borders. Saussure was a citizen of the 
civilization of writing. His intellectual biography and the vast archive are a testimony to the end 
of the book.

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