

Roland Theuas D.S. Pada, *The Context of Logocentrism in Derrida's Thought*¹

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In his celebrated essay “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Jacques Derrida prefaces his discussion with a quotation from Montaigne: “we need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things.”² The point, for Derrida, is that interpretations affirm the absence of an original presence or *center*. And that these interpretations become new *centers* worthy of future interpretation. What I attempt to do in this short piece is an “interpretation of interpretation.” Roland Theuas D.S. Pada’s book *The Context of Logocentrism in Derrida’s Thought* affirms the absence of the origin and center, that is, Derrida. Pada’s work—which is an exercise of interpretation itself—therefore becomes the new center of interpretation. In this case, of *my* interpretation.

Pada’s *interpretation* of Derrida resulted in the overarching theme of his book: that *deconstruction* will have to depend upon the resources provided by *logocentrism* for its operation. Remember that Derrida’s entire project of *deconstruction* aims to unveil *logocentrism* and its various forms and iterations in philosophy, linguistics, social sciences, and literature. The *logocentric* will produce and operate within the logic of binary opposition. More than this, however, *logocentrism* seems to privilege one opposing term/concept over the other. Derrida saw and understood this logocentric *modus operandi* at work in various texts. Thus, Derrida set out to show, through the various gestures and strategies of *deconstruction*, that the stability provided by *logocentrism* is in fact unstable—that the structure of hierarchical opposition built by the logocentric will is *always already* doomed to fall under its own weight. Pada rehearses the deconstructive strategies against Derrida himself by showing the inevitability of logocentrism in Derrida’s thought. What Pada offers then is a *double reading* of Derrida: that while Derrida seems to hurl his criticisms against logocentrism, Derrida himself cannot escape the logic of the very

¹ UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2023, 99pp.

² Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Routledge, 1978), 351.

thing he is trying to criticize. This double reading is carefully laid out in four essays comprising the different chapters of the book. One may read each essay separately from the rest but woven together, they produce a compelling argument for the book's overall theme.

In Chapter One, Pada sets out to trace Derrida's deconstructive strategies in teasing out the logocentric tendencies within Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic structuralism and Martin Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics and ontology. He then proceeds to zero in on deconstruction as a form of textual intervention and ties it up with Derrida's icon(i)clastic³ gestures such as *différance* and *sous rature* (writing under erasure). He concludes by arguing for a two-fold ontology at work in Derrida's thought—*immanence* and *transcendence*. Here, he forwards his claim that deconstruction necessarily relies upon logocentrism for its operation. That while deconstruction seems to be a critique of the system of signification, deconstruction still needs this system for it to function. To express his point clearer, he borrows an insight from phenomenology: "Taken as a *pure* idea, deconstruction can never exist without an intended object to *deconstruct*."⁴ To fortify his conclusion in this essay, Pada examines the debate between Derrida and John Searle in Chapter Two. The debate between Derrida and Searle was precipitated by Derrida's deconstruction of J.L. Austin's "speech act theory"—in particular, Austin's notion of *parasitic* speech acts. Pada carefully follows the debate between the two and concludes that both Derrida and Searle harbors *logocentric* tendencies in their exchanges. Pada observes that both philosophers were *logocentric* "because [their] so-called debate or confrontation would not have been possible if the two authors had not focused their energies on Austin's text."⁵ In this case, Austin's text was the inevitable *logocenter*—the object of Derrida's deconstruction. In these first two chapters of the book, Pada has convincingly established the necessity of *logocentrism* in Derrida's deconstruction.

From the necessity of *logocentrism*, Pada shifts his attention towards the ontological necessity of *normativity* in Chapter Three. In this chapter, he explores the sense of normativity in Derrida and Frankfurt School theorist, Axel Honneth. For Pada, there is an affinity between the two. On the one hand, Derrida recognizes the need for metaphysical violence for ethics to be possible. This violence comes in the form of reducing the *Other* to an "identity" in order to open "a space for dialogue."⁶ On the other hand,

³ A play on the words "iconic" and "iconoclastic." An apt reminder of how Derrida cemented the reputation of deconstruction as subverting the ideals of West while at the same time attracting more followers from the West.

⁴ Pada, *The Context of Logocentrism*, 36.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 4, 71.

Honneth's recognition theory understands the necessity for individuals to struggle "through existing social practices" in order for the norm to be realized in the individual.⁷ Pada concludes his discussion by noting the significant role played by *difference* (as emphasized by Derrida) in securing the possibility of Honneth's theory of recognition. The concluding chapter of the book—which seems to me like an encore—highlights the recurring motif of the book: the necessity of logocentrism in Derrida's deconstruction. Taking off from the previous chapter, Pada treats the notion of *difference* (together with consciousness and center) as key elements of repetition and how this magnifies the problem of logocentrism in Derrida's thought. Pada's core argument here is that insofar as repetition is concerned, deconstruction shows that repetition is always already inhabited by *ipseity* and *difference*. He uses a clear example to illustrate his point: "... one could say that I am writing in anticipation of my future disappearance, for in reading this once more, I have become an other of myself."⁸ This is just another way of saying that when I write something and then *repeat* it back to my self (i.e., to my consciousness), the text (*center*) appears to my *consciousness* as something *different* as to when I wrote it. To borrow and recontextualize Heraclitus' dictum: one cannot read the same text similarly twice. For Pada, Derrida's *différance* perfectly illustrates this paradox of *ipseity* and *difference*.

One challenge that every reader must face is the difficulty of Derrida's text primarily because of the kind of language and writing style he employed. As Pada admits at the beginning of his book: "it would be difficult to recommend Derrida to novices and students new to philosophy."⁹ Indeed, it would be difficult if one does not have a good grasp of the context upon which Derrida wrote his works. This is perhaps the reason why some English translators of Derrida's books felt the *need* to write an introductory essay to their translations—to arm their readers with the necessary contextual considerations to navigate through Derrida's works. Two notable essays come to mind on this point: Gayatri Spivak's "Translator's Preface" to her English translation of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* and Barbara Johnson's introduction to her translation of Derrida's *Dissemination*.¹⁰ Reading and trying to understand Derrida is one thing, writing about him is entirely another challenge.

Writing about Derrida, by itself, is already an act of faithfulness and betrayal. As Pada shows in Chapter Four, one cannot totally *repeat* something

⁷ See *Ibid.*, 74.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), ix-lxxxvii and Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (London: Athlone Press, 1981), vii-xix.

in the same way. The Derrida that we read in secondary works (or interpretations) are already mediated by the author's consciousness. The Derrida, therefore, that Pada presents in his book is *his* Derrida—a product of *his* mediation. And yet, his book would not have been possible if not for Derrida as the (logo)center of his attention. For the most part of the book, Pada assiduously read and cited Derrida's major works such as *Of Grammatology*, *Margins of Philosophy*, *Writing and Difference*, *Speech and Phenomena*, and *Dissemination*—works that one could consider as the “canon” of deconstruction. Relying on these texts, however, also meant that Pada had to rely on Derrida's language and strategies to demonstrate the inevitability of logocentrism in Derrida's thought. Pada was not oblivious to this fact. His entire work *performs* what he intended to prove, that is, deconstruction cannot escape logocentrism—just as his work cannot escape the *logocenter* that is Derrida. This, I believe, is what sets Pada apart from those who attempt to *write* an introduction to Derrida's thought: Pada introduces Derrida's deconstruction by *performance*. By demonstrating that Derrida's deconstruction is a critique of logocentrism but at the same time can only operate within the ambit of logocentrism, Pada tacitly shows its readers how deconstruction operates and produces an *aporetic* reading of a text. In other words, Pada does not simply try to repeat what Derrida already said, rather he tries to repeat Derrida's very gestures on Derrida himself. Still, Pada's book was modest in its claims—it does not brand itself as a “deconstructive” interpretation of Derrida. I surmise that this is his way of keeping his reading within the bounds of deconstruction's commitment to openness and what is yet to come (*l'avenir*).

One thing, however, that caught my attention is Pada's claim in Chapter One that “*Différance* traces its roots back to *Of Grammatology*.”¹¹ He backs up his statement by contextualizing it within Derrida's discourse on the primacy of speech over writing in *Of Grammatology*. Pada then proceeds to cite some passages from Derrida's famous 1968 lecture “*Différance*” to elucidate his point further. Derrida's bibliographers claim that the term *différance* was introduced in his essay “*Cogito and the History of Madness*” (which appears in *Writing and Difference*).¹² This information seems to suggest that *différance* traces its roots back to Derrida's essay “*Cogito and the History of Madness*,” not in *Of Grammatology* as Pada claims. If one reads Derrida's “*Cogito*,” one will readily notice that he mentions *différance* as a passing remark to describe the relationship of “absolute excess” in the “economy of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² See William Schultz and Lewis Fried, *Jacques Derrida: An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (London & New York: Garland Publishing, 1992) 12.

writing.”¹³ In *Of Grammatology*, we find *différance* significantly peppered throughout the work particularly in Derrida’s discussion of nature, culture, and writing. In “Différance,” we find Derrida’s focused and sustained discussion of the layers of meaning behind *différance*, how it operates against the speech/writing opposition, and its relation to Freud’s *trace* and Heidegger’s *ontico-ontological* difference.¹⁴ Regardless of the fact that *différance* was introduced in the “Cogito,” Pada’s claim still holds if we follow the gradual introduction of *différance* in Derrida’s writings. One must note that in the “Cogito,” Derrida introduced the term within the context of his critique of Michel Foucault’s *History of Madness*. In *Of Grammatology*, however, we find a clearer articulation of how Derrida operationalizes *différance* in his critique of the logocentrism perpetrated by the speech/writing opposition. The *différance* in *Of Grammatology* is further amplified by his lecture “Différance” where he tries to dissect the layers of forces behind this linguistic anomaly. In other words, if we follow the context of Derrida’s writings, the *différance* of the 1968 lecture traces its roots back to *Of Grammatology*. We can, therefore, construe Pada’s claim in this way. Nonetheless, Pada’s work could have benefited from exploring on how Derrida appropriated *différance* in his other works, like “Cogito.”

Overall, Pada’s book is a remarkable addition to the growing catena of literature on Derrida scholarship. Pada was able to maintain academic rigor while being clear and concise in his language. One may also find his verbal illustrations entertaining (and sometimes humorous). In four essays, Pada was able to deliver what his book promised to its readers: that *logocentrism* is inevitable in any discourse (deconstruction included). Doing so, however, entailed employing the very gesture of deconstruction against itself. Pada, then, delivered more than what he promised: his book poignantly showed how deconstruction can neutralize the opposition between *theory* and *practice*. The practice of deconstruction against deconstruction, turning Derrida against Derrida, reveals their logocentric proclivities. Indeed, “a specter is haunting Derrida—the specter of *logocentrism*.”¹⁵

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¹³ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 75.

¹⁴ See Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (Great Britain: The Harvester Press, 1982), 1-27.

¹⁵ A playful reappropriation of Marx’s opening words in *The Communist Manifesto*.

References

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