

Cultural Memory

in the Present

JACQUES DERRIDA

*Monolingualism
of the Other* OR *The Prosthesis
of Origin*

Translated by Patrick Mensah

Monolingualism of the Other;
or,
The Prosthesis of Origin

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For David Wills

Contents

Monolingualism of the Other; or,
The Prosthesis of Origin 1

Epilogue 70

Notes 77

An oral version of this text, shorter and often different in form, was presented at a colloquium organized by Patrick Mensah and David Wills, hosted by Edouard Glissant, and held on April 23-25, 1992, at the Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

This conference, entitled "Echoes from Elsewhere" / "*Renvois d'ailleurs*," was international and bilingual. We were required to deal with problems of *francophonie* outside France, problems of linguistics or literature, politics or culture.

An earlier outline of this paper had already been read at a colloquium organized at the Sorbonne by the International College of Philosophy, under the direction of Christine Buci Glucksmann.

“Lack” does not reside in the ignorance [*méconnaissance*] of a language (the French language), but in the non-mastery (be it in Creole or French) of an appropriated language. The authoritarian and prestigious intervention of the French language only strengthens the processes [*les processus*] of lack.

The demand of this appropriated language is therefore mediated by a critical revision of the French language. . . .

To the extent that French linguistic hegemony [*le domesticage par la langue française*] is exercised through a mechanism of “humanism,” this revision could partake in what might be called an “anti-humanism.”

Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais*

There, a birth to language, through a labyrinthine maze of names and identities coiling up, one around the other: a nostalgic ring of the unique. . . . In this story, I deeply believe that language itself was jealous.

Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Amour bilingue*



—Picture this, imagine someone who would cultivate the French language.

What is called the French language.

Someone whom the French language would cultivate.

And who, as a French citizen, would be, moreover, a subject of French culture, as we say.

Now suppose, for example, that one day this subject of French culture were to tell you in good French:

“I only have one language; it is not mine.”

Or rather, and better still:

I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me. The monolingualism in which I draw my very breath is, for me, my element. Not a natural element, not the transparency of the ether, but an absolute habitat. It is impassable, *indisputable*: I cannot challenge it except by testifying to its omnipresence in me. It would always have preceded me. It is me. For me, this monolingualism is me. That certainly does not mean to say, and do not believe, that I am some allegorical figure of this animal or that truth called monolingualism. But I would not be myself outside it. It constitutes me, it dictates even the ipseity of all things to me, and also prescribes a monastic solitude for me; as if, even before learning to speak, I had been bound by some

vows. This inexhaustible solipsism is myself before me. Lastingly. [*A demeure.*]

Yet it will never be mine, this language, the only one I am thus destined to speak, as long as speech is possible for me in life and in death; you see, never will this language be mine. And, truth to tell, it never was.

You at once appreciate the source of my sufferings, the place of my passions, my desires, my prayers, the vocation of my hopes, since this language runs right across them all. But I am wrong, wrong to speak of a crossing and a place. For it is *on the shores* of the French language, uniquely, and neither inside nor outside it, on the unplaceable line of its coast that, since forever, and lastingly [*à demeure*], I wonder if one can love, enjoy oneself [*jouir*], pray, die from pain, or just die, plain and simple, in another language or without telling anyone about it, without even speaking at all.

But above all, and this is the double edge of a sharp sword that I wished to confide to you almost without saying a word: I suffer and take pleasure in [*jouis de*] what I am telling you in our aforementioned common language:

"Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine."

—You speak the impossible. Your speech does not hold water. It will always remain incoherent, "inconsistent," as one would say in English. Apparently inconsistent, at any rate gratuitous in its phenomenal eloquence, because its rhetoric does the impossible with meaning. Your statement makes no sense, it has no common sense, you can see it getting carried away with itself. How could anyone have a language that is not theirs? Especially if one claims, as you insist, to have just one, one only, all alone? You are putting forward a sort of solemn attestation that stupidly drags itself by the heels into a logical contradiction. A scholar would perhaps

diagnose something worse in a case so serious, which professes, on its own, to be incurable; on its own, your sentence extirpates itself in a logical contradiction heightened by a *performative* or *pragmatic contradiction*. It is desperate. The performative gesture of the enunciation would in the act prove the opposite of what the testimony claims to declare, namely, a certain truth. “And, truth to tell, it never was [mine],” you dared to say. The one who speaks, the subject of the enunciation, yourself, oh yes, the subject of the French language, is understood as doing the opposite of what he says. It is as if, in one and the same breath, you were lying by confessing the lie. A lie from then on incredible that ruins the credit of your rhetoric. The lie belies itself by virtue of the deed it does [*par le fait de ce qu’il fait*], by the act of language. Thus it proves, practically, the opposite of what your speech intends to assert, prove, and give to be verified. People will not stop denouncing your absurdity.

—Is that so? But then why would they not stop? Why should that last? Even you cannot seem to manage to convince yourself, and you multiply your objection, always making the same one, and exhausting yourself in redundancy.

—The moment you say in French that the French language—the one you are speaking in this manner, here at this very moment, the one which renders our words intelligible, more or less (to whom are we speaking, moreover, and for whom? and shall we ever be translated?)—well, that it is not your language, even though you have no other one, not only will you find yourself caught up in the “performative contradiction” of enunciation, but you will also worsen the logical absurdity, the lie, in fact, or even the perjury within the statement. How could one have only one language without having any, without any which is theirs? Their

very own? And how does one know it? How does one claim to have any knowledge of it? How does one say it? Why would one want to have others share this knowledge so long as one is alleging equally, and in the same outburst of the same idiom, that one does not know or practice any other language?

—Stop. Do not play that trick on us again, please. To whom is the reproach of “performative contradiction” often hastily addressed nowadays? To those who are wondering, asking themselves questions, and sometimes making it their duty to tie themselves into knots with it. Certain German or Anglo-American theorists believe they have discovered an unanswerable strategy there. They make a specialty of this puerile weapon. At regular intervals, they are to be found aiming [*poindre*] the same criticism at some adversary or other, preferably a French language philosopher. Occasionally, some French philosophers also import this weapon or imprint a national patent upon it when they have the same enemies, the “enemies within.” One could give a good many examples. This childish armory comprises one single, weak polemical device. Its mechanism amounts roughly to this: “Ah! So you ask yourself questions about truth. Well, to that very extent, you do not as yet believe in truth; you are contesting the possibility of truth. That being the case, how do you expect your statements to be taken seriously when they lay a claim to some truth, beginning with your so-called questions? What you are saying is not true because you are questioning truth. Come on! you are a skeptic, a relativist, a nihilist; you are not a serious philosopher! If you continue, you will be placed in a department of rhetoric or literature. If you push the matter further, the condemnation or exile could be more serious. You will be confined to the department of sophistry because what you are doing actually falls within the province of sophism; it is never far from lying, “perjury,” and false evidence. You do not believe what you are saying;

you want to mislead us. And now in order to stir us and win us to your cause, there you are, playing the card of the exile and immigrant worker, there you are, claiming, in French, that French has always been a foreign language to you! Come off it! If that were true, you would not even know how to say it; you would not know how to say it so well!

(I draw your attention to a first slippage: up until now, I have never spoken of a “foreign language.”

When I said that the only language I speak is *not mine*, I did not say it was foreign to me. There is a difference. It is not entirely the same thing, we shall come to it.)

That this scene is as old as the world—at any rate, as old as philosophy—does not bother the prosecutors. We will conclude euphemistically that they have a short memory. They are out of training.

Let us not revive this debate today. My mind is elsewhere, and even if I had not attempted to respond, and so often, to this type of objection, that would not prevent me at this instant from installing myself resolutely, with all the requisite imprudence, within the provocation of that so-called “performative contradiction,” at this very instant when the phrase has become envenomed with perjury and logical incompatibility. Nothing will prevent me from repeating to whoever wants to hear it—and from signing this public declaration:

“It is possible to be monolingual (I thoroughly am, aren’t I?) and speak a language that is not one’s own.”

—That remains for you to demonstrate.

—Yes, indeed.

—In order to demonstrate something, it is first of all necessary to understand what one wants to demonstrate, what one means

or what one wants to mean, what you dare claim to mean where for such a long time, according to you, it would be necessary to think a thought that has no meaning.

—Yes, indeed. But grant me then that “to demonstrate” will also mean something else, and it is this something else, this other meaning, this other scene of demonstration, that is important to me.

—I am listening. What is the meaning of this attestation you are claiming to sign?



— Well, before beginning, I will first risk two propositions. They will also appear impossible. Not only contradictory *in themselves*, this time, but also contradictory *between themselves*. They each take the form of a law. You will call the relationship of antagonism that these two laws maintain each time between themselves an *antinomy*, if you like that word of which I am fond.

— Very well. So what might these two propositions be? I am listening.

— Here they are:

1. *We only ever speak one language.*
2. *We never speak only one language.*

The second proposition approaches the meaning of what my friend Khatibi clearly sets forth in the Introduction to a work on bilingualism, at the moment of defining in sum [*en somme*] a *problematic* and a *program*. I therefore call him to my aid:

If (as we are saying along with others, and after them) there is no such thing as *the* language, if there is no such thing as absolute monolingualism, one still has to define what a mother tongue is in its active division, and what is transplanted between this language and the one

called foreign. What is transplanted and lost there, belonging neither to the one nor the other: the incommunicable.

Of bi-language, in its effects of speech and writing.¹

“Division,” he says. “Active division.” That, perhaps, is why one writes and how one dreams of writing. And that is why there are two motivations instead of one, a single reason but a reason wrought by the said “division,” that is why in always doing that one recollects, one troubles oneself, one goes in search of history and filiation. In this place of jealousy, in this place that is divided between vengeance and resentment [*ressentiment*], in this body fascinated by its own “division,” before any other memory, writing destines itself, as if acting on its own, to anamnesia.

Even if it forgets it, writing still summons this memory, it summons itself in this way, it summons itself from memory. A blind genealogical impulse would find its moving source, its force, and its recourse in the very partition of this double law, in the antinomical duplicity of this clause of belonging:

1. *We only ever speak one language— or rather one idiom only.*
2. *We never speak only one language— or rather there is no pure idiom.*

—So would that be possible? You are asking me to take your word for it. And you have just added “idiom” to “language.” That changes many things. A language is no idiom, nor is the idiom a dialect.

—I’m not unaware of the necessity of these distinctions. Linguists and scholars in general can have good reasons for upholding them. Nevertheless, in all rigor, and stretched to their extreme limit, I do not believe them to be tenable. If we do not take into consideration, in an always very determined context, some *external* criteria, whether they are “quantitative” (the age, stability,

and demographic extension of the field of speech) or “politico-symbolic” (the legitimacy, authority, and domination of a language over a speech, dialect, or idiom), then I do not know where we can find *internal* and *structural* features in order to distinguish rigorously between a language, a dialect, and an idiom.

At any rate, even if what I am saying there remains problematic, I would still position myself at this viewpoint, from which, provisionally, and at least by agreement [*convention*] between us, that distinction is still suspended. For the phenomena that interest me are precisely those that blur these boundaries, cross them, and make their historical artifice appear, also their violence, meaning the relations of force that are concentrated there and actually capitalize themselves there interminably. Those who are sensitive to all the stakes of “creolization,” for example, assess this better than others.

—I do accept the proposed agreement, and since you want to narrate your story, give testimony in your name, speak of what is “yours” and what is not, it remains for me, one more time, to take your word for it.

—Is that not what we always do when someone is speaking, and hence attesting? And yes, I too believe in this antinomy, it is possible and that is what I think I know. From experience, as we say, and that is what I would like to demonstrate, or, rather than demonstrating it “logically,” to restage and recall it as the “cause of effects” [*raison des effets*]. And rather than recalling, to remind *myself*. Myself. To remind myself, to myself as myself.

What I would like to remind myself of, that to which I would like to recall myself, are the intractable traits [*traits in-traitables*] of an impossibility, an impossibility so impossible and intractable that it is not far from calling an interdiction to mind. There would be a necessity in that, but the necessity of what

presents itself as impossible-forbidden (“You cannot do that! Of course not!—But of course yes!—Of course not; if I were you I would not do it!—But of course yes; if you were me, you would do that, nothing but that!—Of course not!”)—and a necessity that, however, is there and that works: translation, a translation other than the one spoken about by convention, common sense, and certain doctrinaires of translation. For this double postulation,

— *We only ever speak one language . . .*

(*yes, but*)

— *We never speak only one language . . .*

is not only the very law of what is called translation. It would also be the law itself as translation. A law which is a little mad, I am willing to grant you that. But you see, that is not very original, and, later on, I shall repeat it again: I have always suspected the law, as well as language, of being mad, of being, at any rate, the unique place and the first condition of madness.

So this meeting—which had just opened, as you recall—was an international colloquium. In Louisiana, which is not, as you know, anywhere in France. Generous hospitality. Invited guests? Francophones *belonging*, as we strangely say, to several nations, cultures, and states. And all these problems of *identity*, as we so foolishly say nowadays. Among all the participants, there were two, Abdelkebir Khatibi and myself, who, besides an old friendship, meaning the blessing of so many other things from memory and the heart, also shared a certain destiny. They live in a certain “state” as far as language and culture are concerned: they have a certain status.

In what is so named and is indeed “my country,” this status is given the title of “Franco-Maghrebian” [*Franco-Maghrébin*].

What can that possibly mean to say, I ask you, you who are fond of meaning-to-say [*vouloir-dire*]? What is the nature of that

hyphen? What does it want? What is Franco-Maghrebian? *Who* is a “Franco-Maghrebian”?

In order to know *who* a Franco-Maghrebian is, it is necessary to know *what Franco-Maghrebian is*, what “Franco-Maghrebian” means. To put it the other way round, by inverting the circulation of the circle in order to determine, *vice versa*, *what it is to be Franco-Maghrebian*, it would be necessary to know who is, and (Oh Aristotle!) above all who is the *most* Franco-Maghrebian. As a model, let us use a logic that would be, say, of the Aristotelian type: we model ourselves upon what *is* “most this or that” or what *is* “the best this or that,” for example, upon the entity [*l'étant*] par excellence in order to reach down to thinking the being of what is *in general*, proceeding that way regarding the being of the entity [*l'être de l'étant*], from theology to ontology and not the reverse (even if actually things are, as you will say, more complicated, but that is not the subject).

According to a circular law with which philosophy is familiar, we will affirm then that the one who is *most*, most purely, or most rigorously, most essentially, Franco-Maghrebian would allow us to decipher *what it is to be Franco-Maghrebian in general*. We will decipher the essence of the Franco-Maghrebian from the paradigmatic example of the “*most* Franco-Maghrebian,” the Franco-Maghrebian par excellence.

Still, assuming there were some historical unity of *a* France and *a* Maghreb, which is far from being certain, the “and” will never have been given, only promised or claimed. At bottom, that is what we must be talking about, what we are talking about without fail, even if we are doing it by omission. The silence of that hyphen does not pacify or appease anything, not a single torment, not a single torture. It will never silence their memory. It could even worsen the terror, the lesions, and the wounds. A hyphen is never enough to conceal protests, cries of anger or suffering, the noise of weapons, airplanes, and bombs.



So let us form a hypothesis, and leave it to work. Let us suppose that without wishing to hurt Abdelkebir Khatibi's feelings, one day at the colloquium in Louisiana, far from his home and from mine, also far from our home, I make him a declaration through the loyal and admiring affection I feel for him. What would this public declaration declare to him? Approximately the following: "You see, dear Abdelkebir, between the two of us, I consider myself to be the *most* Franco-Maghrebian, and perhaps even the *only* Franco-Maghrebian here. If I am mistaken, in error, or being misleading, then, well, I am certain someone will contradict me. I would then attempt to explain or justify myself in the best way I can. Let us look around us and classify, separate, and take things one group at a time.

"A. Among us, there are Francophone French speakers who are not Maghrebian: French speakers from France, in a word, French citizens who have come here from France.

"B. There are also among us some 'Francophones' who are neither French nor Maghrebian: Swiss, Canadians, Belgians, or Africans from various Central African countries.

"C. Finally, among us there are French-speaking Maghrebians who are not and have never been French, meaning French citizens: yourself, for example, and other Moroccans or Tunisians.

“Now, as you can see, I do not belong to any of these clearly defined groups. My ‘identity’ does not fall under any of these three categories. Where would I categorize myself then? What taxonomy should I invent?”

“My hypothesis is, therefore, that I am perhaps the *only* one here who can call himself at once a Maghrebian (which is not a citizenship) and a French citizen. One and the other at the same time. And better yet, at once one and the other *by birth*. Birth, nationality by birth, native culture—is that not our theme here? (One day it will be necessary to devote another colloquium to language, nationality, and cultural belonging, *by death* this time around, by sepulture, and to begin with the secret of Oedipus at Colonus: all the power that this ‘alien’ holds over ‘aliens’ in the innermost secret place of the secret of his last resting place, a secret that he guards, or confides to the guardianship of Theseus in exchange for the salvation of the city and generations to come, a secret that, nevertheless, he refuses to his daughters, while depriving them of even their tears, and a just ‘work of mourning.’)

“Did we not agree to speak here of the language called maternal, about birth as it relates to soil, birth as it relates to blood, and birth as it relates to language, which means something entirely other? And about the relationships between birth, language, culture, nationality, and citizenship?”

“That my ‘case’ does not fall under any of the three groups that were represented at that time, such was, at least, my hypothesis. Was that not also the only justification, if there was one, for my presence at this colloquium?”

That, roughly, is what I would have begun by declaring to Abdelkebir Khatibi.

What you want to listen to at this moment is the story that I tell myself, the one that I would like to tell myself, or that, perhaps on account of the sign, writing, and anamnesia, and also in

response to the title of that meeting, the title *Renvois d'ailleurs* or *Echoes from Elsewhere*, I am limiting, without a doubt, to a little fable.

If I have indeed revealed the sentiment of being the only Franco-Maghrebian here or there, that does not authorize me to speak in the name of anyone, especially not about some Franco-Maghrebian entity whose identity remains in question. We will come back to that, for all of that is, in my case, far from being so clear.

Our question is still identity. What is identity, this concept of which the transparent identity to itself is always dogmatically presupposed by so many debates on monoculturalism or multiculturalism, nationality, citizenship, and, in general, belonging? And before the identity of the subject, what is *ipseity*? The latter is not reducible to an abstract capacity to say "I," which it will always have preceded. Perhaps it signifies, in the first place, the power of an "I can," which is more originary than the "I" in a chain where the "*pse*" of *ipse* no longer allows itself to be dissociated from power, from the mastery and sovereignty of the *hospes* (here, I am referring to the semantic chain that works on the body of hospitality as well as hostility—*hostis, hospes, hosti-pet, posis, despotes, potere, potis sum, possum, pote est, potest, pot sedere, possidere, compos*, etc.—)²

To be a Franco-Maghrebian, one "like myself," is not, not particularly, and particularly not, a surfeit or richness of identities, attributes, or names. In the first place, it would rather betray a *disorder of identity* [*trouble d'identité*].

Recognize in that expression "disorder of identity" all its seriousness without excluding its psychopathological or sociopathological connotations. In order to present myself as a Franco-Maghrebian, I made an allusion to *citizenship*. As we know, citizenship does not define a cultural, linguistic, or, in general,

historical participation. It does not cover all these modes of belonging. But it is not some superficial or superstructural predicate floating on the surface of experience.

Especially not when this citizenship is, through and through, *precarious, recent, threatened*, and more artificial than ever. That is “my case”; the at once typical and uncommon situation of which I would like to speak. Especially not when one has obtained this citizenship in the course of one’s life, which has perhaps happened to several Americans present at this colloquium, but also, and above all, not when one has lost it *in the course of one’s life*, which has certainly not happened to almost any American. And if one day some individual or other has seen their citizenship *itself* withdrawn (which is more than a passport, a “green card,” an eligibility or right to vote), has that ever happened to a *group* as such? I am of course not referring to some ethnic group seceding, liberating itself one day, from another nation-state, or giving up one citizenship in order to give itself another one in a newly instituted state. There are too many examples of this mutation.

No, I am speaking of a “community” group (a “mass” assembling together tens or hundreds of thousands of persons), a supposedly “ethnic” or “religious” group that finds itself one day deprived, as a group, of its citizenship by a state that, with the brutality of a unilateral decision, withdraws it without asking for their opinion, and *without the said group gaining back any other citizenship. No other.*

Now I have experienced that. Along with others, I lost and then gained back French citizenship. I lost it for years without having another. You see, not a single one. I did not ask for anything. I hardly knew, at the time, that it had been taken away from me, not, at any rate, in the legal and objective form of knowledge in which I am explaining it here (for, alas, I got to

know it in another way). And then, one day, one “fine day,” without, once again, my asking for anything, and still too young to know it in a properly political way, I found the aforementioned citizenship again. The state, to which I never spoke, had given it back to me. The state, which was no longer Pétain’s “French State,” was recognizing me anew. That was, I think, in 1943; I had still never gone “to France”; I had never been there.

In essence, a citizenship does not sprout up just like that. It is not natural. But, as in the flash of a privileged revelation, the artifice and precariousness of citizenship appear better when it is inscribed in memory as a recent acquisition: for example, the French citizenship granted to the Jews of Algeria by the Crémieux decree in 1870. Or, better yet, in the traumatic memory of a “degradation,” of a loss of citizenship: for example, the loss of French citizenship, less than a century later, for the same Jews of Algeria.

Such was, indeed, the case “under the Occupation,” as we say.

Yes, “as we say,” for it is actually a legend. Algeria has never been occupied. I mean that if it has ever been occupied, the German Occupant was never responsible for it. The withdrawal of French citizenship from the Jews of Algeria, with everything that followed, was the deed of the French alone. They decided that all by themselves, in their heads; they must have been dreaming about it all along; they implemented it all by themselves.

I was very young at that time, and I certainly did not understand very well—already, I did not understand very well—what citizenship and loss of citizenship *meant to say*. But I do not doubt that exclusion—from the school reserved for young French citizens—could have a relationship to the disorder of identity of which I was speaking to you a moment ago. I do not doubt either that such “exclusions” come to leave their mark upon this belong-

ing or non-belonging *of* language, this affiliation *to* language, this assignation to what is peacefully called a language.

But who exactly possesses it? And whom does it possess? Is language in possession, ever a possessing or possessed possession? Possessed or possessing in exclusive possession, like a piece of personal property? What of this being-at-home [*être-chez-soi*] in language toward which we never cease returning?

I have just emphasized that the ablation of citizenship lasted for two years, but it did not, *strictu sensu*, occur “under the Occupation.” It was a Franco-French operation, one even ought to say an act of French Algeria in the absence of any German occupation. One never saw a German uniform in Algeria. No alibi, denial, or illusion is possible: it was impossible to transfer the responsibility of that exclusion upon an occupying alien.

We were hostages of the French, enduringly [*à demeure*]; something of it remains with me, no matter how much I travel.

And I repeat it: I do not know whether there are other examples of this in the history of modern nation-states, examples of such a deprivation of citizenship decreed for tens and tens of thousands of people at a time. In October 1940, by abolishing the Crémieux decree of October 24, 1870, France herself, the French state in Algeria, the “French state” legally constituted (by the Chamber of the Popular Front!) following the well-known act of parliament, this state was refusing French identity to—rather, taking it away again from—those whose collective memory continued to recollect or had barely just forgotten that it had been lent to them as if only the day before and had not failed to give rise, less than half a century earlier (1898), to murderous persecutions and the beginnings of pogroms. Without, however, preventing an unprecedented “assimilation”: profound, rapid, zealous, and spectacular. In two generations.

Does this “disorder of identity” favor or inhibit anamnesia?

Does it heighten the desire of memory, or does it drive the genealogical fantasy to despair? Does it suppress, repress, or liberate? All of these at the same time, no doubt, and that would be another version, the other side of the contradiction that set us in motion. And has us running to the point of losing our breath, or our minds.



Under this heading, the monolingualism of the other, let us exercise our imagination. Let us sketch out a figure. It will have only a vague *resemblance* to myself and to the kind of autobiographical anamnesis that always appears like the thing to do when one exposes oneself in the space of *relation*. Let us understand “relation” in the sense of narration, the narration of the genealogical narrative, for example, but more generally as well, in the sense that Edouard Glissant imprints upon the expression when he speaks of *Poetics of Relation* [*Poétique de la Relation*], just as one could also speak of a politics of relation.

I therefore venture to present myself to you here, *ecce homo*, in parody, as the exemplary Franco-Maghrebian, but disarmed, with accents that are more naïve, less controlled, and less polished. *Ecce homo*, and do not smile, for a “passion” would indeed appear to be at stake here, the martyrdom of the Franco-Maghrebian who from birth, since his birth but also from his birth on the other coast, his coast, has, at bottom, chosen and understood nothing, and who still suffers and testifies.

As regards so enigmatic a value as that of attestation, or even of exemplarity in testimony, here is a first question, the most general one, without the shadow of a doubt. What happens when someone resorts to describing an allegedly uncommon “situation,” mine, for example, by testifying to it in terms that go

beyond it, in a language whose generality takes on a value that is in some way structural, universal, transcendental, or ontological? When anybody who happens by infers the following: "What holds for me, irreplaceably, also applies to all. Substitution is in progress; it has already taken effect. Everyone can say the same thing for themselves and of themselves. It suffices to hear me; I am the universal hostage."

How does one describe this time, then; how does one designate this unique time? How does one determine this, an uncommon this whose uniqueness stems from testimony alone, from the fact that certain individuals in certain situations testify to the features of a structure nevertheless universal, revealing it, showing it, and allowing it to be read "more vividly," more vividly as one says, and because, above all, one says it about an injury, more vividly and *better than others*, and sometimes alone in their category? And what makes it more unbelievable is that they are alone in a genre which becomes in turn a universal example, thus interbreeding and accumulating the two logics, that of exemplarity and that of the host as hostage.

— That is not what surprises me most. For one can *testify* only to the unbelievable. To what can, at any rate, only be believed; to what appeals only to belief and hence to the given word, since it lies beyond the limits of proof, indication, certified acknowledgment [*le constat*], and knowledge. Whether we like it or not, and whether we know it or not, when we ask others to take our word for it, we are already in the order of what is merely believable. It is always a matter of what is offered to faith and of appealing to faith, a matter of what is only "believable" and hence as unbelievable as a miracle. Unbelievable because *merely* "credible." The order of attestation itself testifies to the miraculous, to the unbelievable believable: to what must be believed all the same, whether believable or not. Such is the truth to which I am ap-

pealing, and which must be believed, even, and especially, when I am lying or betraying my oath. Even in false testimony, this truth presupposes veracity—and not the reverse.

—Yes, and as I was saying, what makes it more unbelievable is that such individuals testify this way in a language they speak, of course, one that they agree to speak in a certain way and up to a certain point . . .

— . . . in a certain way and up to a certain point, as one ought to say about any practice of language . . .

— . . . but one which they speak by presenting it, *in that very language, as the language of the other*. Such will have been, this time, the experience of the majority of us when we were speaking English at that meeting. But how would I do it, on this very spot, by speaking to you in French? By what right?

Here is an example. What did I do a short while ago by uttering a maxim such as “I have only one language, yet it is not mine,” or “we only ever speak one language”? What did I wish to do by continuing in approximately the following manner: “Therefore there is no such thing as bilingualism or plurilingualism”? Or still, and multiplying the contradictions in this manner, “We never speak only one language,” therefore, “There is nothing but plurilingualism”? So many apparently contradictory assertions (there is no such thing as x , there is nothing but x), so many claims of which I indeed believe, however, that, given the time, I would be capable of demonstrating the universal value. Anyone should be able to say “I only have one language (yet, but, henceforth, lastingly [*à demeure*]) it is not mine.”

An immanent structure of promise or desire, an expectation without a horizon of expectation, informs all speech. As soon as I speak, before even formulating a promise, an expectation, or a

desire *as such*, and when I still do not know what will happen to me or what awaits me at the end of a sentence, neither *who* nor *what* awaits whom or what, I am within this promise or this threat—which, from then on, gathers the language together, the promised or threatened language, promising all the way to the point of threatening and *vice versa*, thus gathered together in its very dissemination. Since subjects competent in several languages *tend* to speak only one language, even where the latter is dismembering itself, and because it can only promise and promise itself by threatening to dismember itself, a language can only speak itself of itself. One cannot speak of a language except in that language. Even if to place it outside itself.

Far from sealing off anything, this solipsism conditions the address to the other, it gives its word, or rather it gives the possibility of giving its word, it gives the given word in the ordeal of a threatening and threatened promise:³ monolingualism and tautology, the absolute impossibility of metalanguage. The impossibility of an absolute metalanguage, at least, for some *effects* of metalanguage, effects or relative phenomena, namely, relays of metalanguage “within” a language, already introduce into it some translation and some objectification in progress. At the horizon, visible and miraculous, spectral but infinitely desirable, they allow the mirage of another language to tremble.

—What I am having some difficulty understanding is this entire vocabulary of having, habit, and possession of a language that would or would not be one’s own—yours, for example. As if the possessive pronoun and adjective were, as far as language goes, proscribed here by language.

—On the part of one who speaks or writes the aforementioned language, this experience of monolingual solipsism is never one of

belonging, property, power of mastery, pure "ipseity" (hospitality or hostility) of whichever kind. Though the "non-mastery . . . of an appropriated language" of which Glissant speaks qualifies, above all, more literally and more sensitively, some situations of "colonial" alienation or historical servitude, this definition, so long as it is imprinted with the requisite inflections, also carries well beyond these determinate conditions. It also holds for what would be called the language of the master, the *hospes*, or the colonist.

Quite far from dissolving the always relative specificity, however cruel, of situations of linguistic oppression or colonial expropriation, this prudent and differentiated universalization must account, and I would even say that it is the only way one can account, for the *determinable* possibility of a subservience and a hegemony. And even account for a terror inside languages (inside languages there is a terror, soft, discreet, or glaring; that is our subject). For contrary to what one is often most tempted to believe, the master is nothing. And he does not have exclusive possession of anything. Because the master does not possess exclusively, and *naturally*, what he calls his language, because, whatever he wants or does, he cannot maintain any relations of property or identity that are natural, national, congenital, or ontological, with it, because he can give substance to and articulate [*dire*] this appropriation only in the course of an unnatural process of politico-phantasmatic constructions, because language is not his natural possession, he can, thanks to that very fact, pretend historically, through the rape of a cultural usurpation, which means always essentially colonial, to appropriate it in order to impose it as "his own." That is his belief; he wishes to make others share it through the use of force or cunning; he wants to make others believe it, as they do a miracle, through rhetoric, the school, or the army. It suffices for him, through whatever means there is, to make himself

understood, to have his “speech act” work, to create conditions for that, in order that he may be “happy” (“felicitous”—which means, in this code, efficacious, productive, efficient, generative of the expected event, but sometimes anything but “happy”) and the trick is played, a *first trick* will have, at any rate, been played.

Liberation, emancipation, and revolution will necessarily be the second trick. It will provide freedom from the first while confirming a heritage by internalizing it, by reappropriating it—but only up to a certain point, for, as my hypothesis shows, there is never any such thing as absolute appropriation or reappropriation. Because there is no natural property of language, language gives rise only to appropriative madness, to jealousy without appropriation. Language speaks this jealousy; it is nothing but jealousy unleashed. It takes its revenge at the heart of the law. The law that, moreover, language itself is, apart from also being mad. Mad about itself. Raving mad.

(As this goes without saying and does not deserve any overly long development here, let us recall briefly, in passing, that this discourse on the ex-appropriation of language, more precisely, of the “mark,” opens out onto a politics, a right, and an ethics: let us even go so far as to say that it is the only one with the power to do it, whatever the risks are, precisely because the undecidable ambiguity runs those risks and therefore appeals to the decision where it conditions, prior to any program and even any axiomatics, the right and the limits of a right to property, a right to hospitality, a right to *ipseity* in general, to the “power” of the *hospes* himself, the master and possessor, particularly of himself—*ipse, compos, ipsissimus, despotes, potior, possidere*, to cite in no particular order a chain reconstructed by Benveniste of which we were speaking earlier.)

So much so that “colonialism” and “colonization” are only high points [*reliefs*], one traumatism over another, an increasing buildup of violence, the jealous rage of an essential *coloniality* and *culture*, as shown by the two names. A coloniality of culture,

and, without a doubt, also of hospitality when the latter conditions and auto-limits itself into a law, however “cosmopolitan” — as the Kant of perpetual peace and universal right wanted.

Consequently, anyone should be able to declare under oath: I have only one language and it is not mine; my “own” language is, for me, a language that cannot be assimilated. My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other.

This abiding “alienation” [*aliénation à demeure*] appears, like “lack,” to be constitutive. But it is neither a lack nor an alienation; it lacks nothing that precedes or follows it, it alienates no *ipseity*, no property, and no self that has ever been able to represent its watchful eye. Although this injunction issues a summons, lastingly [*mette en demeure à demeure*],⁴ nothing else “is there” ever to watch over its past or future. This structure of alienation without alienation, this inalienable alienation, is not only the origin of our responsibility, it also structures the peculiarity [*le propre*] and property of language. It institutes the *phenomenon* of hearing-oneself-speak in order to mean-to-say [*pour vouloir dire*]. But here, we must say the *phenomenon* as *phantasm*. Let us refer for the moment to the semantic and etymological affinity that associates the phantasm to the *phainesthai*, to phenomenality, but also to the spectrality of the phenomenon. *Phantasma* is also the phantom, the double, or the ghost. We are there.

— Do you mean we belong among them?

— Who, upon reading and understanding us properly, here . . .

— Here?

— . . . or there, will dare to have someone believe the opposite? Who would dare claim to prove it? Being here in an element

of which the spectral phantasmaticity cannot, under any circumstances, be reduced does not imply that political and historical terror is alleviated on that account, quite the contrary. For there are situations, experiences, and subjects who are, precisely, in a *situation* (but what does *situating* mean in this case?) to testify exemplarily to them. This exemplarity is no longer reducible to that of an example in a series . . . Rather, it would be the exemplarity—remarkable and remarking—that allows one to read in a more dazzling, intense, or even *traumatic* manner the truth of a universal necessity. The structure appears in the experience of the injury, the offense, vengeance, and the lesion. In the experience of terror. It is a traumatic event because at stake here are blows and injuries, scars, often murders, and sometimes collective assassinations. It is reality itself, the scope [*portée*] of any *férance*, of any reference as *différance*.

That being the case, what status must be assigned to this exemplarity of re-mark? How do we interpret the history of an example that allows the re-inscription of the structure of a universal law upon the body of an irreplaceable singularity in order to render it thus remarkable?

Already, this is an abyssal problem that we cannot treat here in its classical form. Even so, one must, still from the abyss, take note of a chance that is bound to complicate the deal or the folding, and involve the fold in dissemination, *as* dissemination. For it is in the form of a thinking of the unique, precisely, and not of the plural, as it was too often believed, that a thought of dissemination formerly introduced itself as a folding thought of the fold—and as a folded thought of the fold.⁵ Because the fold of such a *re-mark* is there, the replica or re-application of the quasi-transcendental or quasi-ontological within the phenomenal, ontical, or empirical example, and within the phantasm itself where the latter presupposes the trace in language, we are justifiably

obliged to say at once that “we only ever speak one language,” and “we never speak only one language” or “I only speak one language, (and, but, yet) it is not mine.”

For is the experience of language (or rather, before any discourse, the experience of the mark, the re-mark or the margin) not precisely what makes this *articulation* possible and necessary? Is that not what *gives rise* to this articulation between transcendental or ontological universality, and the exemplary or testimonial singularity of *martyred* existence? While evoking apparently abstract notions of the mark or the re-mark here, we are also thinking of scars. Terror is practiced at the expense of wounds inscribed on the body. We speak here of martyrdom and passion in the strict and quasi-etymological sense of these terms. And when we mention the body, we are naming the body of language and writing, as well as what makes them a thing of the body. We therefore appeal to what is, so hastily, named the body proper, which happens to be affected by the same ex-appropriation, the same “alienation” without alienation, without any property that is forever lost or to be ever reappropriated.

Do you hear this word, *jamais*, in our language? And what about *sans*? Do you hear without ever understanding? That is what must, henceforth, be demonstrated in the scene thus created.

In what respect, therefore, can the passion of a Franco-Maghrebian martyr testify to this universal destiny which assigns us to a single language while prohibiting us from appropriating it, given that such an interdiction is linked to the very essence of language, or rather writing, to the very essence of the mark, the fold, and the re-mark?