

The Question of the Horizon

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"Totality and infinity: Utopia at the horizon of a voyage (travel)." (Louis Marin, 1993: 413)

There is something about a horizon, something that attracts us, starting with its etymology: horizon (kyklos) "bounding (circle)" from *horizein* "bound, limit, divide, separate," from *horos* "boundary, landmark, marking stones." As Louis Marin's observes, there is something about a horizon that marks—but does not define—the difference between totality and infinity, boundedness and unboundedness, the known and the unknown, proximity and distance. There is something about the way the horizon directs us forward; and something about the way, once arrived, our journey becomes aoristic: something completed but undefined—and pursued further.¹ In his corrective reading of Husserl and especially Heidegger, Derrida recalls Heidegger's insistence that "anthropology and humanism were not the milieu of his thought and the horizon of his questions" (38). Rather, claims Derrida, Heidegger is already "gone beyond the horizon of a philosophical anthropology" (45); and in the passage from *Being and Time* provided just here, Heidegger himself deploys the trope of the horizon in describing philosophical inquiry into the nature of "Being" not in terms of limits or truths, but in terms of indeterminacy: "But even if we ask "What is "Being"", we keep within an understanding of the 'is', though we are unable to fix conceptually what that 'is' signifies. We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. But this vague average understanding of Being is still a Fact" (qtd. by Derrida, 45-46).

A fact that is not a fact. A "known" that is, in fact, not known. To speak of a horizon that delimits what can be said about Being "within the horizon of metaphysics and ... within the Indo-European linguistic milieu" (46) is, as Derrida following Heidegger goes on to suggest, a transumptive "distortion" of the "Fact" of Being as human-reality, the "we" of mankind, the only beings (we assume) to be conscious of ourselves. While the questioner might near "the horizon" of the original pursuit of the inquiry, he is never farther from the "Fact" of *Dasein* than when he claims to have reached it. The logic of the pursuit is in a sense tautological: he

¹ Horizon is related to the word aorist, which refers to a verb tense in ancient Greek that both is and is not temporal: that word is formed by the assimilation of a- (not) + *horistos*, "limited, defined."¹ The point of the aorist is that it does not have a point - it sees the action as a whole, without regard to the time element. This means it can and often is used of something that took place in the past, but it does not need to be limited in such a way. Charles Smith describes it this way: In the matter of 'aspect' the purpose of the aorist is to be invisible. The term means "no boundary," "without horizon," "non-specific," "noncommittal," "indefinite," etc. The whole point of the aorist is to refrain from saying anything about the nature of the action. As Chamberlain said, the word means "I do not define." (Grace Theological Journal 2.2, Fall 1981, p. 206; <http://www.angelfire.com/nt/theology/greekverbs.html>).

“finds himself” in the same place. “Being” appears as a self-generating system, such that “the Dasein must ‘be able to show itself in itself and from itself’” (Derrida, 48-39 [fn. 15]). This self-reflexivity, however, creates a hall of mirrors receding ever backward--the “farthest”--without answering the original question. Hence Derrida’s interest in the words *we*, *always*, and *already* (45-46) in Heidegger’s passage on the formal structure of “the question of Being,” and in the proximity of “I” and “we,” “we ... ourselves” (48) at “the horizon of [Western] metaphysics” (46). This has been the “privilege,” ontological and epistemological, of the exemplary “proper man.” This privilege is what must be challenged, argues Derrida, as a radical displacement or rupture that must, he says, come not from within the system, on “this side” of the horizon, but “from the outside” (56). Even then, the most “efficacious” systems will be able to “transform transgressions into ‘false sorties’” (56), appropriating and neutralizing its difference: “The risk here is to constantly confirm, consolidate, or ‘reléver,’ at a depth which is ever more sure, precisely that which we claim to be deconstructing”--and falling, he concludes, “into a closed autism.”

Derrida explains therefore, that the Heideggerian Dasein must be understood to be “[b]eyond the enclosure common to humanism and metaphysics” and in terms both of the near and the far: “Heideggerian thought is guided by the motif of Being as presence, understood in a more original sense [than the metaphysics of ‘presence’ and ‘the proximity of Being to the essence of man’]” (49). This “more original sense” is the Derridean notion of *différance*, introduced only the year previous to this publication, and here conceived as an aoristic moment of proximity and distance: “Everything takes place as if the ontological distance recognized in *Sein und Zeit* had to be reduced and the proximity of Being to the essence of Man had to be said” (49)--that is, it had to become language. This “place” is “situated in the space which separates and which relates to one another such a proximity and such a distance” (49). This place is the horizon, understood not as a limit, but a receding line that can only be approached, and never actually reached: it is a space that marks “the opposition of the near and the far” (53), where repudiating the limits, we “decide to change ground, in a discontinuous and eruptive manner, by stepping outside and by affirming absolute rupture and difference” (56). This is the truer “*ek-sistence*,” a standing-outside on other ground, conscious of disorientation and unknowing: marked by the possibility of an other Being: not a “we”--or not yet; but an I and a Thou. Herein must lie the truly ethical relation: not among the “we” but *entre-deux* (Malabou), an entertainment of a new relation, a discontinuity or disruption (56).

The horizon always suggests, from this perspective, something beyond, that attracts us again, “magnetically,” to use Derrida’s analogy: what is beyond “has to” be known, lest we risk that “closed autism” of “repeating what is implicit in the founding concepts and in original problematics” (56). The imperative is both epistemological and ontological: it is speculative,

insofar as the system remains open, rather than closed: it is an anticipation, not a retrospective. It is a horizon. So we might look at the "problem" of Being not only in terms of the "the horizons" of a philosopher's questions, but in terms of the question(ing) of the horizon. Looking ahead, Catherine Malabou will speak of a "plasticity" of self that "implies a necessary split" between repetition and difference: the "split" comes not from within, but again from outside: "It is thus that every form carries within itself its own contradiction. And precisely this resistance makes transformation possible" (2008, 71). She too speaks of risk—the "ideological risk" that "offers nothing new to mankind, while plasticity, far from producing a mirror image of the world, is the form of another possible world" (2008, 80): this tension, she concludes, resists the "strict alternative between reductionism and antireductionism, the theoretical trap within which philosophy too often confines itself.

This is the "appeal" or "attraction" of the horizon: the plastic possibilities of Being, such that "identity is defined no longer as a permanent essence but as a process of autoconstitution or 'fashioning,' ... a process at whose heart a multiplicity of possible figurations unfolds" (71). The becoming of identity is at each point "aoristic": it contains the past, but nothing about it directs what comes next: "the purpose of the aorist is to be invisible. The term means 'no boundary,' 'without horizon,' 'non-specific,' 'noncommittal,' 'indefinite,' etc. The whole point of the aorist is to refrain from saying anything about the nature of the action. As Chamberlain said, the word means 'I do not define.'" That alone is greatest challenge to the notions of identity and Being. Malabou's proposition of "the new ontological transformability" (2011: 38-39) will develop from her notion of a plasticity of difference that—as with Derrida—requires a rupture or "accident," "the violence of a gap that interrupts all continuity" (2008, 73).

The rupture also brings to light the myth of who we are, the story we tell ourselves about our origins and identity. To "break with" an identity changes everything, all "complacent conventions" as David Hayman puts it, including what counts as identity, as difference, and even as "the text." His notion of a "process text" stages a "resistance" to itself, and thereby makes visible "the degree to which all texts do indeed contain the germ of their own generative principles" (108). Moreover, he adds, the potentialities implied in this principle of generativity give way to "the new myth of the text," new figurations of identity. This mythical figuration of identity is the crux of Sylvia Wynter's "The Ceremony Found" (1993). Wynter has little to say about horizons except in quoting, no less than seven times, Derrida's formulation of the "we [...] in the horizons of humanity." Wynter's intervention is to highlight the exclusion of race, the experience of being black, of Native American, from the "horizons of humanity": the line of the horizon is superseded by the dividing "Color Line" (187).

This line definitively marks the racial other as a “dissonant anomaly” to being human to this ‘proper’ normative Western-bourgeois self-conception,” that is, “within the genre-specific terms of secular Western Man (2)” (197). These generic lines are clearly drawn: to “be-human” at all, non-white others could only identify themselves insofar as they mimicked whiteness, donning “genre-specific [White] masks” (198) in an act of self-fashioning. Being, however, “essentially” out of bounds, non-generic, Fanon, DuBois and later black thinkers will analyze the “new heuristics” produced by “the systemic mistrust of their subjectively experienced, yet ostensibly instinctive, natural, and self-evident order of consciousness” (200). Double-consciousness, born of “our” false myth, the “self-evident order of consciousness.” For this reason Wynter dwells on the problem of myth, which Roland Barthes so provocatively described as “an alibi”—a being elsewhere. “How can we then come to know our social reality outside the terms of the myth?” (206), when “our social reality” is informed by the myths and tropes that affirm and even constitute that system? She alludes to Sam Weber’s conclusion that “the space of otherness” is “the foundational debt of meaning that pervades all institutions” (204, fn. 28); further, this space “must” be “beyond the reach of human desire and temptation ... [it is] either absolute or mediated through the institutions of the state” in order for the state to “act upon itself.” Returning to the spatial trope of the near and the far, it seems that in within the system, near and far merge at a horizontal boundary “beyond which” nothing more is to be known: there remains in place is a kind of feedback loop, an auto-poetic “cloning” of the I/We, Wynter says (214), a “recursive self-referentiality of our chartering and order-instituting cosmogonies” (214). What exists outside “is not and cannot be seen as such, and must thereby remain normally unseeable” (237).

Once again, as Malabou reiterates, “It is thus that every form carries within itself its own contradiction” (2008, 71; emphasis added). In essence Wynter ends up at the same place, imagining with Malikowski the “generic” and exemplary anthropologists “hesitat[ing] at the threshold of their own [social organization], reluctant to explore their own origin myths whether religious or secular” (214), and evading, therefore, the risk of destabilizing “this autopoetic, cosmogonically/sociogenically induced closure” (222) - unwilling to question the authority of “our ‘foundational myths’” and the authenticity of the “who-we-are.” We are, Wynter stresses, “opaque to ourselves”; we are, in short, our own myth (Homo Narrans), too often repeating a story with the most conservative of plots, wherein the beginning and ending meet comfortably, order having been restored. “We” remain safely within “the horizon of humanity” (230), still both near and far from understanding our own Being.²

² It is a mark of Othello’s exemplary otherness that he alone has risked and survived encounters with “the Cannibals that each other eat, / The Anthropophagi and men whose heads / Do grow beneath their shoulders” (Othello I.3.143-145); moreover, he recognizes these races as men, and extends the

Up to this point, I follow Wynter's argumentation. Where I - or she - falls flat is in the "emancipatory" conclusion. For she gives up neither language nor telos. We may "no longer need the illusions" of the past: yet how exactly do we "remake ... the new society in which our now existential referent 'we ... in the horizon of humanity' will all now live" (245)? Whence comes this utopian embrace of universality, which makes story telling no longer necessary? Are we human if we don't tell stories? What kind of utopian horizon is Wynter setting before us? What is the horizon?

"horizon of humanity" through his travels. And of course it is his story-telling that "bewitches" Desdemona, whose "greedy ear / Devour[ed] up my discourse" (149-150).