

Dry Ink: Arguing (to) the Limits

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Abstract

Framed within a discussion of what constitutes the limits between an uncritical joke and a serious argument, this essay revisits the polemic between Jacques Derrida and John Searle which ensues from the French philosopher's initial criticism, in "Signature Event Context" ("Sec"), of Austin's exclusion of non-serious utterances in his attempt to sketch a theory of performative speech acts. Derrida's fully fledged response in "Limited Inc a b c . . .", focusing on issues of iterability, citationality and parasitic versus normal speech acts, misunderstood by Searle in his "Reply" to Derrida's "Sec", will be examined in the light of other similar attempts by Derrida, especially in "Le Facteur de la vérité", to highlight the underlying "economic" stakes in claiming proprietorial rights of interpretation to the thought of a (usually) dead philosopher or critic, whereby an author like Searle sets himself up as the copyright holder of a L(imi)ted (Inc)orporation (in French *SARL*). After an "Interlude" teasing out some of Derrida's later musings on Austinian speech act theory through an intricate set of texts and references, the article will finally return to the issue of critical appropriations or even stealing (as in Poe's "Purloined Letter"), and circle back to the limit to be observed between fun and seriousness, limited responsibility and unlimited irresponsibility, in an ethics and politics of academic exchange.

Keywords: *fun versus seriousness, parasitism, citationality, Derrida, deconstruction, Searle/SARL, limit(ed), Inc/ink, ethics of discussion*

Many of [M. Derrida's writings] seem to consist in no small part of elaborate jokes and the puns "logical phallusies" [*sic.*] and the like (Derrida, "*Honoris Causa*: "This is *also* extremely funny")¹

The fact that this is *also* extremely funny doesn't detract from the seriousness of the symptom [...] In the responses that are called for [...] we must stay sensitive both to the comedy and to the seriousness, never give up either the laughter or the seriousness of intellectual and ethico-political responsibility. (Derrida, 1995, 404)

This is, perhaps, not very philosophical. This is theatre. Or even cinema. *C'est du cinéma*. Television. What fun.²

¹ Derrida, 1995, 420 ("[*sic.*]" addition mine), quoting from Barry Smith *et al.*'s letter to the *Times* (London): "Derrida Degree: A Question of Honour", 9th May 1992.

² Geoffrey Bennington, "For the Sake of Argument (Up to a Point)". In Glendinning, 2000, 332.

“jocoserious”³ ink

Let me begin immediately, *aussi sec*, with a teasing gambit: ‘seriousness’ would serve as guarantee for criticism and philosophy, setting a limit beyond which, unlike literature, they should not venture for fear of invalidating their claims to a shared protocol of truth-seeking in communication, for instance in academic exchanges, debates and polemics.

As long as one does not frame the word within quotation marks...

With its sustained interest in the logic of supplementarity, parergonal (framing) effects, the iterability (i.e. repeatability *and* alterability) of structurally counterfeitable signatures, and conceptual de-limitations etc - in the words of Derrida himself in *Limited Inc*: “I deconcentrate, and it is the secondary, eccentric, lateral, marginal, parasitic, borderline cases which are “important” to me and are a source of many things, such as pleasure, but also insight into the general functioning of a textual system” (1988, 44)⁴ - deconstruction has very early been accused by its detractors of being a parasitic activity sponging off not only the primary matter of literary, philosophical (etc.) texts but also their normative interpretations, as in M. H. Abrams citing Wayne Booth's assertion that the “deconstructionist” reading of a given work “is plainly and simply parasitical” on “the obvious or univocal reading”. These last citational snippets are themselves tacitly restaged and borrowed from the beginning of J. Hillis Miller's famous reply “The Critic as Host” (“The Limits of Pluralism *III*”), which goes on as follows:

The latter is Abrams' phrase, the former Booth's. My citation of a citation is an example of a kind of chain which it will be part of my intention here to interrogate. What happens when a critical essay extracts a “passage” and “cites” it? Is this different from a citation, echo, or allusion within a poem? Is a citation an alien parasite within the body of its host, the main text, or is it the other way around, the interpretative text the parasite which surrounds and strangles the citation which is its host? The host feeds the parasite and makes its life possible, but at the same time is killed by it, as 'criticism' is often said to kill 'literature.' Or can host and parasite live happily together, in the domicile of the same text, feeding each other or sharing the food?

Abrams, in any case, goes on to add “a more radical reply.” If “deconstructionist principles” are taken seriously, he says, “any history which relies on written texts becomes an impossibility.” (439)

Miller's plea for the recognition of the mutual interdependency of criticism and literature, and ultimate interchangeability and breakdown of the threshold between guest/parasite and host, appeared in Spring 1977 and is uncannily contemporaneous with the publication, in Johns Hopkins's newly founded journal of textual studies *Glyph*, of the English translation of Derrida's 1972 essay “Signature événement context”, which was to unleash a much fiercer controversy with John R. Searle's subsequent “Reply to Derrida”, countered at great length by the French philosopher in “Limited Inc a b c . . .” (all in 1977),⁵ not to mention

³ This portmanteau word is Joyce's in the “Ithaca” chapter of *Ulysses*.

⁴ Hereafter, for reasons of clarity, quotations from the English version of *Limited Inc* will be identified as *LI*, followed by the page number, in the text.

⁵ The exact chronology is as follows: Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context”, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman, *Glyph*, vol. 1 (1977), 172-97; John R. Searle, “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida”, *Glyph*, vol. 1 (1977), 198-208; Jacques Derrida, “Limited Inc a b c . . .”, trans. Samuel Weber, *Glyph*, vol. 2 (1977), 162-254. Derrida's contributions, augmented by an “Afterword” replying to Gerald

many subsequent critical ink spillings⁶ all somehow vying for what *Finnegans Wake* calls, punning on story and stealing, “[t]he last word in stolentelling!” (Joyce, 1975, 424).

In the first note to “Limited Inc a b c . . .” Derrida dwells extensively on the nature of the original essay's title, which in conclusion he had dryly abbreviated into “*sec*” (dry). His argument is worth reiterating at some length, including the relevant excerpt from “*Sec*”, some three pages before the end, in order to frame our argument here:

What is a title, according to the general theory of speech acts? And for example, from this point of view, the title *Speech Acts? And Signature Event Context*, these three nouns juxtaposed without either copula or apparent attribution? And what I am deciding here and from this instant on to designate with the conventional sign (but conventional to what point?), *Sec*? And is it only due to brevity? [...] Three pages before the end of *Sec* you can read this: “In order to function, that is, to be readable, a signature must have a repeatable, iterable, imitable form; it must be able to be detached from the present and singular intention of its production. It is its sameness which, by corrupting its identity and its singularity, divides its seal [*sceau*]. I have already indicated above the principle of this analysis.

To conclude this very dry discussion [*Pour conclure ce propos très sec*] . . .”

Sec is set there - in a manner which, you may take my word for it, was hardly fortuitous - in italics. Three points follow, which lead to the apparent simulacrum of “my” signatures, of my seal in bits and pieces, divided, multiplied. All that isn't very serious, Sarl will perhaps say. Serious? Not serious? That is the question: why does that absorb and irritate Sarl to such a degree? And were Sarl to object that in each one of these examples (titles, names, abbreviations, etc.) there are several *functions* at the same time, cohabiting parasitically with each other, how is that possible? [...] And how could this lack of seriousness have been taken so seriously?

The “very dry discussion” conducting *continuously* to the multiple signature of *Sec*, *Sec* will henceforth designate the whole of *Sec* plus (including) its multiple, presumed, divided, and associated signatories. Which signals - to arrive at a temporary conclusion concerning the question of titles, under the title of “perhaps more serious than one thinks, “ - that *Signature Event Context* might also lend credence to the parasite of a “true” dependent proposition: “signature event that one texts” [*signature événement qu'on texte*]. (LI, 108, n. 1)

And to substantiate “the calculated necessity of this neological usage of the verb *to text* [*texter*]”, Derrida further, and self-parasitically, quotes from an earlier text of his about a “paradoxical logic of the event” - which we need to curtail and pick up in mid flight here for the sake of convenience:

[...] this should account for the irreplaceable, which only produces itself in losing itself *aussi sec* [a French idiom meaning immediately, on the spot, without delay - *at once*], textually, in the process of iteration: signature, event that one texts [*signature, événement qu'on texte*]. (LI, 108, n. 1)

Opposite his reproduced ‘final’ (counter)signature at the end of “*Sec*”, Derrida had

Graff's questions some eleven years after the raging polemic, “Toward an Ethic of Discussion”, are collected in *Limited Inc* (1988), in which Searle's reply is summarized since he declined to have his essay reprinted.

⁶Apart from studies more directly referred to in this essay, let us mention Spivak's Searle bashing (1980), Steven Winspur's “Text Acts: Recasting Performatives with Wittgenstein and Derrida” (in Dasenbrock, 1989, 169-188 - see also Dasenbrock's own Introduction “Redrawing the Lines”: 1989, 6-11); Alfino, 1991, 143-52; Niall Lucy's “Merger Margin Mark - The Debate with Searle” (Lucy, 1995, 22-47); and Simon Glendinning's “Inheriting “Philosophy”: The Case of Austin and Derrida Revisited” (in Glendinning, 1999, 307-331).

appended a “remark” between brackets to the effect that “Sec” had to be “texted” beforehand:

(Remark: the - written - text of this - oral - communication was to be delivered to the *Association des sociétés de philosophie de langue française* before the meeting. That dispatch should thus have been signed. Which I do, and counterfeit, here. Where? There. J.D.) (*LI*, 21)

Is this a protracted joke - since there may be more at stake than the mere convenience of ‘brevity’ (the soul of wit) in “Sec”? One proffered in the spirit of ‘dry humour’, prolonging - or, etymologically, ‘pur-loining’ - a piece which in an already (non-)serious way had, among other things, questioned the validity of Austin's ‘strategic’, ‘methodological’ exclusion of non-serious utterances in order to isolate the felicitous conditions in which a performative speech act could take place and thus be studied as part of a ‘general theory of speech acts’?

In *How To Do Things with Words* - a title which, despite its author's intentions and precautions throughout, already implicitly promises some playful ‘deconstructive’ *bricolage* with language at the limit of its interaction with the Real - J. L. Austin had offered his famous delimiting caveat in order to sift out the ideal purity of performative utterances:

Surely the words must be spoken 'seriously' and so as to be taken 'seriously'? This is, though vague, true enough in general - it is an important commonplace in discussing the purport of any utterance whatsoever. I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem. (Austin, 1962, 9)

Surely? But already, as Jonathan Culler shrewdly observed, rather than defining what seriousness and “serious literal speech” (*LI*, 67) means, Austin had framed the word within quotation marks, using the very same marker of parasitism and citationality he was precisely so keen to exclude, as in the ‘peculiar’, ‘non-ordinary’ cases of playacting, a poem or a soliloquy.⁷

Language in such circumstances is in special ways - intelligibly - used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use - ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiologies* of language. (Austin, 1962, 22)

A point which was re(p)layed in earnest and with faithful citationality - hence parasitism or ‘paracitationism’⁸ - by Searle in his “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida” or ‘defence’ of Austin:

Austin correctly saw that it was necessary to hold in abeyance one set of questions, about parasitic discourse, until one has answered a logically prior set of questions about 'serious' discourse. (Searle, 1977, 204-5)

⁷ Culler, 1982, 116. The whole section “Meaning and Iterability” (110 ff.; especially 119-20), commenting on John Searle's “egregious misunderstanding” (112), offers a neat deconstructive approach to Austin's own text (an earlier version was published as “Convention and Meaning, Derrida and Austin” the year before; see References). Searle used his review of Culler's study, published in the *New York Times Book Review* on 27 October 1983, as a belated flame *in absentia* on “Limited Inc a b c . . .”

⁸ Or, for Llewelyn, ‘paracitation’, which captures the necessary link between the performative's status as a quotation and its consequent tendency to be mimicked (Llewelyn, 1986, 60).

Thus, while, as Ian Maclean likewise noted, Austin “indulges in a certain intellectual playfulness” in spite of his *ab initio* dismissal of non-serious, mimicable aspects of performatives, a more churlish Searle in fact failed to grasp that Derrida's “play [*jeu*] of differences” not only meant playfulness in language but equally referred to loose mechanical play as in a machine.⁹ Such ‘infelicities’ of linguistic communication, let alone intellectual communion, are tokens of the larger impossibility to ‘translate’ between Derrida's deconstructive terms of reference and Searle's more proprietorial attitudes and exclusionary practice of the Anglo-American (Fregean) tradition, his “unwillingness to accept the coherence of a philosophical discourse which is not reducible to, or reproducible in terms of, analytical philosophy” (Maclean, 1985, 21).¹⁰

Derrida's A to Z objections, or basic (“*abc's*” - *LI*, 86) corrections, run parallel to those he had formulated, in the more or less contemporaneous essay “Le Facteur de la vérité”, first available in English as “The Purveyor of Truth” in a 1977 issue of *Yale French Studies* and later incorporated into *The Post Card*, against Lacan's celebrated allegorical ‘economic’ conclusion to his “Seminar on “The Purloined Letter”” that “a letter [read: of the unconscious] always arrives at its destination” (Lacan, 2007, 30):

The divisibility of the letter - this is why we have insisted on this key or theoretical safety lock of the Seminar - is what chances and sets off course, without guarantee of return, the remaining [*restancel*] of anything whatsoever: a letter does *not always* arrive at its destination, and from the moment that this possibility belongs to its structure one can say that it never truly arrives, that when it does arrive its capacity not to arrive torments it with an internal drifting. (Derrida, 1987, 489)

In *Limited Inc* a similar insistence on the structural inscription of the possible as therefore the necessarily possible - “this *possibility* is *always* inscribed, hence *necessarily* inscribed *as possibility* in the functioning or the functional structure of the mark.” (*LI*, 48) - forms part of Derrida's own vested economy and paradoxical logic of the tersely idiomatic *aussi sec* or even *à-sec*, whereby Searle is shown to borrow and “reapply” [used in the translation to convey some of the colloquial *rappliquer*] from “Sec” the arguments which he will bring to bear on it as objections in his “Reply” - thus circuitously ‘bringing home’, i.e. ‘economically’ (from *oikos*: house) the self-division of the letter's “destiny” and “destination” (*LI*, 37):

⁹ See Maclean, 1985, 5, 15. See also, before him, Culler, 1982, 118: “When Austin then performs a similar exclusion, his own example prompts us to ask whether it is not equally illicit, especially since both he and Searle, by putting ‘serious’ in quotation marks, suggest the dubiousness of the hierarchical opposition, serious/nonserious. The fact that Austin's own writing is often highly playful and seductive, or that he does not hesitate to undermine distinctions that he proposes, only emphasizes the inappropriateness of excluding nonserious discourse from consideration.” During the discussion after his paper “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” given at the seminal John Hopkins conference (1966), Derrida had already noted that ‘free play’ is to be understood as ‘*jeu dans la machine*’ (Macksey and Donato, 1970, 268).

¹⁰ Since this early assessment, more thorough engagements with - and friendlier encounters between - these supposedly two incompatible critical-philosophical traditions have underlined convergences which help relativize such valid, if reductively bipolar views of the debate; see especially Dasenbrock 1989, and the proceedings of the 1999 *Ratio* Conference “Arguing with Derrida” (Glendinning, 2000). The precursors for this *rapprochement*, writing in the short- to mid-term wake of the original polemic, are Norris, 1983, 1985, and Staten 1984.

How Sarl, citing this phrase on the very next page, can turn it into an objection to *Sec*, is a *mystery*. If the simple argumentation of *Sec* is made into an *objection* to *Sec*, isn't it because, as I said earlier, that other hand, the one that signed *Sec*, also dictated the *Reply* behind its back? But we are not yet done with this curious programming of what, in French, I would call the *objection à-Sec*, and which, in English, might be rendered as *Sec dry up!* or also as the *Dried-out-objection*. However, for reasons of economy and of formalization, I shall refer to this simply as *from/to-Sec*, thus designating a gesture which recurs regularly in the reply and consists in taking arguments borrowed *from Sec* [*à Sec*], as though there were nowhere else to turn, and changing them into objections *to Sec* [*à Sec*]. With the other hand. Whence my perplexity at finding myself in this discussion often obliged to argue with a discourse moving *from/to Sec*, seeking to repeat against *Sec* what it has taken from *Sec*, or, in terms of the venerable fantasm of the *copyright*, what 'belongs' *to* or stems *from Sec*. Would I have been spared this mistake or this mishap had I stamped each argument in advance with a ©? Concerning iterability, for instance: in reiterating what can be read on each page of *Sec*, replying or reapplying [*rappliquant*] it, it is difficult to see how the *Reply* can object to it. (*LI*, 47; last insertion mine)

As soon as [*aussi sec*] a possibility is essential and necessary, *qua possibility* (and even if it is the possibility of what is named, *negatively*, absence, 'infelicity,' parasitism, the non-serious, non-'standard,' fictional, citational, ironical, etc.), it can no longer, either *de facto* or *de jure*, be bracketed, excluded, shunted aside, even temporarily, on allegedly methodological grounds. (*LI*, 48)

This fantasizing of a multiple, divided authorial seal at work both in “Sec” and Sarl is also reminiscent of the first part or “Envois” of *The Post Card*, according to Derrida's postal principle of *destinerrance* which stages the unpredictable dispatch of innumerable missives from unknown, uncertain senders to equally unstable addressees, a prelude to the full-frontal charge on Lacan's tenet of the inalienable, unalterable non-partitivity of the letter.

We should recall that Poe's famous analytic detective, Charles Auguste Dupin, himself operates as a duplicitous double of the rival Minister D---, whose original evil turn to him he undoes by retrieving the Queen's purloined letter and leaving in its place a mock-up bearing as a signature a “bread seal”, an ironic *mie du pain* (a partitive in the French language) from *l'ami Dupin* imitative of the Minister's own “D--- cipher”.¹¹ Let us reread Derrida's insistence on “a Searle who is divided, multiplied, conjugated, shared” (*LI*, 31), reduplicating Derrida/Sec's “seal in bits and pieces, divided, multiplied” (*LI*, 108, n. 1), in this analytic, Poesque light:

For I imitate and reproduce my 'own' signature incessantly. This signature is imitable in its essence. And always has been. In French one would say that *elle s'imit*, a syntactical equivocation that seems to me difficult to reproduce: it can be imitated, and it imitates *itself*. This is all that I ask my interlocutors to acknowledge. And yet, as we shall see shortly, the consequences of this very simple fact are *unlimited* and *unlimitable*. (*LI*, 34)

they can at least join me in acknowledging the importance of the desires and fantasms that are at stake in a proper name, a copyright, or a signature. And, after all, isn't this the very question which, posed by *Signature Event Context*, will have involved us in this improbable confrontation? It is as a reminder of this, and not to draw the body of his name into my

¹¹ Poe, 1982, 221. See also Milesi, 1998, for the issue of counterfeit signatures and seals in Poe's tale and its ‘application’ to *Finnegans Wake*.

language by subtracting one *r* and two *e*'s, that I thus break Searle's seal (itself already fragmented or divided). (*LI*, 36)

(L)imit..., or the iterable that de-limits the limit: the *imitable* has consequences which are *illimitable*, and much of Derrida's rejoinder will aim to expose the simplistic, 'limited' as well as limiting, understanding by *SeARLe* - in French, short for *Société à responsabilité limitée* (*LI*, 36) or in dual UK-US English "Limited" (Ltd) / "Inc(orporated)" - of the complex logic and principle of iterability, citationality, parasitism, illimitable self-divisibility of a 'letter' in its context(s), its intention and its delivery, etc. As when someone says, for instance at the beginning of the "f" section - and after the inaugural self-alleged 'pretence' of a "*faux départ*" (*LI*, 29) - "Let's be serious". Or again in "h" - after a hospitable "I get my foot in the door."¹² Indeed, it has long since slipped in, and at bottom Sarl may not quite want me to pull it back, at least not too quickly" (*LI*, 36): "Let's be serious. I am going to try to engage myself in this confrontation without excessively prolonging the pleasure of the threshold [*limen*]." (*LI*, 39) Etc.

In "The Critic as Host" Hillis Miller reminds us of the etymology of the 'parasite':

"Parasite" comes from the Greek, *parasitos*, etymologically: "beside the grain", *para*, beside (in this case) plus *sitos*, grain, food. [...] 'Parasite' was originally something positive, a fellow guest, someone sharing the food with you, there with you beside the grain. Later on, "parasite" came to mean a professional dinner guest, someone expert at cadging invitations without ever giving dinners in return. [...] The host and the somewhat sinister or subversive parasite are fellow guests beside the food, sharing it. [...] The host may then become the host in another sense, not etymologically connected. The word "Host" is of course the name for the consecrated bread or wafer of the Eucharist (442)

Thus "There is no parasite without its host. At the same time both word and counterword subdivide and reveal themselves each to be fissured already within themselves" (441), just as the concept of the 'limit' for deconstruction is no longer 'exterior', 'between', but also divides each term within and from itself. Likewise, in *Limited Inc* Derrida will note that

It should also be remembered that the parasite is by definition never simply *external*, never simply something that can be excluded from or kept outside of the body 'proper,' shut out from the 'familial' table or house. Parasitism takes place when the parasite (called thus by the owner, jealously defending his own, his *oikos*) comes to live *off the life* of the body in which it resides - and when, reciprocally, the host incorporates the parasite to an extent, willy nilly offering it hospitality: providing it with a place. (*LI*, 90)¹³

Concerned with the ethical sense of 'place',¹⁴ the relation between site and para-site,

¹² This consecrated image also uncannily occurs in Hillis Miller, 1977, 443 (about the host in the sense of a guest): 'the first foot in the door'.

¹³ See also Ionescu, 2010, 72, for an analysis of this problematic relationship, leading to the comparable, if slightly differently focused, view that "If deconstruction is a parasite for whom, in Derrida's famous but famously misunderstood formula, "there is nothing outside the text" [...], it is one that sustains itself on the hope for something always to come, beyond the normatized laws of a delimiting threshold for hospitality which inscribes the context as parasitical outsider and the text as lawful insider."

¹⁴ I am referring here to my unpublished talk "*Séance tenante: Deconstruction in (the) Place of Ethics Now*", given on the occasion of the Workshop "Deconstruction Space Ethics" organized by Stefan Herbrechter at the University of Heidelberg in May 2009.

deconstruction is always, to cite Derrida's own words in "The Rhetoric of Drugs", "a discourse about the parasite, itself a device parasitic on the subject of the parasite, a discourse "on parasite" and in the logic of the "superparasite." (Derrida, 1995, 234) - a word to be understood in the light of a 'pre-critical' archi-trace that will always have left its self-erased "foot in the door". To push those metaphors to their critical limits or "against the grain": all is grist to its mill - and to the Miller who faithfully broke the bread out of which the 'host' is also etymologically and semantically kneaded.

Like any sign(ature), mark, letter etc, the bread *seal*, itself a part(itive) of Searle, is "in itself divided [partitive *du pain*] or multiplied in advance by its structure of repeatability" (LI, 49; insertion mine), at once (*aussi sec*), in a sort of "communion" which inextricably binds together sender(s) and addressee(s) in a more generalisable *socius* - including a business company (*société*) with bonds, a "Limited Inc" which "marks the common bond linking England and the United States (Oxford and Berkeley), also *mentions* in translation a seal [*sigle*] related to the French code (s.a.r.l.)" (LI, 84, insertion mine; Austin had taught in both places) - than a SARL is prepared to admit (LI, 49-50). Hence:

[The proper name] can thus transform itself, at once [*aussi sec*], and change itself into a more or less anonymous multiplicity. [...] That Searle's seal should become, at once [*aussi sec*] and without waiting for me, Sarl's seal [*also in English in the text*], is therefore anything but accidental. It is a little like the multitude of stockholders and managers in a company or corporation with limited liability, or in a limited, incorporated system; or, like that limit which is supposed to distinguish stockholders from managers. (LI, 57; insertions mine)

Thus, to return to Austin's, then Searle's attempt to exclude and draw limits between the serious and the non-serious, no epochal bracketing-off is possible as both fall without any order of antecedence or precedence under the rule of iterability which "blurs [*brouille*]¹⁵ a priori the dividing-line that passes between these opposed terms ["for instance, serious/non-serious, literal/metaphorical or sarcastic, ordinary/ parasitical, strict/nonstrict, etc. "], "corrupting" it if you like, contaminating it parasitically, qua limit." (LI, 70)

S(e)arl(e) is thus cast into the role of a not-so-serious parasitic paraciter, a deviant as much as deviating purloiner of "Sec", analytically less gifted than even Minister D--- in "The Purloined Letter" who "is well acquainted with my MS" (Poe, 1982, 222), and who, in order to bring his objections home against his opponent while appropriating the "returns" of a dead Austin's unfinished work to himself,¹⁶ turns against Derrida, "as a glove, inside out, re-directed, and re-sealed" (Poe, 1982, 221), the arguments lifted from his own text - what the hilariously vernacular "*ça rapplique dans le discours à-Sec*" (Derrida, 1990, 101; cf. also 146 - "*it-reapplies in the discourse from/to-Sec*" [LI, 51; cf. also 77]) seals economically and 'analytically' (*ça*). Deviating since he not only misdirects/misreads but also on occasion misquotes "Sec"'s words, forgets them or leaves them behind like undigested misunderstood remainders (*restes*, hence the discussion of *restance*, with resistance the other of two "axes" of deconstruction - see Derrida, 1989, 87), in spite of his cult of presence; he may be breaking unawares the (in)corporate(d)

¹⁵ Used repeatedly to tie in with *parasites* or noise interferences (e.g. LI, 44), corresponding to *parasitage* in the French original.

¹⁶ Cf. Jacques Lacan's whole Seminar project of a 'return to Freud', whose institutional effects Derrida analyses in the more 'theoretical' second part of Derrida's *Post Card* (see later).

bread seal of the communion but forgoes the main staple to go alongside:

(had we both been together in Montreal while I was reading *Sec*, I would surely have sent off a note to help Sarl's wandering attention, so that despite this slight tendency to *absentmindedness*, what is 'most important' might still not be missed; had *Sec*, now, been a shopping list [cf. *LI*, 25 and *passim*], we would have to conclude that Sarl had forgotten to buy the necessary items for what in French is called the 'plat de résistance'; but doesn't this prove that the *written* list is made to supplement an absence that is always possible, and someone, either Sarl at one moment, or, at another, a part of Sarl - let us say, for instance, D. Searle - can send Sarl back to the list, or even to the supermarket to get what is missing). (*LI*, 51)

Throughout his jocoserious retort, the performatively dry abbreviation for "Signature Event Context" will have furnished Derrida with a resourceful strategy to drive in a few home truths about Searle's missed encounter with his earlier essay. At the end of his penultimate letter/section, running out of the literal ammunitions he had set himself (see below), Derrida orchestrates the impending conclusion, and his sense of an ending and "limited ink", by framing and citing his previous conclusive moves thus - near the beginning of "Limited Inc a b c . . ." Derrida had multiplied abyssally the citational framing of Searle's 'original' *copyright* (*LI*, 30-31):

These three conclusions open with the formula, "To conclude this *very dry* [sec] discussion: " (pp. 20-21)

And, for the second time, I am going to conclude a bit abruptly, since I see that all I have left is the letter

z (*LI*, 104-5)

Whose near-final conclusive words will read as follows:

I promised (very) sincerely to be serious. Have I kept my promise? Have I taken Sarl seriously? I do not know if I was supposed to. Should I have? Were they themselves serious in their speech acts? Shall I say that I am afraid they were? Would that mean that I do not take their seriousness very seriously?

What am I saying? What am I doing when I say that? (*LI*, 107)

...

Interlude Pleas and Pli(e)s - Two Ways of Spelling 'Inc'

Soon after Derrida had announced he had only 15 (erroneously given as 18 in the translation) remaining letters or 'blows' at his disposal, the end of section 'k' ushers in the 'real' (true) beginning while mimicking a performative oath of seriousness:

But I will have to limit my arguments in number to eighteen. [...] But, one will protest, is not this limit utterly contingent, artificial and external? Are we now going to integrate such fringes into the text, and take account of such frames? Are all these parasites to be incorporated into the economy of discourse? Must the surface of the paper, the contents of the time at our disposal, etc. all be integrated into our calculations? If so, what about the ink remaining in my typewriter ribbon? And yet: why not? That is the question.

Finally, I give my word of honor that I shall be of good faith in my argument. I promise this in all sincerity and in all seriousness, literally, raising my hand above the typewriter.
I begin. (*LI*, 45)

The complex ‘mechanical’ entanglement of those various material supports for writing was to spill beyond note 3, appended to ‘ink’ in the above quotation, indebted to Sam Weber and referring to Austin's “Three Ways of Spilling Ink” (also briefly quoted later in *LI*, 73),¹⁷ the posthumously published appendix to the manuscript bearing the title “Responsibility”, whose inaugural sentence, “Most of what I have to say about responsibility in general I have said in another place”, refers to “A Plea for Excuses”. This particular essay is also mentioned in connection with the American linguist's enquiring about “the crux of the Last Word” in “Comme si c'était possible, "within such limits"..."” (the last three words, left in English, are a quotation from Austin), originally published in a special issue on “Derrida with his Replies” (1998), whose second section, “Of Ordinary Language: Excuses (Aphoristic 2)” is a later engagement with the Austinian theory of speech acts in relation to this paper, his ironic refusal to reply to questions and, a performative contradiction (?), his apologetics for not treating the subject of excuses “within such limits”¹⁸ - “Excuses” being also the general title of Austin's Oxford seminars as indicated in L. W. Ferguson's succinct presentation of “Three Ways of Spilling Ink”. The section concludes with a recall of the episode of the stolen ribbon in Book 2 of Rousseau's *Confessions* (Derrida, 2005, 76).

Derrida will further draw out “the ink remaining in my typewriter ribbon” in the second essay of *Papier machine*, “Le ruban de machine à écrire (*Limited Ink II*)” - translated as “Typewriter Ribbon: Limited Ink (2)” but included in *Without Alibi* (Derrida, 2002, 71-160) - which likewise kicks off with confessions (‘spilling beans’) of thieving by Rousseau but also Augustine which indirectly ‘pur-loin’ the Searlean purloinings exposed in *Limited Inc* before attempting an impossible linkage, as a “next to last word” (Derrida, 2002, 71) beyond Austin's speech acts, between the active and passive, mechanical “calculable programming of an automatic repetition” (the machine as *performante*) and the event of performativity, which “excludes in principle, in its own moment, any machinelike [*machinale*] technicity” (Derrida, 2002, 71, 72, 74). A few pages into the essay, Derrida recalls the moment in Rousseau's confession when he “accuses Marion so as to excuse himself” (Derrida, 2002, 77), an ‘economy of contingency’ which, no matter how opportunistic it is made to sound, stands in sharp contrast to Searle's thieving replications or ‘reapplications’ in his “Reply”. Then, following his own admission that his title (“*Matière et mémoire*”) is stolen from Bergson and Ponge, Derrida ties the loose strings of the confessional and the apologetic by referring to Paul De Man's article on Rousseau “Excuses (*Confessions*)”, originally to be titled “The Purloined Ribbon”, which incidentally also refers to Austin's “A Plea for Excuses” in a note (Derrida, 2002, 78).¹⁹

¹⁷ Starting from the banal case of a teacher asking a schoolchild why he spilled the ink in class, Austin's paper analyzes three different degrees of intentionality and responsibility in doing so: ‘intentionally’, ‘deliberately’ and ‘on purpose (purposely)’ (Austin, 1966, 428; cf. *LI*, 109, n. 3). Testing their imbrications in the light of grammar and philology, Austin unwittingly anticipates Derrida's linkage between responsibility and ‘Inc’ as ink.

¹⁸ See “As If It Were Possible, "Within Such Limits"”, in Derrida, 2005, 73, 74-76.

¹⁹ See Derrida, 2002, 294, n. 2, which makes the explicit connection between Derrida's two contemporaneous lectures/essays. Derrida will also allude to his recent re-reading of Austin's book in one of the discussions of the 1999 *Ratio* conference “Arguing with Derrida” (Glendinning, 2000, 416).

Here again, Austin appears at his most playful in his apologetic pretence and refusal to engage with the subject of excuses right at the beginning of an essay which is therefore an exemplarily performative “plea for excuses”. Or to quote Derrida one last time here, thus cutting short his argumentative ribbon since criticism has its limits which are also imposed by the material constraints of space and place in a given publication:

So Austin excuses himself for not treating the excuse in a serious enough fashion. He excuses himself for falling short, or even for leaving his audience in ignorance on the subject of what is meant by 'to excuse oneself.' And this at the moment when (performative contradiction or not), having begun by excusing himself, by pretending to do so, or rather by pretending to pretend to do so, he undertakes to excuse himself for not treating the subject of the excuse. [...]

Will he have treated it? [...] It is like the scene of the writing of a post card whose virtual addressee would in the future have to decide whether or not he or she will receive it and whether it is indeed to him or to her that it will have been addressed, in the singular or the plural. The signature is left to the initiative, to the responsibility of the other.[...]

Did Austin [...] allow himself to be enclosed in a "performative contradiction", [...]? [...] May we thus be permitted to smile at it, along with his ghost? As if it were possible to escape all performative contradiction! And as if it were possible to exclude that an Austin would have had a little fun illustrating this inevitable trap! (Derrida, 2002, 78-79)²⁰

Arguing Ltd

But [...] if he has discussed Austin solely in order to play games with Descartes' titles, it's not serious and there is no theoretical issue worthy of discussion: he is evading the discussion. This might be true: I detest discussions, quibbling [*arguties*] and hair-splitting (*LI*, 84)²¹

On the one hand, I try to submit myself to the most demanding norms of classical philosophical discussion. (*LI*, 113)

What is the limit between stealing and appropriation? And why should this question form the preliminary threshold to the last part of our analysis, which started with “the laughter or the seriousness of intellectual and ethico-political responsibility”, of the limits of a critical *argument* or discussion?

In “Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion” Derrida reminisces over the stakes of the once heated polemic in order to initiate his hopefully performative gesture of re-launching and re-opening the debate without exclusions - and here again it should be recalled that Searle denied permission to reprint his original “Reply” in Gerald Graff's collection:

²⁰ Throughout the unfolding of this “Limited Ink” ribbon, or confessional/apologetic ‘ink flow’ (Derrida, 2002, 122) between Augustine, Rousseau and De Man, Derrida will hauntingly return to Austin's texts “A Plea for Excuses” and “Three Ways of Spilling Ink”: Derrida 2002, 122, 127 (noting the usual irony in Austin's beginnings), 136-137.

²¹ Insertion mine and end of translation modified. Derrida had just decrypted a near-citational, parasitic allusion to the fifth of Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations*, an argument about the existence of God using the word *iterum*, in the title of the subsection “Parasites. Iter, Of Writing: That It Perhaps Does Not Exist” (*LI*, 82-83).

Am I right to insist, even before beginning, on the debate itself, its possibility, its necessity, its style, its "ethics", its "politics"? You know, of course [...] that what went on more than ten years ago around *Sec* and "Limited Inc . . ." concerned above all our experience of violence [including his own, which he confesses retrospectively - *LI*, 113] and of our relation to the law - everywhere, to be sure, but most directly in the way we discuss "among ourselves", in the academic world. Of this violence, I tried at the time to *say* something. I also tried, at the same time, to *do* something. I will return to this in my answers.

I want to refer here to a sort of friendly contract between us: it is clearly understood that this republication and our exchange should serve above all as an invitation to *others*, in the course of a discussion that is both open and yet to come. I have accepted your invitation with this hope in mind and not at all with the aim of providing a finishing touch or having the last word (*LI*, 111; see also 112-3)

The reason why Derrida took so 'seriously' the need to reply to Searle's reply, beyond the necessary task of correcting blatant misreadings and setting the argumentative score right, was precisely the higher stakes involved in any academic exchange, to which a theory of so-called "speech acts", doing something effectively with words, would have something to contribute:

I am convinced that speech act theory is fundamentally and in its most fecund, most rigorous and most interesting aspects (need I recall that it interests me considerably?) a theory of right or law, of convention, of political ethics or of politics as ethics. It describes (in the best Kantian tradition, as Austin acknowledges at one point) the pure conditions of an ethical-political discourse insofar as this discourse involves the relation of intentionality to conventionality or to rules. (*LI*, 97)

... As long as it would be a general theory of speech acts, not one with "limited responsibility" - whichever serious or humorous way one wishes to hear this French idiom in translation; see e.g. *LI*, 67: "John R. Searle, co-signatory, director, and, within the limits of his liability responsible [*responsable limité*] for the *Reply*." [insertion mine] - one which Searle concedes "Austin did not live long enough to develop himself" (*LI*, 35, 90, 94) and is yet to be teased out.

But by whom? In his fourth reiteration of Searle's concession - in which we will gloss over the rather 'infelicitous' equation of Austin's premature death with a misfiring performative which prevented him from working out such a general theory - Derrida develops:

I sincerely regret that "Austin did not live long enough", and my regret is as sincere as anyone else's is, for there are surely many of us who mourn his loss. It is unfortunate, even infelicitous. But through my tears I still smile at the argument of a "development" [...] that a longer life might have led to a successful conclusion. Searle might thus be considered to have "developed" the theory: to have produced it, elaborated, and formulated it, and at the same time to have merely extended it in detail, guided it to adulthood by unfolding its potential.

(*LI*, 94-95)

A passage which must be read alongside or in the light of another development - here again caught in mid flight - seguing from the first mention of Searle's concession:

[...] while one of the participants, who died too young even to know of the debate, is represented, without his knowledge and without ever having given his consent (in a serious and

'strict' sense), by a more or less anonymous company or corporation [*par une société plus ou moins anonyme*] (three + n authors) asserting the legitimacy of their lineage (*LI*, 36)

That is, “the self-made, auto-authorized heirs of Austin” (*LI*, 37), such as the author of the 1969 book titled *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, who would have a secure purchase on the *copyright* of filial bonds:

It is this last feature [*the inability to tolerate that others pose questions concerning the limits or the presuppositions of Austin's theory*] that I find most interesting: what characterizes a self-proclaimed heir (especially when the father has died too young, at the age of 48!) is the fact that, doubting his own legitimacy, he wishes to be the only one to inherit and even the only one, in a *tête à tête*, to break, now and then, the filial bond of identification [...]. All this is familiar in philosophy and, *mutatis mutandis*, has been ever since the *Sophist*; also, ever since the Sophists, and no one will be astonished when I observe that they haunt our present debate, as more than one sign shall indicate. Thus, Sarl would like to be Austin's sole legitimate heir and his sole critic (*LI*, 42)

We saw earlier that the Searle-Derrida dispute dovetailed with the French philosopher being busy working out another larger argument, against psychoanalysis as originally a family (Freudian) institution bequeathed to (self-)authorised heirs eager to ensure the transmission of the heritage or patrimony without loss of returns (as in Jacques Lacan's famous “return to Freud” of the latter's own “purloined letters” whose true significance would have been diverted by the IPA or American ego psychologists). Like “Le Facteur de la vérité”, which was to form the *pièce de résistance* of *The Post Card* (1980), but also, much later, “Marx & Sons”, written in the wake of often bellicose attacks on *Specters of Marx* mounted by equally self-authorised heirs of Marxism,²² “Limited Inc a b c . . .” exposes the corporate (“Inc”) excesses of criticism and underlying critical feuds as soon as someone feels authorized to answer for, in place of, somebody else - who, conveniently enough, occupies the place of the dead man or dummy (*la place du mort* - Austin, Freud, Marx), from which he cannot speak for himself. From such patient institutional dissections a ‘rule’ emerges whereby the more one lays claim of originality and originarity to intellectual property - what Derrida calls ‘*prioprietaryity*’ in “Marx & Sons” (1999, 222) - the more aggressively (self-)protective and the deafer to the arguments of one's opponents one becomes. An equation which could be transposed *mutatis mutandis* to the authority of disciplinary boundaries, as when in the Cambridge *Honoris Causa* ‘affair’ the limited signatories of the letter to the *Times* accused Derrida of not having much influence within the discipline of philosophy ‘itself’:

Here are intellectuals who are using the press to put about the idea that philosophy should only influence professional philosophers and should not be open to the judgment of scholars of other disciplines! How many examples could one find of the contrary, to remind them that philosophy, in its best tradition, has never allowed itself to be put under house arrest within the limits of its own discipline, to say nothing of the limits of its profession? (Derrida, 1995, 404)

Far from granting Searle the exclusive inheritance of his legal (copy)right(s) of authorship, Derrida proceeds to an asset stripping of the three + n collective SARL and an anonymizing of Searle as ‘author’:

²² See for e.g., against Gayatri Spivak's compulsively repeated confession of feeling proprietorial about Marx; Derrida, 1999, 222-3, also 227, 229, and 233.

how can I be absolutely sure that John R. Searle himself (who is *it?*) is in fact the author? Perhaps it is a member of his family, his secretary, his lawyer, his financial advisor, the 'managing editor' of the journal, a joker or a namesake? (*LI*, 31; italics mine)²³

The double move of replying to a text, rather than to an authorial person, let alone one signed by a consortium whose French acronym SARL is uncannily extracted from a now 'broken Searle', conveniently allows Derrida to claim that he is avoiding a frontal *ad hominem* attack:

I hope that the bearers of proper names will not be wounded by this technical or scientific device. For it will have the supplementary advantage of enabling me to avoid offending individuals or proper names in the course of an argument that they might now and then consider, wrongly, to be polemical. (*LI*, 36)

But there is yet another ironic twist to this tale: several critics partaking of the debate, whether they be aligned with deconstruction or analytic philosophy (which already presupposes the critical perception and construction of this 'limit' to be unproblematic in its own right), have shown that, despite his criticism of Austin and while taking into account the latter's self-ironic moves, Derrida is in fact closer to Austin on the performative theory of speech acts than Searle is (see in particular Felman 1983 [originally *Le Scandale du corps parlant*, 1980], Fish 1982, Norris 1986). So much so that Derrida's own facetious claim to some of the SARL liquidities - "I, too, can claim a stake in the "action" or "obligation", the stocks and bonds, of this holding company, the Copyright Trust. And it is true that I have occasionally had the feeling - to which I shall return - of having almost "dictated" this reply. "I" therefore feel obliged to claim my share of the copyright of the *Reply*." (*LI*, 31) - stands vindicated through this imaginary trajectory of an economic restitution of sorts. Anticipating the famous reversal, on the Bodleian Library (Oxford) post card reproduction of the frontispiece adorning the work of Matthew Paris, of the traditional scene of filiation and inheritance in philosophy whereby Plato takes down Socrates' words of wisdom in dictation, Derrida, coming before Searle (since "Sec" predates the "Reply"), pre-dictates the holder of an Oxford DPhil (which became the 1969 book *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*) what to write; yet Searle, true to Derrida's reiterated statement that the communication of an intention can always misfire (which thus makes the Searlean emphasis on the primacy of intention irrelevant²⁴), still had to be 'put right'.

Perhaps one should never underestimate the defusing power of a (not-so-)serious 'argument', especially in the face of the somewhat unethical politics of defaming the adversary in a mainstream press organ without taking the trouble to address and respond to

²³ For a similar point, see Dasenbrock, 1994, 264-267, who notes that "Derrida is not replying to a person named John Searle, he is responding to a text signed by John Searle" (266).

²⁴ The best refutation is to be found in Winspur's essay (in Dasenbrock, 1989, 170-171), which also exposes Searle's warping of the Austinian intent to take on the mentalist tradition in philosophy and the language-as-description theory (171-172).

cogent charges of misreading. In “Toward an Ethics of Discussion”, referring to Searle's 1983 review of Culler's *On Deconstruction* in the *New York Review of Books*, “an article of unbridled resentment (written *after* “Limited Inc . . . ” and without the slightest reference to my discussion of his theses)” (LI, 125), and after distinguishing between “the nucleus of the theoretical structure” and [Searle's] “manner of discussing, of arguing, of polemicizing, of his rhetoric and of the forms in which he takes part in social and intellectual life” (LI, 139), Derrida comments:

In this regard I certainly do *at times* disapprove of the politics of this practice, of certain of its moments in any case: to insult an author instead of criticizing him through demonstration, to accuse the other of a 'distressing penchant for saying things that are obviously false' and of a thousand 'confusions' while not taking the trouble to read any of the incriminated writings with the slightest attention [...], and above all, to attempt in newspaper articles for instance to turn gossip into an argument in order to accuse me, and with me all those interested in my work, of 'terrorist obscurantism.' This style, or at least the style of this particular manifestation [...], seems to me indeed to have broad political implications. (LI, 139)

The glib allegation of “terrorist obscurantism” is documented in an endnote, only the gist of which, showing the need to acknowledge when and where a limit between ‘fun’ and seriousness must be kept or drawn, can be reproduced here:

I cite: “Michel Foucault²⁵ once characterized Derrida's prose style to me as “*obscurantisme terroriste*”. The text is written so obscurely that you can't figure out exactly what the thesis is (hence “*obscurantisme*”) and when one criticizes it, the author says, “*Vous m'avez mal compris; vous êtes idiot*” (hence “*terroriste*”).”

Why do I cite this? Not just for fun. Nor in order to comment directly on the content of these declarations and of these citations. In my opinion it speaks for (and of) itself here. I just want to raise the question of what precisely a philosopher is doing when, in a newspaper with a large circulation, he finds himself compelled to cite private and unverifiable insults of another philosopher in order to authorize himself to insult in turn and to practice what in French is called a *jugement d'autorité*, that is, the method and preferred practice of all dogmatism. I do not know whether the fact of citing in French suffices to guarantee the authenticity of a citation when it concerns a private opinion. [...] But as he is dead, I will not in my turn cite the judgment which, as I have been told by those who were close to him, Foucault is supposed to have made concerning the practice of Searle in this case and on the act that consisted in making this use of an alleged citation . . . (LI, 158, n. 12)²⁶

Authorship and authority, (self-)authorization, and authenticity Ltd. And ‘to be continued’ abyssally... But that would be crossing a ‘serious’ limit, between ‘limited responsibility’, perhaps even ‘limited inc[ompetence]’ - the French *être limité*: to be limited, carrying enough intellectual connotations to exemplify the Foucauldian verdict served on Derrida in the absence of the accused that those who do not get him right are idiots - and downright unlimited irresponsibility... And, even by deconstruction's own avowal and

²⁵ With whom Derrida had been locked in an earlier polemic, following his critical account of Foucault's work in “Cogito and the History of Madness” (Derrida, 2001, 36-76).

²⁶ The endnote continues with the extract from an egregious letter sent on official letterhead by a Yale Professor of Philosophy, complete with an impressive array of titles of academic recognition, to a French minister, asking whether Derrida's recent nomination (in fact “the unanimous election by my colleagues”) as Director of the International College of Philosophy was not “something of a joke or, more seriously, raises the question as to whether the Ministère d'Etat is the victim of an intellectual fraud”, and misspelling Foucault's alleged comment as “*terrorisme obscurantiste*” (LI, 158-159, n. 12; my bold).

preoccupations with what sets an a priori critically unthought limit between restricted and generalizable practices (for instance: “From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve” in *Writing and Difference* [Derrida, 2001, 317-350]), that would not be too serious indeed...

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(În C)erneală uscată. Dezbătând (până la) limite

Încadrat în discuția despre ce constituie limitele dintre o glumă lipsită de semnificație critică și o argumentare serioasă, esul revine asupra polemicii dintre Jacques Derrida și John Searle care

decurge din critica inițială a filosofului francez în „Semnătură Eveniment Context” („Sec”), referitoare la excluderea de către Austin a enunțurilor ne-serioase în încercarea lui de a alcătui teoria actelor de vorbire. Răspunsul extins a lui Derrida din “Limited Inc a b c . . .” care se centrează asupra unor concepte precum iterabilitatea și citaționalitatea și asupra actelor de vorbire normale și a celor parazitice, interpretate în mod eronat de Searle în „Replica” sa la opera „Sec” a lui Derrida, va fi examinat în lumina unor alte încercări similare, mai ales în “Le Facteur de la vérité”, pentru a pune în lumină mizele „economice” subiacente în afirmarea drepturilor de proprietate ale interpretării asupra gândirii unui filosof sau unui critic (de obicei) mort, prin care Searle se declară deținătorul drepturilor de autor ale unei (Inc)orporații cu răspundere limitată (SRL). După un „Interludiu” care despletește meditațiile derridiene târzii asupra actelor de vorbire ale lui Austin printr-un set întortochiat de texte și referințe, articolul se întoarce în final la problematica însușirii sau chiar a furtului critic (precum în „Scrisoarea furată” a lui Poe) și la limitele dintre glumă și seriozitate, responsabilitate limitată și iresponsabilitate nelimitată care trebuie respectate conform unei etici și unei politici a schimburilor academice.