**An Inexperience**

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Close your eyes: I’ll close mine too. I’ll just read. No need to do anything. Here it is, quite unintroducible, from the horse’s mouth—the horse being Jacques Derrida:

Your image is in me. There’s a sentence which could have any author, everyone understands it. A very simple thing about which neither philosophy nor the ‘positive’ sciences (neurobiology, the discourse on the brain and the storage of optical traces, etc.) have, at bottom, ever said anything satisfying. Same thing for the sound-image [image sonore[[1]](#endnote-1)]. A very simple question. As for the rest we are all experts, full stop. What one could say, one must keep quiet.[[2]](#endnote-2)

And when I quote, which I do all the time, the inverted commas are all there, but barely: the brush of eyelashes, a breath. Little touches of punctuation in the dark, finding a way towards an invisible inside that ‘philosophy and the “positive” sciences [...] have never said anything [...] satisfying’ about.

This is it. This is what you came for perhaps: to put it in a condensed way, some kind of ‘deferred reciprocity.’[[3]](#endnote-3) It’s staggering, when it happens. Staggeringly indirect. It has happened to me before, objectively speaking, but I never sees it coming. I mean: it spaces out time, pushes tenses around, redisposing the priorities, no longer only favouring the present, or the past-present, or the future-present, or its images of itself. There are these sentences, unpredictable, some with other, lost sentences wandering inside them. The syntaxes, the structures, the chains melt, get re-cut, go stretchy. There are tides and tremors. I reel. Fracked. Whatever I fix on for balance or direction, it wavers.

Something also quietly gets on with it: what choice do we have? It’s not as if anyone gets over anything. It’s not as if one’s presence of mind, poor beast of burden, stumbling forward, could ever do anything but fail, following, following and failing to follow through pointless hunts and remorseless destinies. We follow this or that line, or logic, thereby neglecting to follow another that still keeps on, latently manifest, in another scene that we don’t know anything about. We can’t see it. Then a word interrupts, and remains with us, marking something not even a place. A word we return to, not because we know we should, but because we believe it holds, in fact, the whatever that, some time before, touched us to the heart, quickly and apparently for good.

I had in my head the word ‘conversion’. I was convinced it had something to do with an experience. Saussure calls the sound-image a ‘psychological imprint’ of the sound, the impression [the sound] makes on our senses’.[[4]](#endnote-4) There are words that come out of the blue and hit us on the head. But why only the head? Saussure has a drawing of two heads, with dotted lines, to show how language works between two speaking subjects but a conversion, Caravaggio knows, is a whole-body—more, a whole-being experience. When we fall head-and-ears, all of us falls, and in a scene full of connections and relations. Listening, the whole being, memories and dreams included, can vibrate, not only the tympanum and the tiny bones inside the ear. And all sounds at least begin to be heard in this way, by a body that doesn’t know how to receive them. A body that is spiritual as well as material. One becomes-ear in time—perhaps, it’s not guaranteed. Fear works against it, for example—by processes of interoception and avowal. Processes of reading. And the ‘image’ that arrives is not yet, or no longer, or not only an image. Theory, as you know, comes from Greek θεωρία: ‘a looking at, seeing, viewing; curiosity; presence at a festival; examination, contemplation, theory; festival, spectacle; sending of ambassadors to an oracle’.[[5]](#endnote-5) But how can I contemplate or send embassies to what takes me by surprise, what compels me to return to it, to speak of it, to be with it in dreams?

I pored over various books. According to Saussure, people generally overvalue writing: they ‘attach even more importance to the written image of a vocal sign than to the sign itself. A similar mistake would be in thinking that more can be learned about someone by looking at his photograph than by viewing him directly’ (24). Saussure attributes writing’s influence to the power of the image to impress by its intimation that it’s here to stay: ‘the graphic form of words strikes us as being something permanent and stable,’ he says, and ‘[m]ost people pay more attention to visual impressions simply because these are sharper and more lasting than aural impressions’; and then ‘literary language adds to the undeserved importance of writing’ as well, because it is associated with education, in the form of ‘dictionaries and grammars,’ schoolbooks and rules (25).

‘This experience of conversion’ is a phrase of Derrida’s.[[6]](#endnote-6) It struck me as something that couldn’t be imagined: ‘not an as if’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Nor a fantasy, nor a pretence. Not mediated. A magic word. That is what I managed to imagine. I had no idea (that is, no image) how to bring an experience of conversion about—not for myself, still less for you. But, I told myself, a word can be read, and read out. And I told myself: the point, with a word like this, is to speak it, or speak to it ... ‘Conversion’ is a password, according to Hélène Cixous, but she also recognises it as a ‘word of replacement’ (Hyperdream 136). I take this to mean that it is not only a key word but a dream word, a stand-in for the word that opens an other scene than the manifest one. A skyponym or hoponym away from another sentence, another life. ‘Replacement’ suggests not magical access, but a loss. She, or her narrator, says very authoritatively towards the end of her fiction Hyperdream: ‘When I use the word conversion I know what I mean. It’s a password’ (136). But before that, and afterwards too, it’s this weird thing, wild, not subdued, idealised or otherwise kept in place by memory or by signification. It can be neither used, nor known, nor meant. And it’s not hers, it’s Derrida’s. And he’s gone. She glimpses it from various distances, in sentences she guesses at because they are remembered insecurely and slow to pass to this side from beyond. She imagines Derrida, she observes this special word of his; she does not hesitate to volunteer to repeat, even before she knows. She imagines, perhaps that’s the word but ‘dreams’ or ‘remembers’ would be closer. She’s not making it up. And on her way she appears to lose her way—conversion doesn’t belong exclusively to her. Listen to her for a moment:

I said the sentence over to myself. Maybe it was “Perhaps I’ll have to convert.” But sometimes I thought I remembered he’d said “I think I must convert without delay.” The variations were killing me. Over and over I repeated the word I had flinched at. [‘Flinched’ translates broncher, a verb usually applied to the stumbling or staggering of horses.] As soon as he’d said the word conversion I’d been seized by a spasm of doubt. As if the hearing faculty had blacked out. The word conversion, I’m absolutely certain of it, this was the word upon which my presence of mind had failed me, instead of following the conversation, I went after the word conversion, which I had instantly joined up with that other mighty word, the word “instructions.” Names of things my friend had in mind all the time, and that I experienced like the words of a dream fading, gleaming from afar on the black waves, towards which one heads by the conviction they have the explanation, unstable glow worms flickering, shifting, to which we trust for it is probable they have the secret. (104-5)

To imagine perhaps always entails being ready to launch ourselves, navigators, adventurers, alone into the black waves. Waves of what? Just black waves. Antimatter. Nothing. And before that, there’s the flinch, stumble or mis-step the animal spasm of doubt like a twitch of fear.

In Derrida’s texts, conversion can be someone’s name, or a talking word. For example in ‘Circumfession’ it says: ‘the conversion which happens ought no longer to cause any fear, as though she had said to me: “I know you are innocent right up to the most extreme of your perjuries, perhaps because I am a woman [...]”’[[8]](#endnote-8) Unless it’s his mother speaking, we have here Conversion, who is, like Ananke, Necessity, a feminine character that Derrida imagines speaking. Perhaps he isn’t only imagining her. Perhaps Conversion could be someone, or something which happens. This happening or arrival would change everything. The promise of arrival doesn’t escape him, even if she does. Conversion materializes in various locations. Some are to do with Derrida’s family history, his Jewishness in French Algeria at a certain time, and with the non-conversion of the Marranos in Spain. No longer securely a word, not yet a woman, it’s aphorism, outlaw, phantom, legislator, mother, fidelity, betrayal, sexed and singular love. Seen from the side of fear and deception, conversion is desired with a desire that is both enacted and abstinent.

Derrida more than once mentions his love of words, particular words. For example in ‘Circumfession’ he describes ‘seeing a word’ as if for the first time, ‘as happens to me so often, and each time it’s the birth of a love affair, the origin of the earth’ (‘Circumfession’ 266-7). The word arrives alone, it’s an aphorism or a name. Completely turns his head, by the sound of it. Knocks him for a loop. It addresses the most jealous and the most generous in him. In Monolingualism of the Other, he famously describes the effect this love for a word has. It’s anything but private, although it happens in solitude: ‘Each time I write a word, a word that I love and love to write; in the time of this word, at the instant of a single syllable, the song of this New International awakens in me. I never resist it, I am in the street at its call, even if, apparently, I have been working silently since dawn at my table.’ 3 He’s inspired. At once possessed and dispossessed. Imagining, I want to say, never happens without love. The question is, how will it be lived? Part of what we have learned to call the work of the signifier involves love. The signifier can become a powerful character. We might, as readers, readers of all kinds of stuff but including Derrida, like to think about what goes on with words, parts of words, sentences, writing, reading and so forth together with a certain psychology of love, and in terms of the kind of experience and observation that love makes possible. We are struck by iterations, separations, closenesses, articulations, and we fall. Then we continue.

The original title of this essay came from ‘Force and Signification’: it was ‘This Experience of Conversion’. I thought to bring the phrase to a symposium organised by Sarah Dillon at Cambridge and called ‘Imagining Derrida’ − because it occurs in a sentence of Derrida’s about ‘creative imagination’ (‘Force and Signification’ 7). He describes ‘the operation of creative imagination’ as involving some kind of turn or turning towards − and therefore, one might imagine, a turning away. You know, turning away from the world to write ... but the text never says that. Could there be a turning towards that did not at the same time turn away, that abandoned nothing? A choosing that does not choose, that singles out while including the rest? I knew I’d seen the word ‘conversion’ elsewhere, and come to that, the word ‘experience’ too. I recognised these words. But if I wanted to know what they meant, I found I had to say them and write them. And I had to mean it. In A Taste for the Secret Derrida identifies imagination as ‘that which participates in participation and non-participation’.[[9]](#endnote-9) He says this ‘particularly interests’ him. On the track of conversion with a small c, I read the work of various authorities on the subject. St. Paul, and Badiou on St. Paul, and St. Augustine. I read ‘Circumfession’ and Hyperdream too. I looked carefully at the later of Caravaggio’s two paintings of the conversion of St. Paul, the one from 1601 known as The Conversion on the Way to Damascus.[[10]](#endnote-10) But the lights were flickering, breaking up any clear sense I might have had of this word and what it meant or referred to. And then, now, there is what we might call the New Insistence, or climate change conversion in all the critical and para-critical worlds on Earth. It is described with rigour and urgency in the editorial preface to Confuse Your Hunger, a publication that announces, calls for and does a new kind of necessary conversion thinking:

“climate change” forces a rethinking in a now viciously comparitivist field. Who now would be exempt from a need to make a personal, emotional, professional and even semiotic disinvestment? Can we confuse our hunger? Can we, in effect, confuse or retrain our cognitive appetites, in order to at least recognize new emergences?[[11]](#endnote-11)

Of course we never do anything else but formalise and name and imagine, there’s no getting away from that. But where there is form, force is never far away: the word and the thing, the other thing, that is, force, without which, Derrida says, language would not be what it is. In a late interview, in the same breath where he mentions its form, Derrida touches aphoristically on the ‘forge’ of his writing.[[12]](#endnote-12) A forge is absolutely a place of conversion, scene of a scene too hot to touch, too bright to see, too fluid to exist alone. Turner paints the statue or apparition of the Duke of Wellington—on top of another scene.[[13]](#endnote-13) According to the notes to his painting of between 1800 and 1801, The Hero of a Hundred Fights: ‘This canvas was originally an exploration of industrial machinery, but it was reworked to show the moment when a bronze statue of the Duke of Wellington was removed from its mould.’ I don’t think it really is the Duke of Wellington. And it looks like what must be a dragon, or a winged horse. Turner doesn’t disguise that he has ‘reworked,’ as the Tate’s display caption puts it. There is no idealisation of the gesture. ‘Turner’ means ‘converter,’ does it not? He was much envied for having the courage to paint both sides. We covet the ability to convert and to abstain from conversion. That is, we covet imagination, out of laziness or cowardice, and we smooth this over with bullshit and forged explanations. Or, we might leave painting and go back to a phrase in ‘Force et Signification,’ citing Nietzsche on music: the quality of music is a matter of ‘absolutely impenetrable forces’.[[14]](#endnote-14) You can’t transitively ‘imagine Derrida.’ It is inexplicable, or he is. Those elliptical remarks of his that I began with come to mind: ‘Your image is in me [en moi]. [...] As for the rest we are all experts, full stop. What one could say, one must keep quiet.’ Best not to say too much because the light means love no good, here where we are. I mean in ‘this heliocentric metaphysics where, returning now to ‘Force and Signification’: ‘force, ceding its place to eidos (i.e. the form that is visible for the metaphorical eye) has already been separated from its meaning as force, as the quality of music is separated fromitself in acoustics.’[[15]](#endnote-15) If you want to get some of those absolutely impenetrable forces, in order to participate in both participation and non-participation, you have to close your eyes. You have to stop being you all the time. Let’s read some more, or go as near as we can get in English, losing in the process of translation articulations and movements of syntax that become, once replaced, impossible to imagine. Anyway, there’s a short passage about imagination in ‘Force and Signification,’ I’ve quoted from it before, and it says:

To grasp the operation of creative imagination most closely, one must turn oneself towards the invisible inside of poetic freedom. One must separate from oneself in order to rejoin the blind origin of the work of art in its darkness. This experience of conversion that founds the literary act (writing or reading) is of such a kind that the very words ‘separation’ and ‘exile’, which still designate a rupture and a making-one’s-way interior to the world, cannot manifest the experience directly [...]

One must separate, il faut se séparer, oneself, or from oneself. It is a risk (periculum). You have to go through (perire) something. The twins in the belly of the mare in ‘Envois,’ they belonged to a before. Imagination has to do with the capacity to experience separations, turns, reunions, awakenings, anxieties, to let them happen in you, to you, through you, while also remaining unassimilably beyond the objective illusion of the world as a shared context. It looks like death, it asserts life, indirectly and without alibi.

Something about love is like writing. Unless it’s the other way round. The scenes superimpose themselves on each other. I’m reminded, gullible doting fan that I am, of Freud. In the Three Essays on Sexuality, he mentions ‘the credulity of love,’ that ‘becomes an important, if not the most fundamental, source of authority’.[[16]](#endnote-16) Freud also describes normal love as perverse in two ways: 1) it extends beyond specific genital locations and 2) it protracts its activities, in order to ‘linger over [...] intermediate relations [...] which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final [...] aim’ (150). Something about love does and does not participate in the efficient functioning of the socio-sexual-anatomical-reproductive system, nor does it loyally serve the drives, nor does it take its object simply as an object. Something about love is imaginative and indirect. It admits more than one scene. Something about love is like writing. Or painting, or music. Whatever. Love is not love without some deviation from union. I mean union in general, not only Freud’s stated idea of love’s culmination and end: ‘the union of the genitals in the act of copulation’ (149).

This experience of writing, it’s everything while it lasts. And it lasts. Freud again, on overvaluation in love: ‘The appreciation extends to the whole body [...] and tends to involve every sensation derived from it’ (150). But in this case, the body of what? Of whom? ‘You never go away from us,’ Augustine writes to God. ‘Yet we have difficulty in returning to you.’[[17]](#endnote-17) His word for this difficulty, which is also a question of love, is ‘vix’: meaning ‘with much ado, hardly, scarcely, barely.’ Conversion is not direct or immediate, it has to do with love and a kind of labour that goes on and off, or sometimes happens while you are sleeping. There are adventures of vision like the one Cixous, or her First Person, notices herself being taken on around the same time she’s pursuing conversion. Her sight is affected: a glowy fog comes to cut her off from everyone. It may or may not be a metaphor. The grieving mist could be imagined, a projection of some kind, hers, but she doesn’t stop there:

Lately I see a golden haze around beings, the kind that usually only haloes the silhouettes of those who have gone. As if my eyes were filled with loss and I was the one who misted those around me and to whom I nod in advance the way one smiles at the denizens of photographs who smile back at us with the potent, sustained gentleness of my cats. But it’s not an as if, no, it’s a more truthful vision of what we are, beings promised and withdrawn, taken away and restituted but differently, but changed by this incessant to-and-fro-ing through time. (Hyperdream 134)

Is there here too the beginnings of what Clare Colebrook calls a new climate change imaginary? Cixous’s clear-eyed premonition of living life on terms with extinction filters through the haze of thickened air and light into writing as beautiful as a Turner sunset. If there were time I would write something called ‘The Sky In Hélène Cixous.’ It would talk about the signifier ciel, about air, light, heaven, pollution, distance, night, stars, flight, firmament, space, out-of-the-blue and, yes I begin to hear it now at last, also the ‘global denaturing, as yet unnamed, contained in a section of indelible and cold blue sky, like a replacing of one world by another, a sort of cold version, withdrawn, inconceivable’ (*Hyperdream* 109). This last would be ‘beyond the beyond’ and also heard ‘only from the inside’: ‘as shattering as an explosion beyond the beyond the speed of sound, which would be terrifying because one would hear it only from the inside.’ She points it out: the ‘thing he doesn’t know,’ ‘the new Thing.’ The inside in Cixous is never a retreat from the universal or the outside. She can ‘find the slowness inside the speed.’[[18]](#endnote-18) But we still have to read. How did I not see before? Derrida describes reading and writing in one of his aphorisms, a sentence without a main verb, a fragment or fragmentary totality: ‘Strange labour of conversion and adventure where grace cannot but be absent’ (‘Force and Signification’ 11). In aphorism, what is given is given as separate. Aphorism is the name because it separates itself out in a way that makes us work. Reading and writing have their magic, nobody can deny, but they are also work. Strange work, fearful: ‘capricious only through cowardice’ he says. ‘One must act fast. And no time to learn,’ she says (‘Writing blind’ 144).

Sometimes I imagine an English poet’s translation of Derrida. I don’t imagine it would be a good translation, or even beautiful. I don’t imagine anyone being grateful for it, or finding it useful. Such a translation would have the courage to be unimaginative. I’ve never seen such a thing, it’s a dream, but my model in waking life, so to speak, is a translation that didn’t work, Robert Browning’s extremely odd translation of the Agamemnon. When he translated Aeschylus, Robert Browning dared to let Greek dream-work English; he let English, hyphenated, syntactically re-ordered, undergo Aeschylus’s Greek. He wanted to be ‘literal at every cost save that of absolute violence to our language,’ admitting the force of poetry as it touches on language and on national languages.[[19]](#endnote-19) Verbal and syntactical grace, never Browning’s main aim, suffered dreadfully. He knew many readers were likely to find his translation hard to take: ‘I would be tolerant for once, −’ he wrote ‘in the case of so immensely famous an original, − of even a clumsy attempt to furnish me with the very turn of each phrase in as Greek a fashion as English will bear.’ But this subordination, turning after the turns of the other language, will do something to the target language that risks making it clumsy and weakening its authority. This kind of translator, perhaps like the reader in general, relates to the text like a normal lover, who, according to Freud is not only physically enchanted by the body of the beloved but ‘intellectually’ infatuated by the ‘mental achievements and perfections’ of the sexual object (Three Essays on Sexuality 150). This is what Browning says about his own ‘transcription,’ as he called it, of Agamemnon:

if I obtained a mere strict bald version of thing by thing, or at least word pregnant with thing, I should hardly look for an impossible transmission of the reputed magniloquence and sonority of the Greek; and this with the less regret, inasmuch as there is abundant musicality elsewhere, but nowhere else than in his poem the ideas of the poet. And lastly, when presented with these ideas, I should expect the result to prove very hard reading indeed if it were meant to resemble Aeschylus [...] (Preface to The Agamemnon vi)

To preserve the quality of the beloved original thing, symmetry of relationship with it has to be sacrificed. So must the hope of preserving its qualities. There is an element of destruction, if only in thought. One must abandon the fantasy of ‘transmission’, based as it is on reputation, received opinion, the already-recognised ‘magniloquence and sonority of the Greek’. The notion of ‘nowhere else than in his poem the ideas of the poet’ shares Derrida’s understanding that writing is inaugural, and that idealisation is no longer possible. This is what Derrida says: ‘To write, it’s to know that what has not yet been produced in literality [dans la lettre] has no other dwelling place, does not await us as prescription in some topos ouranos[that is, a realm of supersensuous forms] or some divine understanding’ (‘Force and Signification’ 11, translation modified / ‘Force et signification’ 22). Writing belongs on Earth. And a little further on, he says: ‘Writing is, for the writer, even if he is not atheist, but if he is a writer, a maiden and graceless voyage [navigation première et sans grâce]’ (11 translation modified / 22). The ‘graphic form of words,’ as Saussure puts it, may strike us as being ‘permanent and stable’ but that impression does not at all reflect what it is like to read or to write. Nothing is given, gratis. One is at work, this navigation calls for a navvy: ‘a construction worker’ specifically‘a labourer employed in the construction of ... a canal, ... a road, railway, etc.’ (OED). But the way is not to be made in this world, or any other world, it is a conversion: ‘a departure from the world, towards a place that is neither a nonplace nor an other world, neither a utopia nor an alibi [...] only pure absence [...] − the absence of everything in which all presence is announced − can inspire, can work and make one work’ (‘Force and Signification’ 7). Still working on the aphorism about strange labour, etymologically speaking − though it may overstrain etymology to put it to work in this way, the word ‘labour’ comes from the strain of ‘tottering under a burden,’for labo in Latin says, following the entry in Lewis and Short: ‘I totter, I am ready to fall, I begin to sink, I give way, I am loosened.’ Which leaves me at last free to say that, according to the dictionary but also according to what I have learned to call inexperience: intention goes to the point of collapse. In real work, such as the work set out by Jonathan Tiplady of ‘confus[ing] or retrain[ing] our cognitive appetites, in order to at least recognize new emergences’ such as climate change, one comes apart. (‘Such as climate change’? Surely such an expression is no longer satisfactory? And something forces me to hesitate to re-use the general term ‘new emergences’ for this unparalleled present, mortal and un-get-riddable-of emergency called ‘climate change,’ or the one called ‘mass extinction,’ or the one called ‘ecological crisis’. The relation to a phrase, a letter—there’s no ‘I’ in ‘emergences’—comes troublingly alive. Language intrudes, palpitates, starts to get real.) As I was saying before I was interrupted, one comes apart. Somewhat. Maybe not completely. But I sunder. ‘I’ founders. Figuratively, the movement of the verb labere is ‘to waver, to be unstable, undecided, to hesitate (in opinion, resolution, etc.), or finally *‘*to sink, fall to pieces, go to ruin.’ It’s risky. Labour: ‘perhaps related to lābī to fall’ (OED). There is no theory of this. It has to do with a surrendering of facility but also with the redirecting of aptitude and skill, even a new climate change sublimation. How much am I able to want this? I am feeling my way with Cixous’s help and with the help of many others: Clare Colebrook, Jonathan Tiplady, Timothy Clark, many, many others, towards: ‘the unnameable of a never again in the aftermath of a never more’ (*Hyperdream* 109).

It’s all in the painting, perhaps, in the adventure of the gaze called Conversion on the Way to Damascus by Caravaggio. We can see at a glance that there has been a fall, there Paul is on his back, but there has also been a loosening: various harness-straps are lying on the ground along with trailing trappings, dishevelled draperies and his fallen helmet. This is a point in the narrative of St Paul when one name is lost and another is yet to be found. His eyes are shut, not screwed up against some external threat, but closed smooth like the eyes of a statue. His hands and arms are open and empty. There has been a blinding, a loosening of the grip of subject, object, predicate, of relations, including relations of perspective and power relations. Truth is not hidden behind the eyes of this or that face. We can’t see Paul’s look. The eyes of the man holding the horse’s bridle are downcast; we can’t see them or what they might be looking at. The only look we can see is that of the horse, who takes in the scene entirely otherwise. Bigger eyeball, less deep-set, positioned differently on the head. All of that. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit observe: ‘Caravaggio’s Paul may indeed be converted to something, but his gesture upward meets only the horse’s body: there is nothing above that. Paul “turns toward” a new relatedness, but one without transcendence, a relatedness with the natural nonhuman.’[[20]](#endnote-20) The phantasm of the eye of God or what Derrida calls ‘the metaphorical eye’ that receives eidos, image as idea, gives way to something else.

The horse, with her invisible inside, she has no transcendental ego for me to guess her by. There could be anything in there: horse-shit, twin foals (sibling messiahs), or she might be he, it’s beyond me to know. She looks, she participates and does not participate, her look takes in the scene, there in the painting in the moment of conversion, though everything I have been saying says there is no such moment, but she also takes in the viewer, me or you, maybe not, this eye is a kind of constant. Too different, too strange, to even be described as indifferent. Beautiful. Empty of psychology. No saddle. She’s not taking me anywhere.

Augustine heard the instructions: ‘Tolle*,* lege’. ‘[C]hanting as if it mighty be a boy or a girl (I do not know which), saying and repeating over and over again “Pick up and read, pick up and read’” (Confessions 152). It is precisely about, or around writing and reading that I wanted to write, but then again I am inside the work of writing and reading, already in a loosened state, ready to fall. I can only speak about reading and writing from the blind inside of a text, from here where I do not know where I am going, because this is what I am doing and the text has words to say what I want to say about what I cannot do. I must quote, go into eclipse, because I am not able to say in my own words, because I cannot say what has to be said except clumsily and laboriously: convert your reading, writing and thinking in the light of climate change awareness. Address it, let yourself be addressed by it. Make the move.

Or perhaps it would be better, better because more within my competence, to compile a scholarly anthology or hand-list of conversions, or write a ‘short story’ or a ‘poem,’ rather than pursue this experience, which at every moment threatens to fail, becoming anecdote, commentary, or a cut-off series of updates on a live-feed about what exactly? I’m taking forever over it but I don’t have anything like enough to say about it. Is anyone out there interested in Destructive Critical writing? I went online to a website that promises to convert words into minutes. It told me I had three-quarters of an hour of material here. I thought: I’m not there yet. The wooden horse. And I have said nothing, done almost nothing.

1. I am grateful for the attentive reading of Eric Prenowitz. All errors are my own.

   I have translated ‘image sonore’ as ‘sound-image’ here, a conversion which perhaps tendentiously suggests a link with Saussure’s ‘image acoustique,’ a term from the account of the sign in the Cours de linguistique générale that is usually translated as ‘sound-image,’ and to which I turn or return later in this essay. This translation accords with the published one in ‘Jacques Derrida “Writing Proofs” and Jean-François Lyotard, “Translator’s Notes,” 1985,’ translated by Roland-François Lack, Responsibilities of Deconstruction, Pli: Warwick Journal of Philosophy 6 (1997), 43, available online at <http://www.plijournal.com/files/pli_6.pdf>, consulted 15 December 2014. But there are differences worth exploring at more length between sonority and acoustics, and Derrida isn’t explicitly referring to Saussure here. The tone is more neutral or direct, less scientific. The Epreuves d’écriture volume that Derrida is contributing to as part of Lyotard’s Les Immatériaux exhibition project was explicitly concerned with a question of displacing the senses in the relation between art and philosophy. Derrida’s contribution takes up the experiential dimension of the project in a way that interacts with, but does not privilege, the kind of ‘fundamental philosophical question’ that interested Lyotard, who commented in an interview with Bernard Blistène: ‘it’s a question [...] of a relationship to time and space and sensibility, even though I don’t like to make use of that word. What I mean to say is that certain works have a structure that keeps them from being concerned with their existence as events; they do something entirely different as an attentive observer comes away with the feeling that their engagement with the senses, if any such engagement exists at all, is of far less importance than a primary interest in the most fundamental philosophical question of all, “Why does something happen, rather than nothing?”’ (‘Les Immatériaux: A Conversation with Jean-François Lyotard and Bernard Blistène,’ (1985), reprinted with an introduction by Tara McDowell in Art Agenda (May 27, 2014), <http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/les-immateriaux-a-conversation-with-jean-francois-lyotard-and-bernard-blistene/>, consulted 1st August, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Jacques Derrida, ‘Derr. 117, 10 Oct,’ in Epreuves d’écriture, edited by Chantal Noël and Nicole Toutcheff (Paris, Editions du Centre Georges Pompidou, 1985) 84: ‘Ton image est en moi, voila une phrase qui peut avoir n'importe qui pour auteur, tout le monde la comprend. Chose très simple sur laquelle pourtant ni la philosophie ni les sciences “positives” (neuro-biologie, discours sur le cerveau et le stockage des traces optiques, etc.) n'ont au fond jamais rien dit de satisfaisant. Même chose pour l'image sonore. Question très simple. Pour tout le reste nous sommes des experts, stop. Ce qu'on peut dire, il faut le taire.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Jacques Derrida, ‘Force and Signification’ in Writing and Difference, translated by Alan Bass (London, Routledge, 2001) 12 / ‘Force et signification’ in L’Écriture et la différence (Paris, Seuil, 1967) 17. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics, translated by Wade Baskin (London, Fontana / Collins, 1981) 66. The relation between experience and expertise in Saussure’s account of the sound image’s arrival with the nervous system is itself subject to the mysteries of a conversion that comes to happen, in Derrida’s disarming phrase, ‘in me’. We may still wonder where and when exactly the material or physical relation starts to become, or not become, something else − something not objectively observable. Saussure is drawing attention to the impossibility of making the distinction he is wanting to find between the physical and the psychological. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. θεωρία, in The Oxford Classical Greek Dictionary, edited by James Morwood and John Taylor (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002) 157. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Jacques Derrida, ‘Force and Signification’ 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Hélène Cixous, Hyperdream, translated by Beverley Bie Brahic (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009) 134 /Hyperrêve (Paris, Galilée, 2006) 177. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Jacques Derrida, ‘Circumfession’ in Jacques Derrida by Geoffrey Bennington and Jacques Derrida, translated by Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1993) 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jacques Derrida, ‘I Have a Taste for the Secret,’ in Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, A Taste for the Secret (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001) 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I urge you to do the same. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/67/Conversion\_on\_the\_Way\_to\_Damascus-Caravaggio\_%28c.1600-1%29.jpg, consulted 12 December 2014, and frequently since, especially the eye of the horse, which can be seen there as if one were quite close. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Jonathan Tiplady, ‘Preface,’ in Confuse Your Hunger, edited by Jonathan Tiplady, www.confuseyourhunger.com, consulted 6 July 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Aliette Armel, Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, ‘From the Word to Life: A Conversation between Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous,’ translated by Ashley Thompson, New Literary History 37.1 (Winter 2006) 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-the-hero-of-a-hundred-fights-n00551, consulted 15 January 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The note is missing in the English translation. It reads: ‘“... Le point de départ qui permet d’affirmer que tout ce qui est qualificatif est quantitative se trouve dans l’acoustique ... (Théorie des cordes sonores; rapport des intervalles; mode dorique)... Il s’agit de trouver partout des formules mathématiques pour les forces absolument impénétrables.” (Nietzsche, la Naissance de la philosophie à l’epoque de la tragédie grecque)’ (‘Force et signification’ 45n). I haven’t been able to trace this reference in English or French. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. ‘Force and Signification’ 32. The English translation omits the italicised words. In French, we read: ‘Dans cette métaphysique héliocentrique, la force, cédant la place à l’eidos (c’est-à-dire la forme visible pour l’oeil métaphorique), a déjà été séparée **de son sens de force, comme la qualité de la musique est séparée** de soi dans l’acoustique’ (‘Force et signification’ 45, the part missing from the translation in bold). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Sigmund Freud, Three Essays on Sexuality, translated by James Strachey, in Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works VII (London, Vintage, 2002) 150. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Augustine, Confessions, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992) 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Hélène Cixous, ‘Writing blind: Conversation with the donkey,’ translated by Eric Prenowitz, in Stigmata: Escaping Texts (London, Routledge, 1998) 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Robert Browning, preface to The Agamemnon of Aeschylus, transcribed by Robert Browning (London, Smith, Elder, 1877) v. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, Caravaggio’s Secrets (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1998) 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)