

MODERN GREEK STUDIES

(AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND)

Volume 11, 2003

A Journal for Greek Letters

Pages on C.P. Cavafy

Published by Brandl & Schlesinger Pty Ltd
PO Box 127 Blackheath NSW 2785
Tel (02) 4787 5848 Fax (02) 4787 5672

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ISSN 1039-2831

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Typeset and design by Andras Berkes

Printed by Southwood Press, Australia

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MODERN GREEK STUDIES
(AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND)

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MEMBERSHIP TO MODERN GREEK STUDIES ASSOCIATION

plus ANNUAL SUBSCRIPTION for two issues

Individual: AUS \$45 US \$35 UK £25 €35 Institutions: AUS \$70 US \$65 UK £35 €45 (plus postage)

full-time student/pensioners: AUS \$20 US \$30 UK £20

(includes GST)

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Victoria University of Technology

DERRIDA ON CONDILLAC: LANGUAGE, WRITING,
IMAGINATION, NEED AND DESIRE

Imagination, desire and need are concepts that traverse many domains. It is not my intention in this article to give an account of all of the different ways in which these ideas are conceptualised, nor to give a genealogy of their construction. This paper seeks to examine the way Derrida has dealt with these ideas through his deconstruction of Condillac and other thinkers. I will be concentrating on Derrida's work *The Archeology of the Frivolous* because it is there that he analyses the interconnections between imagination, need and desire and examines their relation to the problematic of language, writing and subjectivity. As with his deconstruction of Husserl and Rousseau, Derrida uses the concept of the sign as the entry-point from which to question and deconstruct the empirical and romantic conceptions of the subject and the self. He sees Condillac's empiricism as an example of a kind of thinking that links desire to need and imagination to self-identity. By deconstructing the empirical concept of the sign, Derrida aims to question some of the long held assumptions about language, writing and origin. Of course, this is not the only text in which Derrida deals with these problematics. However, what is important in this text is Derrida's critique of the treatment of imagination and desire within certain traditions of Western thought.

Although Derrida's work on Condillac is not widely used by Derrida scholars, it is an important work because it dispels some of the myths and gives us some insights into to the practice of deconstructive reading and interpretation. It also counterpoises and critiques the two major traditions of interpretation that underpin western thinking: one based on causes and principles and the other based on phenomena and relations or connections. As a result, within Western metaphysics and thinking in general, the idea of analogy and causal link becomes fundamental to the way we interpret texts and see imagination at work. It is these two traditions that Derrida deconstructs in this work, especially their treatment of imagination, need and desire.

In the following article I will try to flesh out some of the issues and challenges presented by Derrida's deconstruction of Condillac and the empirical conceptions of subjectivity which have relevance to the narrative construction of subjectivity and the self.

FRIVOLITY AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF CONDILLAC'S EMPIRICISM

Derrida's deconstruction of Condillac is related to the problematic of writing, especially imagination, need and desire. Derrida aims at a non-analogical relationship between self-identity and imagination, and a concept of desire that is not based on need. His further aim is to avoid the instrumentalisation of both writing and empirical conceptions of language and subjectivity. He sees the problems inherent in the concepts of metaphysics, imagination and desire as providing the 'disorganising lever' in Condillac's texts. His aim, however, is not to establish an internal formal contradiction, as is often claimed to be the basis of deconstructive reading and interpretation practice, but to answer an unanswered question about the production of the new metaphysics, based on the idea of analogy, which gives prominence to the quantity of connection (AF: 72). He uses Condillac's texts and Biran's interpretation of them to arrive at a critique of both reading practices and interpretation. It is clear that both Condillac's texts and Biran's interpretation of them raise for Derrida the question of a reading which 'amounts to constituting as a formal contradiction, hesitation, or systematic incoherence what, in the other [Biran], is claimed or assumed to be duplicity' (AF: 59). Derrida wants to examine why 'the couple activity/passivity give[s] rise to a contradiction in Condillac, but to the analysis of duplicity in Biran' (AF: 59).

In other words, a reading that finds or constitutes a formal contradiction, hesitation, or systematic incoherence in the text does not amount to discovering the meaning of the text, since the same contradiction can provoke different readings, interpretations or theoretical constructions. It is erroneous to argue that the dualism 'passivity/activity' establishes both their relationship and meaning. Textuality, an interminable movement of signification, breaches all dualistic constructions, and defers their interpretative closure. Thus, to reduce a text to dualisms does not amount to determining either its meaning or the deconstruction of those dualisms. Because the possibility of repetition – iterability – is inscribed in each term of dualism, alterity and alteration are embedded within the dualisms themselves. A deconstructive reading of Condillac cannot, therefore, claim to correct other 'misreadings'. It differs also from that evolutionary and empiricist model of reading which purports to demonstrate that Condillac's system has achieved its end through a central deficiency.

On a more philosophical level, Derrida's reading focuses on Condillac's attempts to establish a new metaphysics which, because it is based on the empirical methodology of analogy, aims at correcting bad metaphysics. Moving away from a metaphysics of causes and principles, Condillac constructs a metaphysics of phenomena and relations (connections). Yet although his concern with phenomena leads to a preoccupation with language and signs, it remains nevertheless within the framework of a metaphysics of presence, retraced through imagination and repeating the origin. Although Condillac does not begin at the origin, he returns to it through the analogical method in order to analyse its production and generation. Unlike Husserl, he regards the construction of a new metaphysics as a matter of replacing 'the first philosophy while inheriting its name. Or better still: supply[ing] it' (AF: 36). The correction of metaphysics remains for Condillac a task of philosophy, but he conceives of it as a question of method and order. Above all, 'by elaborating another theory of signs and words by using another language', he wants to avoid the employment of 'indeterminate [sic] signs' (AF: 36).

Philosophy must therefore produce a new language that will 'reconstitute metaphysics' prelinguistic and natural base' (AF: 38). For Condillac, Derrida argues, 'good metaphysics *will have been* natural and mute' (AF: 38) before the advent of language and its ambiguities. The category of good metaphysics thus contains two distinct notions: one is prelinguistic and pertains to origin, instinct and feeling; the other is the highest elaboration in language, which cures the ills of bad metaphysics by correcting them. For Condillac, then, 'metaphysics as such must *develop* and not degrade the metaphysics of natural instinct; metaphysics as such must even reproduce *within* language the relation it has, as language, to what precedes all language' (AF: 38). This means that language is reproducing in language its own origin which, nevertheless, is prelinguistic. Language and signification in general embody a knowledge that was already there: all we need do is retrace its genesis as a prelinguistic and non-signifying origin. For Condillac, both the correction of what has preceded and the production of a new language are a matter of making 'amends through language for language's misdeeds, [so as] to push artifice to that limit which leads back to nature' (AF: 37).

This going back to the origin or to nature is achieved by means of analogy, which is based on the principle of identical propositions. The origin is in itself unmodifiable. Thus, Condillac explains the productive function of analogy by 'the principle of a difference of degree' (AF: 44), without abandoning 'the rule of the "identical proposition"' (AF: 45). This implies that

the genealogical return to the simple – and that progressive development can only be done by combining or modifying a material unmodifiable in itself. Here

sensation. That is the first material: informed, transformed, combined, associated, it engenders all knowledge (AF: 45).

Language and the sign are simply external to this first material, their function being to impose logical order on otherwise confused sense-material. This means in turn that for Condillac

there would exist a mute first material, an irreducible core of immediate presence to which some secondary modifications supervene, modifications which would enter into combinations, relations, connections, and so on. And yet this metaphysics ... this sensationalist metaphysics ... would also be throughout a metaphysics of the sign and a philosophy of language (AF: 46).

Sensation, being the simple element, is conceived of by Condillac as a 'germ' (AF: 46). It leads us not to theoretical but to practical knowledge, which 'does not need signs or language' (AF: 95). Only theoretical knowledge and distinct ideas need language or signs whose function is to classify and define distinct ideas. In Derrida's view, the importance accorded to signs by Condillac means that

from the most natural articulation up to the greatest formality of the language of calculus, the sign's function is to 'account for', is to give the *ratio* to itself according to its calculative essence. But this calculus remarks, its force repeats a force older than itself, on the side of action, passion, need. The theoretical is only a supplying remark ... of the practical (AF: 99).

Thus, the sign becomes an element of remarking through repetition. It is a force that supplements a need inscribed in that practical knowledge from which Condillac excludes language and the sign.

Imagination is the faculty which, by means of signs, produces combinations between the prelinguistic stratum and ideas (objects). In Condillac's theory, the sign comes into existence '*the moment* the present object comes to be missing from perception, the moment perception is absent from itself[:] at that moment the space of signs, with the function of imagination, is opened' (AF: 95). The sign as detour thus becomes necessary when the object is absent from the origin. When the sign takes the place of the object perception (retracing) begins through imagination. The sign is never there at the beginning, because it is excluded from the origin, experience and 'the operation of the soul' (AF: 95). It is unnecessary for practical knowledge of those first 'knowns', which

make all other knowledge possible through analogy. The production of knowledge is but a difference of degree. The imagination is accorded a productive function in fashioning the new only when, 'by analogical connection and repetition, [it] bring[s] to light what, without being there, *will have been there*' (AF: 71).

On the one hand, therefore, imagination is conceived as that which retraces and produces 'as reproduction the lost object of perception' and does so at the moment when 'attention (of which imagination is nevertheless only the first modification) no longer suffices to make the object of perception *subsist*, the moment the first modification of attention breaks with perception and regulates passing from weak presence to absence' (AF: 71). On the other hand, Condillac conceives of imagination as a force which, by connecting the present to the absent, liberates the production of the new, although it is unable to create anything new that deviates from the principle of the identical proposition of analogy. In other words, it invents or reproduces only what was there already. Imagination can thus link one signified of the already-there to another, but without alteration – i.e. alterity – entering into the signifieds connected by the signifier. Repetition comes to be part of the signified only as repetition of the same.

Although imagination-as-reproduction 'traces the perceived', it 'invents or innovates nothing; it only combines in relation to each other the given's finite presences' (AF: 76). 'In order to supply' language, the productive imagination 'adds something more' (AF: 76). Its freedom, however, consists of transferring and mastering the strongest possible connections between the present and the absent, between ideas and perceptions. For Condillac, 'to supply a language's defects is a *theoretical* and *methodical* operation of *re-marking*' after the fact. Thus

to supply is, after having remarked and 'retraced' the origin of the lack, to add what is *necessary*, what is *missing* ... But what is *necessary* – what is lacking – also presents itself as a surplus, an overabundance of value, a frivolous futility that would have to be subtracted, although it makes all commerce possible (as sign and value) (AF: 100–1).

The sign in Condillac thus embodies a knowledge already known to practical knowledge, and its function and meaning are determined by notions of need and utility. Any overabundance of value produced 'by what supplies the lack gives rise to commerce, both economic and linguistic, as well as to trade and the frivolity of chitchat' (AF: 103). The genesis of the sign is linked to commerce when it institutes the arbitrary sign which frees the operations of the soul. Although the operations of the soul are the property of natural signs, the natural sign is not a proper sign. For Condillac, then, 'the *proper*, the *property* of the sign is the system of the arbitrary' (AF: 112).

Articulated language as a system of arbitrary signs becomes the exemplar which contains the whole; that is, it contains the natural sign while remaining external to it. In his *Truth in Painting*, Derrida critiques this idea of an exemplar based on the principle of analogy, by turning analogy against itself. In Condillac, however, the sign does not refer either to the idea or the referent, or to any useful connection. Having no value, it becomes useless, and gives rise to frivolity. In so far as it does not refer to the absent object, the sign falls far from the idea, from sense itself, and from the origin. In Derrida's view, Condillac's

frivolity consists in being satisfied with tokens. It originates with the sign, or rather with the signifier which, no longer signifying, is no longer a signifier. The empty, void, friable, useless signifier (AF: 118).

For Condillac, the sign cannot be present to itself without referring to an object, without repeating it through the principle of identity. The semantic identity of the sign is contained in the idea, in its link to the principle of identical propositions. Any sign that falls outside this schema is 'unnecessary' and 'hollow' (AF: 119). What organises the usefulness or frivolity of the sign is need.

By resorting to the 'values of the same, of analogy, of analysis, of the identical proposition', Condillac had to guard against frivolity 'as if from its infinitely unlike double' (AF: 119). In order to avoid frivolity in discourse, Condillac uses analogy to saturate indefinitely semiotics with 'semantic representation, by including all rhetoric in a metaphoric, by *connecting the signifier*' (AF: 119). Consequently, all language relates metaphorically to the origin, and the signifier must always connect with the signified (object, idea). The sign must mean, and its meaning derives from the origin as identity. Unconnected signifiers – meaningless, futile and thus disposable – introduce frivolity into the sign. Condillac accepts the process of correcting deficiencies in language, and of creating a new language by supplying it. Supplementation and lack are thus quite central issues in Condillac's thought. What he condemns is frivolity in language, that is, the sign which repeats itself merely in order to repeat itself, and lacks both an object and semantic value which originates in a need.

Writing becomes 'evil' whenever it is unintelligible, lacks semantic content, or falls away from the origin – that is, when the signifier-as-detour remains a detour without return. The written signifier poses the greatest threat of deviating from the origin. For Condillac, Derrida argues, 'the root of evil is writing. The frivolous style is the style – that is written' (AF: 126). Because the written signifier has no object, no interlocutor, it repeats itself without reference to any signified. Any signifier that leads to an indeterminate detour from the origin is simply frivolous. Thus, for Condillac

[f]rivolity begins its work, or rather threatens the work of its work in repetition in general, i.e., in the fissure which, separating two repetitions, rends repetition in two. The repetition of the idea, the identity of ideas is not frivolous. Identity in words is frivolous (AF: 127).

Because writing has the greatest potential for frivolity, the frivolous style must be eliminated.

So too must repetition as non-identity in writing. For Condillac, the difference between these two forces of repetition – identity in ideas, and non-identity in writing – produces the gap between the serious and the frivolous. Condillac, Derrida argues, ‘tied the two forces of repetition to one another’, and as a result ‘the limit between the two repetitions within repetition itself cannot be reproduced, stated, or come to signification without engendering that very thing the limit excludes’ (AF: 127–8). Frivolity in writing thus appears inevitable, because the written signifier – instead of bridging the gap between the two repetitions – introduces a fissure which condemns it to frivolity. Thus, ‘frivolity originates from the deviation or the gap of the signifier, but also from its folding back on itself in its closed and nonrepresentative identity’ (AF: 128). Although Condillac recognises non-identity in language, he views it as metaphor and makes it ‘the primordial structure of language only in order to begin its analogical and teleological reappropriation’ (AF: 128).

In other words, language is a secondary modification of this primordial, prelinguistic structure. Metaphor and analogy can be conceived of only in terms of a reappropriation of the origin, and the non-identical only as the non-identity of an identity. As the representation of the absent object, the sign must refer always to that object and be identical with it if it is to mean. The force which determines the need for the presence of the object is the desire rooted in empirical subjectivity. Since the values of use and need orient Condillac’s theory of the sign, frivolity becomes also ‘the seeming repetition of desire without any object or of a floating desire’: it is ‘need left to itself, need without object, without desire’s direction’ (AF: 130). In Condillac, therefore, desire derives from need in the same way as imagination does from sense. Although imagination, need, desire and repetition produce the sign, they must not suspend its relation to an object that ties it to the origin. In one respect, desire ‘opens the direction of the object, [and] produces the supplying [*suppléante*] sign which can always work to no effect ... by means of vacancy, disposability, extension’ (AF: 134). But in other respects, ‘need is itself frivolous. Need without desire is blind. It has no object, is identical to itself, tautological and autistic’ (AF: 134). Condillac thinks that desire must relate need to an object in order to avoid frivolity.

In the place of a derivative desire and imagination, Derrida develops a radicalised concept of desire which is not derived from need. It is *a need to desire* which, having no object, it becomes the object itself. For Derrida,

no longer is desire the relation with an object, but the object of need. No longer is desire a direction, but an end. An end without end bending need into a kind of flight. This escape sweeps away the origin, system, destiny, and time of *need* (an exempt ... word and a concept without identity) (*AF*: 135).

The written sign that is no longer connected to an object becomes a need to desire. For Condillac, the need to desire in writing is what threatens the principle of analogy, whereas for Derrida it frees writing from the dichotomy between use and frivolity.

By conceiving of writing as a need to desire, Derrida liberates it from instrumentalisation, derivativeness, and the need to refer back without loss to an origin *qua* identity which entails a particular destiny or interpretative framework. Freeing writing from all of that, desire directs it into a kind of interminable 'flight' from such fundamental concepts of Western metaphysics as origin, system, destiny and identity. The subject is no longer anchored on the principle of self-identity, instead it has no origin, need or desire connected to either an object or a self as identity. The writing of the self thus enters into an interminable 'flight' that eliminates the self, its identity, and origin. The subject, therefore, cannot write its desire, because writing contains desire without depending on human agency and subjectivity. Desire is disassociated from that notion of subjectivity which rests on self-referential presence and need as origin. In Derrida, desire is freed from its locus in the subject even as something unconscious. There is little room for a narrative construction of the self that can reclaim even a differentiated or multiple identity. The gendered construction of desire that Freud, Lacan and Irigaray among others have developed is not part of Derridean deconstruction. Derrida's concept of desire is very radical in its construction not only because it is subjectless and disembodied, but also because it cannot be contained within language and/or writing or any other teleology or ontology. Of course, feminists already have criticised Derrida (Irigaray, 1985) for ignoring the category of the woman or refusing to consider the feminine. These are all subjectivist categories and since Derrida's anti-subjectivism underpins his thought these are not concerns that can be accommodated within his thought in the terms that much of the feminist debates wish to pursue.

The latest attempt by Peg Birmingham to inject the feminine into Derrida's thought relies on the idea of fiction. She argues that Derrida has moved towards 'an understanding of "fiction" as the engendering activity of sexual difference' (Birmingham,

1997:145). She avoids the charge of the embodied, self-present subject by making the feminine not only a fiction but a shadow and an erotic excess without abandoning sexual difference which 'occasions the singular and the unique' (ibid. p. 145). So for her 'the imperative of desire is not the call of the Other still positioned at the margin, but rather the imperative to respond to the *upsurge* of the singular' (ibid. p. 145). The concept of the Other is far more complex in Derrida and its relation to sexual difference than this statement would suggest (I have written elsewhere on this topic). The other certainly is not positioned in the margin but is a central element in Derrida. Derrida's concept of desire comes out of his deconstruction of Condillac and it is through a careful analysis of this and its connection to identity and subjectivity that we can arrive at a more germane critique of Derrida.

Although Derrida's deconstruction of Condillac shows the limits of an empirical conception of the sign and subjectivity, it appears to have the same shortcomings as Husserl's idealist conception of the sign. For whereas Husserl brackets out the signifier because it does not lead to full presence and transcendental subjectivity, Condillac condemns it for not being connected to an object and, therefore, unable to reappropriate the origin. Neither the frivolous sign in Condillac nor the indicative sign in Husserl is connected to semantic value. Both meaningless, they thus pose a threat to the origin *qua* identity. Both Husserl and Condillac think that the written sign as representation is necessary for communication and understanding. But it also threatens the principle of identity, whether it is conceived of in terms of sense, or as an intended consciousness of an ideal subject and object.

Condillac excludes the written sign from both prelinguistic sense and the faculties of the soul, and derives its meaning through an analogical relationship to the origin. Its status is to supply corrections from secondary modifications, although these modifications remain external to the origin. Writing is what establishes the strongest connection between ideas, threading one signified to another by detours through the signifier. Writing, however, also poses the greatest threat – through frivolity – of falling away from the origin. In Husserl, writing is external and secondary to the signified, even though it is the most ideal of signs. Its meaning is derived from its connection to an intended consciousness. The sign itself being unconnected to intentionality, is both empty and meaningless. In his critique of Husserl, Derrida frees writing from both intentionality and subjugation to a transcendental signified; and by his critiquing Condillac he frees it also from being instrumentalised in relation to origin and need. Writing is no longer dependent upon and directed by a conception of desire connected to an empirical subjectivity. Need, desire and imagination are divorced from their dependence on notions of subjectivity as self-identity.

Derrida's thought becomes problematic, however, once we examine his deconstruction of the sign, which leads him to *differance* and other concepts. Especially problematic in his analysis of Condillac is Derrida's treatment of the subject and the writing of the self. The question is this: how one can write or read the self – especially in autobiographical and/or confessional writing in the absence of the subject, subjectivity, the 'I' or indeed any notion of the self which rests on a principle of identity? How, if one elevates writing to a transcendental concept that is beyond not only speech and writing but also the transcendental or empirical subject, can the project of writing the transcendental or empirical self be possible?

In deconstructing Condillac, Derrida argues for a conception of subjectivity divorced from empirical subjectivity and not conceived of – in the manner of both Lacan and Freud – in terms of desire (which in the early Lacan's case [1977] means desire and recognition of the other). Derrida thinks of desire as embedded in an indeterminable flight, in which the relationship between desire and its ends cannot be grounded in subjectivity. No longer integral to subjective self-consciousness, desire has neither an *arche* nor a *telos*. While desire is turned back ceaselessly upon itself, need becomes the need to desire.

In Hegel, desire is connected to need, whereas Levinas separates desire from enjoyment. Both are reluctant, however, to disassociate desire from subjectivity. For Derrida, however, desire 'permits itself to be appealed to by the absolutely irreducible exteriority of the other to which it must remain infinitely inadequate. Desire is equal only to excess. No totality will ever encompass it' (*WD*: 93). Desire is outside the metaphysics of the same and consequently outside the categories of subjectivity conceived of in terms of identity. The subject is not the locus or the destination of desire. Desire itself becomes an 'opening and freedom' without return (*WD*: 93). Desire is the frivolity of the sign, the excess of need and Nietzsche's 'eternal return'. The 'other' again breaks the circle of desire by opening it to an asymmetrical relationship with the other. As an irreducible exteriority, desire is beyond any relationship of adequation to or analogy with the self.

Derrida's deconstruction of the empirical concept of the sign proposes a conception of the self which, by transgressing the basic tenets of the empirical tradition, frees the self and subjectivity from psychological categories. He postulates a redefinition of selfhood which negates the concepts of need, desire and imagination, partly by abolishing the distinction between frivolity and usefulness, and partly by questioning the relation between sign and object. Subjectivity – as a self-contained entity, anchored to an origin – disappears in order to make room for a new conception of selfhood where desire is a non-originary concept that is not located in the subject; where imagination does not rely on analogy and need is embedded in desire. Overturning both psychologism and empiricism, Derrida abandons the subject that relies on self-identity and the narrative dimension of

selfhood. Desire in language and writing is excess that cannot be totalised. The question becomes whether a non-subjectivist concept of desire is possible or can be as radical as it is presented, once the narrative construction of the self is deconstructed. Can the subject of desire be overcome without the loss of the narrative construction of the self? Desire is embedded in language and language is the medium through which the subject can articulate itself, even within the radical Derridean differential structure of *differánce*.

Derrida's critique of the sign in Condillac's thought again has become the lever by which he tries to unseat the psychologism of Western thought. At the same time, Derrida attempts to free the emotions from empiricism's preoccupation with the experiential dimensions.

Desire uncontained by language, writing and imagination becomes a concept connected to excess and as such impossible to totalise or locate within the limits of subjectivist thought. Desire, exceeding the subject and language, becomes an uncontained signifier that escapes both its own narration and its own empirical construction.

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