



Riddles of the body: Derrida and Hegel on corporeality and signs

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Abstract

Proper attention to the theme of corporeality is crucial for understanding Derrida's analysis of Hegel in "The Pit and the Pyramid." This article argues that Derrida's essay compels us to face the impossibility of giving a wholly coherent account of embodiment. The *Aufhebung* supposedly unites the exteriority of the corporeal with interiority in a higher unity that cancels and preserves them both; Hegel's own text reveals, however, that meaning is primordially absent from the body that was thought to incarnate it. And it is this absence of ideal meaning that is originary: Difference conditions the body as it conditions speech, rendering the body other than itself such that it is not categorizable as flesh that is the self or as an object that is not the self. I am and am not my body because the dichotomy between interiority and exteriority breaks down even at the level of the body. Indeed, I am and am not my self; the embodied self is disrupted from the start, never self-contained. Thus embodiment always already testifies to the other.

Keywords Body · Corporeality · Derrida · Hegel · Self · Sign · Writing

1 Introduction

In "The Pit and the Pyramid," Derrida maintains that Hegel resists writing because writing's physicality renders it exterior to the self; it must, therefore, be negated and ultimately *aufgehoben* in favor of the ideality of sound. As Derrida explains, Hegel privileges hearing over sight, and thus speech over writing, because "the objects perceived by the eye [...] persist beyond the perception of their sensory, exterior, stubborn existence; they resist the *Aufhebung* and do not let themselves as such be

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relevés by temporal interiority.”¹ Certainly the *Aufhebung* is not merely a cancellation, yet it risks preserving corporeality only in a limited way, that is, only insofar as corporeality is subjected to ideality. Focusing on this comparatively neglected theme of the corporeal, I argue that one of the great virtues of the reading of Hegel that Derrida offers in that essay is to reveal that the dichotomy between the ideal and the real collapses even at the level of the body itself. Crucially, because this interrogation of the identity of the self with the body calls into question the very notions of identity and identification, it does not fall prey to any identification of the self with the soul. In short, Derrida’s critique of Hegel brings to light certain nuances of embodiment: I am and am not my body—or, better, in embodied existence, I am and am not myself. Indeed, the very concept of the self is disrupted from the beginning, and as I will conclude, what sense there may be in saying or writing “I” arises only insofar as speaking or writing in what we call “one’s own name” always testifies to the other.

The notions of the body as other than the self and of the self as other than itself have, certainly, been well examined. Among contemporary thinkers of embodiment, consider, for instance, Sara Heinemää, who writes that “for the completion and fullness of [the living body’s] constitution, other subjects are needed. [...] Thus, we ‘are’ our bodies in a fundamental sense. But this is not all that we are.”² To take another example, Dermot Moran, writing on Merleau-Ponty, observes that “there is a ‘hiatus’ between the touching hand and the touched. I cannot never completely coincide with myself in the act of self-touching, rather I have a presence to myself which at the same time indicates the absence of self.”³ And Claude Romano proposes that the body breaks down the dichotomy between subject and object because “*it is the same body*” that is “given *at the same time* according to two complementary sensorial registers (as a reality of the world and as ourselves) [...]”⁴ It is worthwhile, however, to return to Derrida in order to better understand how every attempt to give an account of the body breaks down. To say that the body is constituted through intersubjectivity, that the embodied self is both present and absent to itself, or that the body is both subjective and objective does not go far enough: The body is never fully constituted in its presence, absence, subjectivity, intersubjectivity, or objectivity. Speaking of the body in terms of presence *and* absence or subjectivity *and* objectivity—which, to be sure, reading Derrida will oblige us to do—is better than rigidly opposing the terms of each dichotomy, yet Derrida also obliges us to confront the impossibility of giving a fully coherent account of the body, whether in these terms or any other. To be clear, I do not claim that Heinemää, Moran, Romano, and other thinkers who have questioned the subjective/objective dichotomy propose to offer such an account but only that Derrida forces us to confront this impossibility with particular force. My concern is less to dispute any particular account of the sense of the body than to investigate how the body poses an obstacle to sense—which is not to say that the body is senseless.⁵

¹ Derrida (1972, p. 107; 1982, p. 92, translation modified).

² Heinemää (2021, p. 254).

³ Moran (2013, p. 302).

⁴ Romano (2020, p. 141, my translation).

⁵ Given the brief reference to Merleau-Ponty, it is worth noting that Richard Kearney ably defends him from the Derridean suggestion that his work falls into haptocentric closure, denying alterity. See Kear-

This investigation will lead us to better understand the impossibility of giving a fully coherent account of the self—that is, of what one might call the *I* or the subject—and this impossibility in turn points us to the impossible yet essential search for justice.

2 A question of writing

A crucial hint that the soul/body dichotomy must come undone along with the speech/writing dichotomy is already found in certain passages from *Of Grammatology*, which indicate that arche-writing conditions not only speech but also the body—or, better, arche-writing names the pre-primordial interruption of the body as well as of speech. Even words such as “interruption” and “disruption” must be used only with care, however, since there was never any moment when the embodied self was uninterrupted, simply coincident with itself. Precisely because arche-writing disrupts the opposition between interiority and exteriority, however, the impossibility of pure interiority cannot entail that the body is a matter of pure exteriority, the *res extensa* to which the self-as-soul is merely connected. Directly relating the problem of speech and writing to the problem of the soul and the body, Derrida remarks that “writing, the letter, the sensible inscription, has always been considered by Western tradition as the body and matter external to the spirit, to breath, to speech, and to the logos. And the problem of soul and body is no doubt derived from the problem of writing from which it seems—conversely—to borrow its metaphors.”⁶ Because the speech/writing dichotomy and the soul/body dichotomy are thus related, the undermining of the former must equally undermine any attempt either to identify the self with the body or to disassociate them. Moreover, this relation suggests that when Derrida announces that “deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent. Rather of showing why the violence of writing does not *befall* an innocent language. There is an originary violence of writing because language is first, in a sense that will gradually unveil itself, writing,” we must think not only of writing but also of the body.⁷ It is not enough to absorb the body into the interiority once reserved for the soul and to proclaim the self’s identity with the body in order to declare the body innocent of the charge that it imprisons the self within an alien externality. Rather, the violence that might seem to shatter interiority is, in truth, pre-originary, by which I mean that interiority is always already broken open prior to any condition. To put it another way, there has never been any interiority separate from and prior to exteriority (or vice versa). I am ineluctably other than

ney (2015, pp. 38–39). Kearney certainly does not suppose, moreover, that the sense of the body can ever be fully expressed or made present; quite the contrary. Opposing Derrida to the phenomenological hermeneutics of the body is too simplistic. I argue that the sense or senses of the body are undone from the start and that reckoning with this undoing is crucial for thinking the self, but the body is not senseless or non-sensical: Simply opposing Derrida to phenomenology or hermeneutics would amount to positing a dichotomy between sense and non-sense that, as the concluding section of this article will indicate, is also unsustainable.

⁶ Derrida (1967, pp. 50–51; 1998b, p. 35).

⁷ Derrida (1967, pp. 53–54; 1998b, p. 37, translation modified).

myself, always already interrupted by the exteriority that metaphysics has sought to confine to the body.

This reading of the body thus does not subject it to ideality, but it does compel us to recognize that the play of difference disrupts and conditions the body. As Derrida explains, “difference makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breath. [...] Difference produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible.”⁸ The image of *breath* is a striking one. At first glance, one might take Derrida’s expression as merely figurative and focus solely on the more abstract claim that we owe to difference our ability to conceive of presence even as difference renders presence forever impossible. Such a reading, founded on the supposition that there is such a thing as the *merely* figurative, would, however, miss the crucial insight that if presence is impossible, one’s body cannot simply be present any more than can one’s voice. Difference gives us breath and takes it away, interrupting the supposed immediacy not only of speech but also of my body to myself. Difference both enfleshes and defleshes us. Arche-writing writes not only speech but the body as well. Yet Derrida’s treatment of this theme in *Of Grammatology* is confined to a few passages; for a fuller appreciation of the relation between the speech/writing dichotomy and the soul/body dichotomy, and in order to better interrogate the latter in light of the calling into question of the former, we must turn to his reading of Hegel in “The Pit and the Pyramid.”

Here it is necessary to briefly examine Hegel’s view of the sign. Derrida’s charge that Hegel privileges speech over writing should not be taken to mean that Hegel disapproves of writing; on the contrary, the invention of phonetic writing is important to the development of spirit, as Derrida will acknowledge. Rather, Hegel privileges speech in that he views it as prior to writing and in that he prefers phonetic writing to any other system precisely because of its closeness to speech. Notably, he refers to “spoken language (which is the original language).”⁹ Writing therefore develops only after speech, and while “*hieroglyphic script* designates *representations* of spatial figures”—that is, it uses images that represent physical objects—“*alphabetic script* designates *sounds* which are themselves already signs” and “thus consists of signs of signs.”¹⁰ Speech, then, is composed of signs that designate some ideal meaning, and alphabetic writing in turn designates those spoken signs, whereas hieroglyphic writing merely depicts real, external objects and so is not essentially related to speech. Alphabetic writing is thus related to meaning, that is, to the ideal signifieds, via its relation to speech, whereas hieroglyphic writing is not related to ideality and must therefore be surpassed.

It is crucial to realize that on Hegel’s view, the “signs of signs” that compose alphabetic writing are not to be rejected as false images.¹¹ On the contrary, though speech does precede writing, alphabetic writing is an immensely valuable advance over

⁸ Derrida (1967, p. 200; 1998b, p. 143, translation modified).

⁹ Hegel (1969, p. 371; 2010, p. 195).

¹⁰ Hegel (1969, p. 371; 2010, p. 196).

¹¹ Stähler (2003, p. 201) also raises this point, explaining that for Hegel, unlike for the Plato of the *Republic*, “being a ‘sign of a sign’ does not signal a double deficiency by way of being twice removed” from the

hieroglyphic writing: As Hegel explains, “learning to read and write an alphabetic script is to be regarded as an inestimable and not sufficiently appreciated educational instrument, in that it diverts the spirit’s attention from the sensorily concrete to the more formal aspect, the spoken word and its abstract elements, and makes an essential contribution to laying and clearing the ground for the subject’s inwardness.”¹² Here we come to the crux of the matter: Hegel’s privileging of speech over writing stems from his privileging of the intelligible over the sensible, of the ideal over the real. Alphabetic writing is valuable, for despite its physicality (the writer makes physical marks upon some physical surface), it ultimately turns spirit away from the sensory, that is, the physical. Corporeality is an obstacle to be *aufgehoben* as spirit progresses. Though the *Aufhebung* is both a cancellation and a preservation, the body must still be subordinated to ideality. The *Aufhebung* is supposed to unite the intelligible and the sensible in some higher unity while preserving their differences, yet this unification still presupposes an originary ideality; an originary disruption of signification could never be brought into a higher unity and subjected to signification. Derrida denies that there is any pure realm of originary ideality into which the body could be *aufgehoben*; indeed, as I will argue, it is impossible to fully make sense of the body or the self.

With this background, let us now turn directly to the text of “The Pit and the Pyramid.” Not only does Derrida charge Hegel with privileging speech over writing and interiority over exteriority, but he also highlights those aspects of Hegel’s texts that, contrary to certain more explicit statements, reveal the failure of any attempt to establish such a hierarchy. Thus the essay must not be understood as a mere attack but rather as an attempt to bring to the fore that which does not quite fit Hegel’s system but which still leaves its mark on his text: the instability of language—its non-coincidence with itself—which one might try to name, following Derrida, with the words *differance*, *arche-writing*, or *deconstruction*, and which, prior to any condition for the possibility of speech or of writing, short-circuits any relation of speech to ideality, any opposition between speech and the sensible, and even any opposition between the sensible and the ideal.¹³ This disruption fatally undermines any attempt to construct a determinate hierarchy that values the ideal over the sensible. And that disruption of hierarchy, Derrida argues, is at play at the level of the sign itself: “All contradictions seem to be resolved in it, but simultaneously that which is announced under the name of sign seems irreducible or inaccessible to any formal opposition of concepts; being *both* interior and exterior, spontaneous and receptive, intelligible and sensible, the same and the other, etc., the sign is none [*rien*] of these, *neither* this *nor* that, etc.”¹⁴ Importantly, this *nothing* [*rien*] of the sign is not something that Derrida imposes on Hegel’s text; rather, it is always already at work there—notably

truth. As will become clear later, however, I argue that Stähler misreads Derrida by finding in his text the misunderstanding of Hegel that she rightly criticizes.

¹² Hegel (1969, p. 373; 2010, p. 198, translation modified).

¹³ For a valuable corrective to any misreading that would take Derrida’s essay as an attack on Hegel, see Catherine Kellogg’s (2005, p. 200) argument that “Derrida’s strategy in this regard is not to expose errors by writing about the gaps or discontinuities in the Hegelian system, but rather to inscribe the ‘remains’ that the Hegelian text reveals in the very gesture of covering them over.”

¹⁴ Derrida (1972, p. 92; 1982, p. 79, translation modified).

in Hegel's image of the sign as a pyramid, where a primordial absence of ideality reveals itself.

3 Significations of the corporeal

Hegel writes that “the sign is some immediate intuition, which represents a wholly different content from the content that it has for itself;—the pyramid into which an alien soul is transferred and preserved.”¹⁵ And it is with this image of the signified as a soul and the signifier as a body that the crucial theme of corporeality most clearly appears. Thus Derrida, exploring the implications of this image, states that

Hegel accords to the content of this meaning [*vouloir-dire*], this *Bedeutung*, the name and rank of *soul* (*Seele*). Of course it is a soul deposited in a body, in the body of the signifier, in the sensory flesh of intuition. The sign, as the unity of the signifying body and the signified ideality, becomes a kind of incarnation. Therefore the opposition of soul and body, and analogically the opposition of the intelligible and the sensible, condition the difference between the signified and the signifier, between the signifying intention (*bedeuten*), which is an animating activity, and the inert body of the signifier.¹⁶

Although this incarnation is needed for the development of spirit, Hegel's privileging of the intelligible over the sensible entails that this “soul” is also privileged over this “body.” Derrida notes that this opposition holds “also for Husserl, who sees the sign as animated by the intention of signification, just as a body (*Körper*) lets itself be inhabited by *Geist* and thereby becomes a proper body [*corps propre*] (*Leib*).”¹⁷ This is a key phrase, for it is the very notion of a proper body, *corps propre*, that Derrida's analysis calls into question, for as will become clear—and as Derrida already suggests by insisting on the relevance of the soul/body dichotomy—the relation of the body to itself is always already unstable, disrupted in advance by the play of difference. Moreover, it is interesting to note that the French *propre*, when it precedes a noun, means *own*—for if the body is interrogated, then certainly the own body, *propre corps*, comes into question as well. Indeed, we must ask not only “What, properly, is a body?” but must pose another question as well: What could be said to be my own body, such that my body could be myself? What, for that matter, could be said to be *my self* (for we must not assume that there *is* a readily recognizable self)? Crucially, if that which is supposedly my own body is and is not my own, is and is not myself, it would not follow that I am rather my own soul; the very notion of *my own*, along with the very notion of the *proper*, is here problematized. For Derrida, in contrast to Hegel, interiority and exteriority are not brought together in a higher unity, even one that would preserve their differences; rather, they are other than themselves and thus cannot find their place in any hierarchy, since a hierarchy would presuppose

¹⁵ Hegel (1969, p. 369; 2010, p. 94).

¹⁶ Derrida (1972, p. 94; 1982, p. 82, translation modified).

¹⁷ Derrida (1972, pp. 94–95; 1982, p. 82, translation modified).

that they have fixed, distinct identities. The self is therefore not confined to interiority, whether the interiority of the soul or of a body that would be identified with the self; rather, the self is also haunted by exteriority and so is other than itself.

The image of the pyramid indicates that the sign plays a double role in Hegel: Not only does it mark the death of meaning, it also points to meaning. Thus Hegel's text reveals despite itself that meaning is primordially absent from the very body that was supposed to incarnate it. As Derrida explains, "Hegel knew that this proper and animated body of the signifier was also a *tomb*. [...] The tomb is the life of the body as the sign of death, the body as the other of the soul, the other of the animate psyche, of the living breath. But the tomb also shelters, maintains in reserve, capitalizes on life by marking that life continues elsewhere."¹⁸ In Hegel's text, therefore, we find an image indicating that speech and alphabetic writing cannot simply be divorced, as though one were good and the other bad. Both share the virtue of being composed of signs in which meaning dies and yet which remain as indicators of meaning—and both, for Hegel, are subordinated to the ideality to which they merely point. Yet the ideal meaning that is privileged over the corporeal is precisely absent, for the sign is a body that shelters life by indicating that life continues *elsewhere than in that body*. The body must die and become a tomb in order to fix spirit's attention on the soul or, in other words, on the ideality that, crucially, is not present. Moreover, if speech is a sign, a pyramid holding an alien soul, Hegel also undermines his claim that speech is immediately related to meaning: The sign points to a life that carries on elsewhere—but where? One can always misread or mishear a sign, and thus the alien soul vanishes from the tomb that supposedly preserves and conceals it, leaving behind the physical body whose resistance to ideality Hegel had sought to tame.

To more fully reckon with the crucial role corporeality plays in Derrida's analysis and its implications for our understanding of the body, it is necessary to address a possible misinterpretation of his essay: namely, that the importance that Hegel explicitly grants alphabetic writing poses a fundamental problem for Derrida's analysis. Tanja Stähler has criticized Derrida on these grounds, and given the care with which she defends Hegel, it is instructive to examine the problems with her critique. She charges that Derrida "chooses to ignore those passages and chapters in which Hegel (and not just in parentheses) makes it obvious that writing is not inferior to speech."¹⁹ But this argument falls short on two counts. First, Stähler's argument does not fully discuss what it means to privilege speech: She discusses only the idea that speech is superior to writing, not Hegel's view that speech is originary. Indeed, as Stähler points out, for Hegel the sign is superior to the symbol (recall that hieroglyphic writing is composed of symbols), but remember that he also claims that speech came first.²⁰ In addition, he states that "the intelligence expresses itself immediately and unconditionally by speaking," a remark Stähler cites only to note, correctly, that for Hegel that which is most immediate is not the best.²¹ She does not, however, note the crucial differences between his remarks and Derrida's. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida contends

¹⁸ Derrida (1972, p. 95; 1982, p. 82).

¹⁹ Stähler (2003, p. 203).

²⁰ Stähler (2003, p. 201).

²¹ Hegel (1969, p. 374; 2010, p. 198); Stähler (2003, p. 201).

that speech does not grant immediate access to meaning and that it is always already disrupted or broken open: “Writing appears well before writing in the narrow sense, already in the differance or the arche-writing that opens speech itself.”²² The mute *a* of *differance* reminds us that speech does not—cannot—have immediate access to some supposed ideal realm of meaning. Meaning is always deferred by the inaudible differences that haunt speech itself. Thus Derrida also states that “altering by writing is an originary exteriority. It is the origin of language.”²³ Not only is language not in any immediate relationship to meaning, the exteriority of writing grounds language. All forms of language, speech included, are writing in that they are all at a distance from any ideality that we might suppose could exist.²⁴ In “The Pit and the Pyramid” as well, Derrida criticizes the idea that any ideal meaning could be originary: Near the beginning he notes that “the process of the sign has a history, and *signification* is even history *comprehended*: between an original presence and its circular reappropriation in a final presence,” and then near the end he asks, “What might be a negative that would not let itself be *relevé*?”²⁵ He thereby calls our attention to the specter of that which cannot be subsumed into any originary presence or comprehensive signification to which speech, so we might hope or imagine, could somehow give us access. Hegel wrote of “the monstrous power of the negative”; Derrida proposes a negative that is more monstrous still, for it prevents any attempt to reach ideality from succeeding.²⁶ And if we cannot access ideal meaning, then, as I proposed above, there is no pure, uninterrupted definition of what a *proper body* might be, whether of a sign or of a person.

This discussion of immediacy and ideality leads to the second problem with Stähler’s argument: She does not address Hegel’s privileging of the ideal over the real and thereby misreads Derrida’s text. Yet the speech/writing dichotomy stems from the ideal/real dichotomy, for it is precisely because of Hegel’s suspicion of the corporeal that he values phonetic writing. Stähler argues, in reference to his statement that reading and writing an alphabetic script is valuable, that “this constitutes a fairly emphatic statement in favor of writing over speech.”²⁷ Recall, however, that in context it becomes clear that alphabetic writing is valuable precisely because it directs the spirit’s attention to the spoken word: “Learning to read and write an alphabetic script is to be regarded as an inestimable and not sufficiently appreciated educational instrument, in that it diverts the spirit’s attention from the sensorily concrete to the more formal aspect, the spoken word and its abstract elements.”²⁸ Hence while one

²² Derrida (1967, p. 181; 1998b, p. 128).

²³ Derrida (1967, p. 424; 1998b, p. 315).

²⁴ It is true that Stähler’s essay focuses chiefly on “The Pit and the Pyramid,” in which the words “differance” and “arche-writing” do not appear. The question of originarity is, however, entirely relevant to a discussion of what it means to privilege speech.

²⁵ Derrida (1972, pp. 82, 126; 1982, pp. 71, 107, translation of the latter quotation modified).

²⁶ Hegel (1952, p. 29; 1977, p. 19, translation modified).

²⁷ Stähler (2003, p. 201).

²⁸ Hegel (1969, p. 373; 2010, p. 198, translation modified). Stähler’s citation (differently translated) stops just before “in that”: “What has been said shows the inestimable and not sufficiently appreciated educational value of learning to read and write an alphabetic character” (cited in Stähler [2003, p. 200]).

particular form of writing finds favor in Hegel's eyes, he values it, as noted earlier, because it turns spirit from the real to the ideal. Insofar as Hegel does not maintain a strict dichotomy between speech and writing, it is in order to insist on this more fundamental privileging of the ideal over the real. Note, furthermore, that Derrida's own discussion of the sign/symbol dichotomy acknowledges that Hegel does not always strictly oppose speech and writing. Derrida points out, for instance, that "the production of arbitrary signs manifests the freedom of the spirit. And there is more manifest freedom in the production of the sign than in the production of the symbol. Spirit is there more independent and closer to itself. By the symbol, conversely, it is a bit more exiled into nature."²⁹ Again, the key problem is the ideal/real dichotomy: Derrida charges Hegel with opposing signs (both spoken and written) to symbols because signs are closer to ideality, whereas symbols are too closely bound to the real, corporeal world. Yet Stähler says little about the opposition between signs and symbols and nothing about the ideal/real dichotomy. Derrida explicitly asserts, however, that Hegel's theory of language is grounded in the supposed superiority of the ideal over the real: "This teleological concept of sound as the movement of idealization, the *Aufhebung* of natural exteriority, the *relève* of the visible into the audible, is, along with the entire philosophy of nature, the fundamental presupposition of the Hegelian interpretation of language."³⁰ Thus any reading of Derrida that ignores this question of corporeality misses what is truly at stake: the disruption of a hierarchy that devalues the physical in favor of a supposedly pure realm of ideal meaning.

4 The body and the self

It is true that the *Aufhebung* is a movement of both preservation and negation, which indicates that corporeality is not *only* to be negated.³¹ Can we then truly say that Hegel devalues the physical? Indeed, Stähler also argues, with an appropriate attention to the nuances of Hegel's thought, that "Derrida seems to presuppose that dialectical movement necessarily implies hierarchy, but this is to place too much emphasis on just one aspect of sublation, namely, the aspect of elevation, while not being sufficiently attentive to conservation and negation."³² Furthermore, when Hegel writes in his *Aesthetics* that "the resounding, which in and for itself is already something more ideal than for-itself real subsisting corporeality, gives up this more ideal existence also and thereby becomes a mode of expression adequate to the inner life," he and Derrida in fact agree insofar as both refuse to accept a corporeal pure exteriority that simply is or remains independent of interiority.³³ And Derrida's argument does not

²⁹ Derrida (1972, p. 99; 1982, p. 86, translation modified).

³⁰ Derrida (1972, p. 109; pp. 93–94).

³¹ For a more detailed examination of this question, see John McCumber's (1980) analysis of Hegel's understanding of the relation between mind and body. One of McCumber's (1980, p. 49) conclusions is that the mind and body in Hegel should "be understood [...] as poles of a continuum, rather than two separate realms of being."

³² Stähler (2003, p. 202).

³³ Hegel (1986b, p. 135; 1975b, p. 891, translation modified).

deny that the *Aufhebung* is supposed to be a double movement of preservation and negation; rather, he contends precisely that this double movement of preservation and negation stumbles on the corporeal. Recall his assertion that for Hegel, “the objects perceived by the eye [...] persist beyond the perception of their sensible, exterior, stubborn existence; they resist the *Aufhebung* and do not let themselves as such be *relevés* by temporal interiority.”³⁴ Indeed, bringing together the real and the ideal by actualizing the ideal still proclaims the ideal victorious over the real. The corporeal, which can have meaning only as a signifier pointing to ideality, bows to ideality by joining with it. Hegel is no Gnostic who simply rejects the body, but one of Derrida’s most crucial contributions to the discussion of embodiment is that, by compelling us to confront an originary or even pre-originary resistance to ideality that cannot be assimilated into any dichotomy between the intelligible and the sensible, he forces us to acknowledge the threat that the body-as-pyramid, as tomb, poses to meaning. At issue is less the exact degree to which his reading of Hegel is accurate than the gravity of that very threat. Similarly, my purpose in defending Derrida’s analysis against certain criticisms is not to attack Hegel, or even to determine how Hegel must be read, but to highlight and develop this notion of the body as a resistance to any attempt to establish an originary ideality. Indeed, even if Hegel could ultimately be rescued even from the charge of privileging ideality, Derrida’s analysis would remain valuable because it brings to light the undoing of the sensible/intelligible dichotomy and calls us to face the implications of this undoing for our understanding of embodiment.

Finally, Derrida poses a crucial question: “At the moment when sense is lost, when thought is opposed to its other, when spirit is absent from itself, is the result of the operation certain?”³⁵ Distanced from any ideal meaning that could render it identical with itself, spirit itself differs from itself. And this interrogation also compels us to ask in what sense Derrida preserves corporeality. If the sensible/intelligible dichotomy fails, the sense of the body becomes open to question. Is it the prison of the soul, or is it simply the self, a machine unhaunted by any ghost? Neither, for these options both posit the existence of some pure, readily definable self. Derrida preserves the body, though neither simply as myself nor yet as a mere *res extensa* to which my true self would be mysteriously connected. Rather, the body has no readily defined sense. The body is myself and not myself—and one must not take “myself” as a stable signifier either. It is not a question of reversing the traditional hierarchy and valuing the sensible over the intelligible. Rather, by examining the resistance of the sensible to the *Aufhebung*, Derrida finds that the hierarchy collapses altogether, and with it falls the notion of the self-identical *I* in possession of itself.

Here it is necessary to respond to one more objection. John McCumber argues that Hegel does privilege speech but does so in order to preserve embodiment: “Written language [...] constitutes a break with that development and therefore, a renunciation of embodiment. For written words are produced, not by the whole sounding body, but by the hand.”³⁶ He therefore warns that “Derrida’s deconstruction of Hegel’s

³⁴ Derrida (1972, p. 107; 1982, p. 92, translation modified).

³⁵ Derrida (1972, p. 125; 1982, p. 107).

³⁶ McCumber (2003, p. 58).

semiotics is thus, paradoxically, in danger of rendering itself complicit with one of the main aims of the ‘metaphysical’ tradition as Derrida understands it: the separation of soul from body.”³⁷ Certainly for Derrida it is not a question of returning to a spatial intuition that would privilege presence. But the disruption of the opposition between the sensible and the intelligible cannot separate the soul from the body, for that would assume the existence of a distinct soul and a distinct body. Derrida’s analysis does indeed call into question the notion of one’s own body, yet by interrogating the very notion of defined identities, he also implicitly calls into question any notion of one’s own soul. According to his arguments, we must renounce any naïve notion of embodiment that identifies a person with a distinct and self-identical proper body, but by that same token, we cannot assert that there exists a self-identical soul that is separated from a self-identical body. There can be no such division between soul and body if, as Derrida contends, all such dichotomies fail.

Thus it follows from Derrida’s analysis of the intelligible/sensible dichotomy that my body is neither an objective *res extensa* (and hence exterior, separate from myself) nor the subjective self (such that the body-as-object would vanish in interiority). The objective/subjective dichotomy breaks down, precisely because my body is myself and other than myself. The arche-writing (introduced in *Of Grammatology*) that cracks open presence is at play not only at the heart of speech but in the body as well. Hegel errs not only in privileging speech over writing but also, and more fundamentally, in privileging the ideal over the real. The voice is not prior to the body, nor vice versa. Differance makes possible the corporeal, just as it makes possible speech and writing, rendering each one different from itself. As Derrida writes, “the outside, ‘spatial,’ and ‘objective’ exteriority [...] would not appear without the grammè, without differance as temporalization.”³⁸ Because it is made possible through arche-writing, the body cannot be a mere external object, nor can it be the immediate self-presence of lived experience. Physical bodies resist the *Aufhebung* not because they are stubbornly external but because the differance that grounds interiority and exteriority cannot be brought into any higher unity. Yet having followed Derrida this far, we must remember that he also states that “[Hegel] reintroduced [...] the essential necessity of the written trace in a philosophical—that is to say Socratic—discourse that had always believed itself able to do without it; the last philosopher of the book and the first thinker of writing.”³⁹ Hegel’s careful treatment of the sign reveals, perhaps in spite of itself, how unstable any dichotomy between speech and writing, or between body and soul, must be. If we are to rightly understand ourselves as corporeal, we must realize that one’s physical being, which might seem to belong to one even more than does one’s voice, already escapes the self.

More exactly, the *self* escapes the self. It is not that my body simply is not myself but that *I* in my corporeal existence am other than myself, always already interrupted by exteriority. If it is true neither that the self simply *is* the body nor that the self simply *is not* the body, it is tempting to ask what, then, the self is—yet this way of formulating the question takes as given that there is some originary self-identity, which

³⁷ McCumber (2003, p. 58).

³⁸ Derrida (1967, p. 99; 1998b, p. 76).

³⁹ Derrida (1967, p. 40; 1998b, p. 26, translation modified).

is precisely what this reading of the body calls into question. For if we have failed to locate the self within a self-identical body or a self-identical soul, the notion of a self-identical self—a pure, primordial ipseity—becomes dubious: Where, precisely, could such a thing be found? How indeed could that which is—supposedly—neatly separated from alterity be accessed? As Derrida suggests in *On Touching*, “the constitution of the body proper thus described would already presuppose a passage through the outside and the other, as well as through absence, death, and mourning [...]. This would presuppose interruption in general, and a spacing from before any distinction between several spaces [...].”⁴⁰ We cannot begin with some ipseity that would supposedly be closed off from alterity; any attempt to locate such an ipseity, even in the body, is undone from the start.

5 The pre-primordial disruption of the self

Let us therefore consider in more detail the implications, for our conceptions of the embodied self, of this primordial disruption—or, rather, pre-primordial, since it conditions the self prior to any conditions that would seem to constitute the self as a readily definable entity. Here it is necessary to return to the image of the pyramid. This image is a telling one, for the body, which may at first seem to be the site of life, of presence, is indeed also, by virtue of its temporality, the site of the future event of death—or, better, the non-site of death, precisely because the becoming-present of death is the ultimate loss of one’s capacity to experience anything. Even if one posits death as a transition to an afterlife, the body would not thereby become *the* site of that event, given that such an event would entail a relation to space that would be decidedly out of the everyday and that could not, therefore, be localized in any ordinary sense (not that the self can be either, strictly speaking, as will soon become clear). Thus the body refers one forward to a future death. What is more, the body also refers backward in time to the past event of birth or, more accurately, of conception: Subject to decay and finally to death, the body cannot guarantee its own existence, so it refers both forward to its death and backward to the event whereby it was brought—or thrown, to use Heideggerian terminology—into the world. Embodiment testifies to the self’s inability to ground itself, to the fact that the self is absent from itself since the beginning, in an absence for which it can never compensate, as it cannot catch up with itself in its thrownness and establish its ground. I wrote above that différance both gives us breath and takes it away. More exactly, breath exists as this giving and taking away: The movement inward and outward—alternating with brief, usually unnoticeable pauses that foreshadow the coming cessation of that movement—announces that the self is not its own ground, that to exist is to be perpetually snatched away from one’s own or proper existence by virtue of one’s dependence on what one might prefer to regard as exterior. Michael Naas observes that Derrida “demonstrat[es], in effect, that the purity of auto-affection, the purity of a self speaking to itself in a *vouloir dire*, is compromised both by the relation to others who first give me my language and by a structure of différance that opens the purity of mean-

⁴⁰ Derrida (2000, p. 206; 2005a, p. 180, translation modified).

ing to repetition and difference [...].”⁴¹ The body too is given through alterity and structured by difference. In its bodily existence, the self can never be a unitary entity contained within interiority: The very continuation of life, by pointing to life’s contingency, undermines the dichotomy between the interiority in which one is at home and the exteriority from which one is alienated. The self always and only finds itself in the midst of its undoing. Crucially, this undoing is not only a matter of its future death, for the self is also undone by its lack of control over its birth. The pyramid, let us remember, marks not only death but the continuation of life elsewhere—and the life that one might call *one’s own* always continues elsewhere than in oneself alone, insofar as the self is not its own ground and cannot, of itself, sustain itself.

Positing interiority and exteriority as opposed and distinct thus fails to account for the fundamental strangeness of the self. To say that the self might at any moment be subject to illness or death, as if the self were stable in itself but potentially, albeit also inevitably, subject to invasion, does not go far enough. Such a statement risks suggesting that one might look inward and recognize a readily identifiable, unified, and localizable—if perhaps besieged—*I*. Rather, however, the self does not recognize itself, to the point that the very notion of an “itself” fails: One exists as alien. Saying that the self is the body and saying that the self is not the body both presuppose the idea that we can take some uninterrupted self as our starting point. Rather, in embodiment, we read the disruption of the self. Illness, whether physical or mental, may make that disruption impossible to ignore in a way that everyday existence does not, since illness obliges one to confront one’s lack of control over one’s existence. But in this regard illness is less an exceptional case than a particularly forceful reminder of the uncanniness by which one is haunted and over which one stumbles when seeking and even expecting to encounter one’s own self.⁴² Locating the self in a body or in a soul amounts to answering a false problem: The self—indeed, the bodily self—is not localizable as such. One thinks one has identified the *I*—the ego that represents who one really is, the unalienable core of one’s own self—but the *I*, it turns out, is neither here nor there: Trying to catch itself, the *I* is always already caught up by the not-*I*, and not in the manner of a synthesis, even a synthesis that claims to preserve difference (but without regard for difference) within a higher unity. Beyond the possibility of a synthesis that would enclose and contain it, the self is disrupted before it is. Even saying that the self is alien to itself, that it is uncanny, or that it is disrupted risks misleading by implying a dichotomy between the alien and the not-alien, the canny and the uncanny, the orderly and the disrupted—as if some portion of the self might be susceptible to the *Aufhebung*, with only a part left outside in reserve. But the resistance to the *Aufhebung* cannot be isolated and contained. As Derrida asks near the end of “The Pit and the Pyramid,” “And if the *relève* of alienation is not a calculable certitude, can one still speak of alienation and still produce statements in

⁴¹ Naas (2008, p. 191).

⁴² On illness as a disruption of the self and of the self’s relation to the body, see Falque (2016; 2019), an article that has influenced my approach to the question of embodiment here. While Falque does not reference Derrida and would not make the turn to alterity as quickly as I do at the end of this article, much interesting work could be done bringing Falque’s and Derrida’s analyses into dialogue.

the system of speculative dialectics?”⁴³ One might say simply that the self is alien, leaving out the misleading “to itself” that implies some prior identity—and yet the very words “is” and “the self” retain the same implication. And saying that the self is unrecognizable from the start also implies that “the self” has some referent that at least ought to be clear. How, indeed, can we speak of the alien, the uncanny, or the unrecognizable without seeming to posit a prior sameness, a prior recognizability? In the absence of pure ideality, we cannot fence meaning in so that it does not go astray.

Here it is crucial to note that I am not positing a theory of the nonexistence of the self.⁴⁴ Indeed, I do not aim to posit a theory of the self at all; I wish rather to emphasize that there can be no complete theory of the self, for when one seeks one’s self, all one’s attempts at pinning it to a fixed definition that would represent its authenticity do go astray. Derrida’s discussion of autoimmunity in *Rogues* is relevant here. Autoimmunity, as a medical term, refers to the immune system attacking the body itself, but for Derrida, autoimmunity takes on a more profound sense than this self-destruction by that which, within oneself, is supposed to preserve and protect: Autoimmunity means that the self was never a stable, self-contained identity in the first place. As he writes, “what I call the autoimmune [...] consists not only in cutting into oneself [*s’auto-entamer*] but in cutting into the self, the *autos*—and thus ipseity. It consists not only in committing suicide but in compromising *sui-* or *self-*referentiality, the *self* or *sui-* of suicide itself.”⁴⁵ Any theory of the self, the ego, or the *I* is undone from the start: There is no ipseity that may be isolated and held stable for examination. By this same token, however, we cannot simply proclaim, in a sort of metaphysical suicide attempt, that the self is nonexistent or purely illusory, since that would be another way of trying to definitively identify the self—by identifying it with nonexistence or illusion, granted, but identifying it all the same, in a manner that leaves no room for that which escapes all grand theories. Yet an attempt to show the limits of any theory of the self often ends up looking like an attempt to propound a new theory of the self, particularly given the difficulty of avoiding words such as “the self” or “the *I*,” when these words are usually taken to mark precisely the concepts that must be called into question. If, however, one avoids those words entirely, seeking to jettison their metaphysical baggage, such an avoidance would risk giving the impression that one did regard the self as a pure and simple illusion. Silence is no guarantor of meaning any more than speech is; speech is no closer to pure ideality than writing, and neither is silence, for if breath itself is pre-primordially conditioned by arche-writing, then pure ideality could be only the absolute impossibility of breath—absolute death.

⁴³ Derrida (1972, p. 125; 1982, p. 107).

⁴⁴ See also Derrida’s statement, “I have never said that the subject should be dispensed with. Only that it should be deconstructed. To deconstruct the subject does not mean to deny its existence. There are subjects, ‘operations’ or ‘effects’ (*effets*) of subjectivity. This is an incontrovertible fact. To acknowledge this does not mean, however, that the subject is what it *says* it is. The subject is not some metalinguistic substance or identity, some pure *cogito* of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language” (Derrida and Kearney [1984, p. 125]). The self or *I* is neither a mere nonentity nor pure ipseity.

⁴⁵ Derrida (2003, p. 71; 2005b, p. 45, translation modified).

6 Conclusion: the body and the search for the other

Thus the investigation of corporeality returns us to the theme of language and so also to the problem of meaning going astray. Crucially, and contra the critiques that see in Derrida a herald of subjectivist relativism, the absence of ideality—the pre-primordial disruption of the relation between sign and sense—does not entail the Protagorean “Man is the measure of all things”; far from it. For it is man’s very ability to measure out meaning that is irretrievably called into question. In embodied existence, one finds that one is not the measure of all things, nor even of oneself. What is more, the idea that one could access, or come to access, ideal meaning is closer to the Protagorean doctrine than it might seem, as clear access to meaning makes it possible for one to become a measure of things, including of oneself. Let us consider, in this regard, Hegel’s presentation of the myth of Oedipus and the Sphinx:

As a symbol for this proper meaning of the Egyptian spirit we may mention the Sphinx. It is, as it were, the symbol of the symbolic itself. [...] It is in this sense that the Sphinx in the Greek myth, which we ourselves may interpret again symbolically, appears as a monster asking a riddle [*Rätse!*]. The Sphinx propounded the well-known enigmatic question: What is it that in the morning goes on four legs, at mid-day on two, and in the evening on three? Oedipus found the simple deciphering word [*Entzifferungswort*]: a man, and he tumbled the Sphinx from the rock. The unriddling [*Enträtse!*] of the symbol lies in the meaning that is in and for itself [*anundfürsichseienden Bedeutung*], in the spirit, just as the famous Greek inscription calls to man: Know thyself. The light of consciousness is the clarity which makes its concrete content shine clearly through the shape belonging and appropriate to itself, and in its existence [*Dasein*] reveals itself alone.⁴⁶

Man’s self-knowledge is thus associated with the overcoming of symbolic representations, which for Hegel are a lower form of writing that, as we have seen, must be surpassed by phonetic writing. Oedipus, by recognizing himself in the riddle—or, rather, by recognizing the category of beings to which he belongs—undoes the symbol and so is able to go beyond it, while the symbol’s content or meaning is preserved in his self-knowledge. The key problem with symbolic writing, the reason it must be surpassed for spirit to recognize itself, is its polysemy, the fact that it is not properly attached to meaning: As Derrida remarks, commenting on Hegel, “This polysemy is so essential, belongs so naturally to the structure of the hieroglyph, that the difficulty of deciphering has nothing to do with our situation or our lateness. [...] The answer to the riddle, Oedipus’s words, the discourse of consciousness, *man* destroys, dissipates, or tumbles the petroglyph.”⁴⁷ Oedipus, in solving the riddle, identifies a single correct meaning of the enigma—a single correct meaning that the Sphinx, the symbol of symbolism, is obliged to recognize as such by falling in an acknowledgement of its defeat. Or, to put it another way, Oedipus takes the measure of the symbol and of

⁴⁶ Hegel (1986a, pp. 465–466; 1975a, pp. 360–361, translation modified).

⁴⁷ Derrida (1972, pp. 116–117; 1982, p. 99, translation modified).

man. For Hegel, Derrida observes, “semiology is a chapter in psychology, the science of spirit determining itself in itself as a subject for itself,” an understanding of semiology that Derrida traces back to Aristotle.⁴⁸ To be clear, it does not follow that man is the measure of all things, since writing by means of signs, as the Greeks did, is not the final step in the progress of spirit: As we have also seen, truth is absent from the sign, so alphabetic writing remains at a distance from ideality. Still, the notion of man as measure, by and of himself capable of rightly appraising both symbols and himself, is a crucial step in that progress—even as corporeality once more appears as a stumbling block that here goes nearly unnoticed.

For corporeality is central to the riddle, which describes man by obscurely portraying the process of aging. The very obscurity of the Sphinx’s question reflects the impossibility of entirely controlling existence: Caught between a birth one did not choose and a death that is inevitable whether one desires it or not, aging gradually but inexorably, one never recognizes oneself absolutely. Indeed, Oedipus names not himself but a species; himself he does not recognize at all, for he does not know that the man he killed on the road was his father or that the queen of the city he has delivered, whom he will soon marry, is his mother. The man who deciphered the riddle and overthrew the representative of the symbolic does not know himself; had he paid greater heed to the obscurity of the riddle, and not only to the apparent clarity of its solution, he might perhaps have guessed that he knew far less than he supposed. Even leaving aside the crimes he unwittingly commits, Oedipus cannot, by recognizing and naming man, arrest the process of aging or make the self its own ground. Knowledge and recognition have their limits, and “the light of consciousness,” in Hegel’s words, cannot be dissociated from the obscurity of existence. It is the riddle that measures its answerer, with an enigmatic measure that should warn him of his own instability: Only for a comparatively short time does he walk on two legs, seemingly stable in his apparent identity. But he answers with the name of a species, and in the confidence of his triumph over the fallen monster, he does not think of his falling—his own falling, one might say, save that the falling does not belong to him. It is not that the self is, and then is unstable; rather, a pre-primordial instability precedes, conditions, and undoes every condition that makes it possible to speak, always belatedly, of “the self.”

If one might dare to speak of the self, or, more pressingly, if one might dare to speak in the first person, one must reckon with the unanswerable enigma of breath, of the bodily existence that defies the dichotomy between interiority and exteriority. To say or write “I,” speaking or writing in what we call “one’s own name,” is always to speak or write without knowing to whom or to what one refers—but pure ideality, were such a thing accessible or possible, would indeed be absolute death because the self in command of meaning would be closed in on itself, no longer breathing. Crucially, when meaning goes astray, it does not follow that we are talking pure nonsense, as if sense and nonsense existed in a strictly opposed dichotomy such that one or the other could be dismissed out of hand. We can guarantee neither sense nor nonsense, and the *nothing* that signs cannot escape, the absence of pure ideality, is not the total loss of significance. As Derrida said in an interview, “It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply

⁴⁸ Derrida (1972, p. 85; 1982, p. 75). On Aristotle, see Derrida (1972, p. 86; 1982, p. 75).

concerned with the *other* of language. [...] The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the *other* and *the other of language*.⁴⁹ Thus it is a question not of abolishing meaning but of seeking the (not necessarily human) other or others that linguistic meanings do not adequately express. Moreover, this search cannot be dissociated from the search for justice, as the self, not being self-enclosed, cannot determine justice. Here let us recall once more the image of the pyramid, a monument to life elsewhere. As this image reminds us, embodied existence always already seeks the other, since any self-contained interiority is precluded from the start. Whatever sense there may be in attempting to speak or write in one's own name lies only in the search for the other: To say or write "I" testifies to the other by virtue of the self's inability to be itself.⁵⁰ And to say or write "I" is therefore to take up that search for the other, whether one realizes it or not, whether one wants to or not, and without ever knowing exactly what one is doing, who or what one is seeking, or even who or what one is—a search that one cannot control and of which one can never give a full account but that is ineluctably inscribed in embodied existence.

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⁴⁹ Derrida and Kearney (2004, p. 154).

⁵⁰ See also Pleshette DeArmitt's call for "a new understanding of self-relation in which to speak of and for oneself would, as Echo knew well, pass by way of and be indebted to the other" (2014, p. 140). To say *I* is to be indebted to the other, to affirm that indebtedness, and thereby to testify to the other. As Derrida puts it in *Monolinguisism of the Other*, "My language, the only one I hear myself speak and agree to speak, is the language of the other" (1996, p. 47; 1998a, p. 25). Indebted from the start, I cannot but testify to the other—like Echo, as DeArmitt reminds us, who owed all her words to the other.

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