

Prepositions:

The Metaphysics of “Closeness”

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In his article *Tracking the (Traces of) Sense (Śledzenie (śladów) sensu)*, Patryk Szaj asserts a radically hermeneutic understanding of text and reading, proposing we practice the latter by: “[...] taking steps¹ **upon/after** ²[the traces of the text]” in “a form of play that generates meaning ...” What might we make of this minor and seemingly non-generative “upon/after” (in Polish, “*po*”) in the above claim, which, for me, is so central to the ontology of text as “trace?” Does the phrase “traces of the text” mean the same thing as “traces **upon/after** the text?” And if not, then what does it imply to wedge this particle between “traces” and “text?” And what might it suggest, in turn, if we were to displace the particle to another position within the formula “upon/after traces of the text?”

Radical hermeneutics claims to draw from two traditions simultaneously: on the one hand, it maintains a continuous rapport with its own “past,” or with classical hermeneutics, as proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur (doing so, of course, only to a degree). At the same time, it takes seriously the lessons of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction, demonstrating the hermeneutic capacity of this approach and fulfilling – on the basis of its blueprint – the “semiotic deficit” that limits hermeneutics (TT, p. 85, 86). We can already say that this schema for the methodological field is not above reproach, for it seems to suggest that hermeneutics and deconstruction (and earlier on, certainly structuralism) have always been in conflict, and that only radical (postmodern) hermeneutics seeks to (or has already managed to) overcome this conflict by cultivating an original reading strategy that insists on keeping “**close to the text**” (according to a specific procedure, TT p. 80). In this response to Szaj’s article, I would like to briefly examine how the category of “closeness,” which is central to his text, organizes the system Szaj proposes within this methodological field.

Hermeneutic “Closeness” (Transcendence)

Jacques Derrida’s basic allegation against hermeneutics concerns its practice of “transcendental reading:” a form of reading that always reaches “[...] **outside** the text itself and towards meaning

¹ P. Szaj, *Śledzenie (śladów) sensu. Tekst i lektura w hermeneutyce ponowoczesnej*, “Forum Poetyki” 2017 (spring/summer), pp. 88–89. Italics – GP. Throughout the text this source will be designated as TT followed by the page number.

² Translator’s Note: the original Polish uses the preposition “*po*,” which has many meanings, including “upon” and “after.”

(which **founds** and **precedes** it). The hermeneutic act of “keeping close to the text” therefore turns out to be rather **superficial**, for in fact, this mode of reading seems more concerned with what is *beyond* the text itself.” (TT, p. 82, italics – PS) We might conceive of the relationship between the text and (its) sense on the basis of these same fragmentary formulations (such as: meaning precedes the text; meaning is located beyond the text; meaning is outside the text, and meaning founds the text), both in terms of the text’s **temporal** and **spatial** displacement, and in reference to its **structural** and **genetic** character. Yet this “outside” does not necessarily coincide with the word’s colloquial, spatial meaning as a certain **interval**, or the space constituted “between two things”³ (in this case, between the text and meaning). It is difficult to even fathom the physicality of such a space. It is neither “outside” nor “beyond,” nor does it foreshadow what is to come.

One element in this critical approach, however, seems extremely interesting. I am referring to the attempt to tie together the figures of “the outside” and “closeness” (as in “close” reading). The predicate “closeness” implicated in time and space (cause/effect; inside/outside), for this is its “natural” (by definition) affliction.⁴ At the same time, it is (somehow) visibly enmeshed in an entirely separate opposition between **semblance** and **truth**.⁵ The “truth” as a standard is not explicitly mentioned in the passage cited here. It is hard to say if this omission is a deliberate attempt to shift the target of critique — which, by the way, had not yet been issued. We might have expected as much (particularly in the wake of deconstruction) in regards to the idea of “closeness” **in general**, or in the “truthfulness” of the **specific** form of “closeness” we arrive at through the “external” reading practiced by hermeneutics. Who can say, then, whether this omission haunts Szaj’s text as a whole (perhaps the truth of “closeness” has not yet found its own signifier)? For the **position** (this word choice is not so fortuitous) of meaning vis-à-vis the text is meant to somehow resolve the “true” or “superficial” forms of “closeness.” If we follow this logic, then “to be beyond” (or “be outside of”) unmask (unveils) a false “closeness,” and its status as fact (its truthfulness) can only be confirmed by “being within” (TT, p. 83).⁶ This opposition between inside and outside (which coincides, at least here, with the opposition between signifier and signified [TT, p. 83]), precisely by means of a “closeness” that can manifest itself as “superficial” or “true” (and which is not neutrally positioned, but sits in the conflicting field of the critique of hermeneutic reading), is no “peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather [...] a violent hierarchy,” where “one of the two terms governs the other (**axiologically**, logically,

³ See: J. Derrida, *Positions*, trans. A. Bass, Chicago 1981, p. 106. Throughout the text this source will be designated as P followed by the page number.

⁴ “The close” can designate: 1) someone/something finding herself/itself in close proximity; 2) that which is meant to occur in the near future; 3) something in the recent past; 4) something that is detailed, specific, precise; 5) someone/something directly akin with someone/something; expressing a particular relationship; 6) someone/something with attributes that coincide with someone/something else; 7) someone intensely connected to another by their feelings, views, and also: the expression of this sense of connection. The relationship of “closeness,” as we see here, can be a strictly subjective relationship (as in 7), referring to a subject and/or object (as in 1, 5, 6) or strictly object-related (2, 3, 4). See: *Słownik języka polskiego...* (*Dictionary of the Polish Language...*)

⁵ A separate but somewhat adjacent question would address whether “closeness” should be aligned with the ontology of the text described here, or rather with an ontology of reading? And to what extent are these issues inextricably related?

⁶ Is something that “is (already) inside” something always (still) “close” to that thing? Or, perhaps, by transcribing a text word for word, letter for letter (like in Borges’ famous story) are we still and always “close” to the text we transcribe? Where do we stand when we cite it (even in its entirety), and do we stand somewhere else when we merely paraphrase it? Is the act of citing (and likewise paraphrasing) located on the “inside” or perhaps “beyond?” Or maybe it is neither “in” nor “beyond?” Is there some other option aside from “inside” and “beyond?” What is the third position?

etc.), or has the upper hand” (P, p. 41; boldface GP). In this case, “closeness,” at least in one of its internal threads of signification, openly **privileges** the “inside.” It can therefore have little in common with *spacing*, a notion that for Derrida “is a concept which also, but not exclusively, carries the meaning of a productive, positive, generative force. Like *dissemination*, like *differance* it carries along with it a *genetic* motif [...]” (P, p. 106, italics – Derrida). *Spacing* “also signifies, precisely, the impossibility of reducing the chain to one of its links or of absolutely privileging one – or the other” (P, p.107). “Closeness,” at least at times, is decidedly closer to its spatial and rather literal conception, as the distance that separates one thing from another.

In this case, the false “closeness” of traditional hermeneutics, or a “closeness” oriented towards meaning that, ostensibly and otherwise, privileges meaning and its “outside” vis-à-vis the text, cannot be the same “closeness” we encounter in radical hermeneutics, anticipated in advance.⁷ The text is only an “intermediary product” or “epiphenomenon” (TT, p. 81). It can only be reduced to a “derivative figure” of the truth or meaning that precedes it, constructed through “the element of logos and within this element” (TT, p. 82). Can we really claim that “closeness” is bent towards “external meaning” and leads us in that direction so that we might position ourselves as readers in a **relation** that **increasingly grows distant**? Does the “outside” inherently imply some kind of distancing? The passage we just reviewed is followed by the sentence: “[...] the entire hermeneutic undertaking proves to be **misconceived** due to its [...] ‘silent assumption’ that the text indeed has sense” [TT, p. 82, emphasis – GP]. Let us dwell for a moment on the fact that this word “misconceived” is already laden with the (still) major risks attached to introducing the suspect category of “closeness.” In this light, it seems clear that this category might simply mean **hitting the point** (which, as we are about to see, is also the objective of reading conceived via the metaphor of “acuteness,” which already establishes a certain *telos*).⁸ If this claim about the status of meaning and its existence **in general** – and this deserves emphasis – is unjustified, then on what basis can we define the position of meaning vis-à-vis the text? Through its “externality?” Does this notion of the “illusory” nature of “closeness” not rely on that “silent assumption,” or a leap of faith (albeit temporary) that meaning in fact exists in so far as hermeneutics has embedded it in an **improper** place, which is to say “outside” the text? Sooner or later, we must reckon with this claim about the “authenticity of appearances,” for we have no choice but to rely on appearances (a typical antithesis: “if it’s **really** in fact a matter of...” [TT, p. 82] frees it from the clutches of parentheses). But does this claim not require faith in the truthfulness of the “outside” (the factual transcendence of meaning) so that through negation (presumably, for there is no other way) one might delineate the contour of a true “closeness” that culminates when (and only when) a certain **distance** (and only this distance) is **reduced** to zero? Does this imply that this increasing “closeness,” which we can only fathom as a perpetually **diminishing** distance, will grow as it decreases? Does “closeness” culminate only when it ceases to exist at all? Is it at all

⁷ “[...] at the very least, the relationship to the text that radical hermeneutics proposes is not **arbitrary**. To the contrary – it performs the hermeneutic task of keeping “close to the text” with all due radicality. The point is that both the text itself and “closeness” have specific definitions in this context.” (TT, p. 80, emphasis - GP)

⁸ We might even go further to propose that “acute” reading (along with the “acuteness” of the analyzed text, such as a poem) is a **targeted, accurate** and **adapted** reading. Yet if we wish to discuss the text without using categories such as target or adaptation, we would no longer be able to speak of the meaning of the text and our strategies for understanding it. We would have to speak, rather (in the spirit of Paul de Man) of some sort of “material vision” (See: W.B. Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Princeton 2006, p. 6).

reasonable to speak of closeness in terms of “peaks” and “troughs?” At a certain point, Szaj evokes Paul Ricoeur to suggest that “the text and the reader approach one another and recede from one another in turn” (TT, p. 80). In this case, is “closeness” something we can **measure**, and if so, what tools would we need to do so? On the other hand, perhaps “closeness” is merely a matter of establishing two stable positions: zero (“within”) and one (“beyond”)?

If, in spite of everything, we must reject hermeneutic “meaning,” the semiotic “signified,” and the transcendental *signifié* (TT, p. 83), then by abandoning these notions along with less literal forms of the “outside” of the text associated with a constant but undefined distance, do we not make the factual status of “closeness” an inevitable consequence for the reader? Does the absence of this transcendental meaning that evades the reader at every step not suggest that “closeness” is a curse that condemns the reader to repeat Borges’ experiment ad infinitum?

Deconstructionist “Closeness” (Immanence)

What does deconstruction’s model of “close” reading consist of, if it is the “art of microreading *par excellence*?” (TT, p. 83) Does this also imply that deconstructionist reading (precisely as microreading) is condemned to “closeness?” How can we perceive deconstructionist “closeness” as somehow “more true” than the “closeness” proposed by traditional hermeneutics?

Totalizing meaning (meaning that guarantees complete comprehension) anticipates the status of “close” hermeneutic reading. As such, it is always situated (spatially, temporally, and in every other sense) “outside” the text (the work) and is therefore beyond a text’s reach in that it does not correspond to any one signifier and cannot content itself with any signifiers that the text – potentially – puts forth. Since hermeneutics yearns to position itself as “close” to meaning as possible (or to somehow obtain it), and since meaning is always situated “beyond” the text (which is itself merely a “means to an end”) then “closeness,” following in its tracks (which is to say **abandoning** the text, distancing itself from it) cannot possibly be the same thing as “closeness” to the text. The vector of interpretation proposed by “closeness” to the text should lead in the opposite direction, “to the interior.” Hermeneutic reading thus faces a dilemma: it betrays the letter, which becomes (according to this logic) the very border of the text. Moreover, it ignores form and passes over the *signifiant*, and does all of this in the name of a “transcendental *signifié*.” The truth is therefore rooted somewhere in between two points of orientation: text and sense (and in a certain sense: *signifiant* and *signifié*). Yet the problem remains: how can we conceive of the “closeness” of hermeneutic reading, if it truly is transcendental reading, as a **movement that edges away** from the text (while **moving towards** meaning)? Can we even think of it as the act of **breaking through** to “beyond” the text, despite the fact that the entire history of interpretation includes no instance where meaning has ever abandoned the text? Meaning **cannot abandon** the text, for it has always been “outside” it. By the same logic, it is impossible to **extract** from the text something that never was “inside” it. We might provisionally suggest that every hermeneutic reading oriented towards meaning contains an “original” moment “immanent” to itself that might function as a “semiotic” or “textual moment” (some point of signification that can be “grabbed onto”). This moment can be nothing but a discernible

product of the imperceptible truth of meaning (at some point in the text Szaj makes a similar claim in the form of a question: “is some ‘deconstructionist element’ already concealed in the very interior of the hermeneutic experience?” [TT, p. 84]).

Deconstructionist “closeness” has no need to grapple with this problem, for it is not concerned with meaning that transcends the text. According to deconstruction, this kind of meaning does not exist at all. We might, however, venture the tautological statement that according to deconstruction, text means precisely what it means. And nothing more. Deconstruction, facing more or less the same dilemma, makes the opposite choice, privileging the “inside” of the text over its “outside,” the *signifiant* of the individual word occurring “within” a particular textual environment over the *signifié* that transgresses “beyond” that text: “the reading Derrida calls “nontranscendental” reading consists of remaining loyal [...] to the game of signifiers, remaining invested in the signifier, form, language and matter from which the text derives its structure” (TT, P. 83).

“With Joyce, I was able to pretend to isolate two words (*He War* or *yes, yes*); with Celan, one foreign word (*Shibboleth*); with Blanchot, one word and two homonyms (*pas*). But I will never claim to have ‘read’ or proposed a general reading of these works.” This list, as we know, could very well be filled out with other examples: Mallarmé’s “hymen,” Rousseau’s “suplement,” Plato’s “pharmakon,” Kant’s “parergon,” Levi-Strauss’ “incest taboo” ... Derrida’s **focus** on individual expressions from the texts he has read (though not thoroughly) forms [...] a crucial element of his strategy, which consists of emphasizing the role of the act of writing and its ability to generate meaning, which plays out not **outside** the text, on the level of the signified (e.g., signified meaning), but precisely **on the inside**, on the level of the signifiers.⁹

For deconstructionist reading, then, “meaning” is an **effect** of the text itself” (TT, p. 84, emphasis – GP), which is why “we cannot *extract* (remove to the outside) meaning from the text, for it is always located *within* the text, in the arche-text.” (TT, p. 84, italics – from the original) Meaning is therefore the product of the text, but first and foremost, the textual product is the transcendence of meaning. Perhaps this is why Szaj eventually improvises an impasse: “transcendental reading is **impossible** [...]. But transcendental reading is also **necessary**.” (TT, p. 84) There is no way to “extract” meaning “to the outside,” for at its root, the transcendence of meaning is located “within” the text. Deconstruction – if we follow Szaj’s opposition – **internalizes transcendence** and renders it contingent on the reading.¹⁰ The hermeneutic moment within deconstruction is one consequence of this process. Meaning and text literally trade places,¹¹ reinforcing the sense that this notion of deconstructionist reading **chafes against** the mode of reading practiced by traditional hermeneutics. Now meaning (as an ef-

⁹ TT, p. 83, emphasis - GP. Internal citation: *This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby [in:] *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, New York: 1992, pp. 33 - 75

¹⁰ This becomes particularly clear when Szaj, following Derrida, suggests that “the text in itself cannot resist giving in to ‘transcendental’ reading...” (TT, p. 83)

¹¹ We also encounter other figures of inversion, like the somewhat “disjointed” “deconstructionist circle” **as opposed to** “the hermeneutic circle,” or Gadamer’s “surplus of sense” situated **in opposition to** Derrida’s “surplus of signifiers.” (TT, p. 85).

fect) becomes the result, and text becomes the cause (an inversion of genetic contingency).¹² Deconstruction remains, in this case, clasped in a **dialectical** relationship with traditional hermeneutics. The very concept of the "outside" of the text (meaning) as a product of the text reinforces this point, for it is in keeping with the Hegelian spirit and is therefore entirely compatible with traditional hermeneutics.¹³ The task of hermeneutics, which seeks to "consolidate

¹²By positing such a harsh contradistinction based on a hierarchical opposition between inside and outside, does Szaj not go too far? Does he not essentially idealize the situation precisely in order to prepare a sufficiently legible space for postmodern hermeneutics that responds to traditional hermeneutics by (to use Szaj's words): "attempt[ing] to compensate for this **semiotic deficit**" (emphasis - GP), which is rooted in the belief that "text becomes a specific phenomenon operating at the intersection of semiotics and hermeneutics?" (TT, p. 86) This opposition suggests that postmodern hermeneutics (and only postmodern hermeneutics) has launched a campaign to "reconcile" two distinct and antagonistic motifs in the humanities: the "internal" (phenomenology, formalism, structuralism, semiotics and – we might add – deconstruction) and the "external" (positivism, Marxism and hermeneutics). In another article (*Czy można pogodzić dekonstrukcję z hermeneutyką? Dialog Derridy z Gadamerem*, "Czas Kultury" 2014, issue 5, pp. 68–74), Szaj explicitly addresses the antagonistic relation between deconstruction and hermeneutics. Already in his proposal to take seriously the lessons of deconstruction, we see its former negation by hermeneutics. "The lesson postmodern hermeneutics might learn from deconstruction primarily consists of an intensely scrupulous turn to the textuality (semiosis) of the text. While this feature had already been accounted for in many movements within modern hermeneutics (by Ricoeur in particular), it is in fact missing from Heidegger and Gadamer's approaches [...]" (TT, p. 86) Heidegger's presence here as one of the responsible parties for the deficit of meaning in hermeneutics might, at the very least, provoke some questions. It is never the case that some methodology (or theory) is either "purely" internal (semiotically positive) or "purely" external (semiotically negative). It seems interesting that Maria Janion, basing her hermeneutics off a Heideggerian model, once called hermeneutics a form of "existentialist structuralism," although it is markedly distinct from the linguistic model of "phonological structuralism" that inspired its name. It is structuralism, however, that (once again) in opposition to the paradigm of positivist research, appreciates the formal and aesthetic aspect of the literary work (see: M. Janion, *Humanistyka: poznanie i terapia*, Warsaw 1982, p. 38, and particularly the essay titled *Spór o genezę*). To a certain degree, and formally speaking, deconstruction's critical gesture towards hermeneutics might repeat (with certain displacements, of course) the gesture enacted by twentieth-century formalism against the positivist orientation. At the time, formalists believed that by attending to the aesthetic dimension of a literary work, they were finally dealing with the essence, or "literary status," or "immanence" of the text (unlike the geneticists). It took little time, however, for them to realize the superficiality of this position. If we were to take deconstruction as a method (in spite of its own intentions, of course), then it is neither an "external" method (ignoring signifiers) nor "internal" one (totalizing signifiers). This is not only because it follows the long (and substantive) legacy of structuralism, for deconstruction itself understands this division as the product of its own "discovery," which is to say, *différance*: "[...] the concept of *différance* is neither simply structuralist, nor simply geneticist, such an alternative itself being an 'effect' of *différance*." (P, p. 9). This perhaps informs Anna Burzyńska's position when she writes that "from the very beginning," Derrida was concerned with "breaking away from the closed circle of language, or the hermeneutic 'cocoon' of the text, now reduced to an internal 'game of signifiers'" (A. Burzyńska, *Dekonstrukcja, polityka, per formatyka*, Krakow 2013, p. 519–520). Postmodern hermeneutics, committed to enacting a "double negation," which is to say, a negation of the negative gesture of deconstruction, becomes embedded in this dialectical controversy with the same enthusiasm that propelled Michał Głowiński to announce the advent of a new paradigm in literary theory with the appearance of "literary communication theory," a paradigm that transcends the division between "external" and "internal" methods (see: M. Głowiński, *Od metod zewnętrznych i wewnętrznych do komunikacji literackiej*, [in:] *Problemy teorii literatury. Seria 4. Prace z lat 1985–1994*, ed. H. Markiewicz, Wrocław 1998, pp. 456–469). For more on hermeneutics' turn towards language and speech, see: G. Marzec, *Poza głosem i fenomenem. W sprawie dekonstrukcji i hermeneutyki*, [in:] *Filozofia i etyka interpretacji*, ed. A.F. Kola i A. Szahaj, Krakow 2007, pp. 121–130. This author puts forth a thesis that seems particularly relevant in the context of the claim regarding the "semiotic deficit" of hermeneutics, stating that one of basic allegations Derrida issues against Heidegger's hermeneutics concerns its fixation on universalizing language.

¹³Hegel was the first to truly understand the presuppositional structure thanks to which language is at once outside and inside itself and the immediate (the nonlinguistic) reveals itself to be nothing but a presupposition of language. 'Language,' he wrote in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 'is the perfect element in which inferiority is as external as exteriority is internal' [...] We have seen that only the sovereign decision on the state of exception opens the space in which it is possible to trace borders between inside and outside and in which determinate rules can be assigned to determinate territories. In exactly the same way, only language as the pure potentiality to signify, withdrawing itself from every concrete instance of speech, divides the linguistic from the nonlinguistic and allows for the opening of areas of meaningful speech in which certain terms correspond to certain denotations. Language is the sovereign who, in a permanent state of exception, declares that there is nothing outside language and that language is always beyond itself." G. Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, Palo Alto, 1998, pp. 19–20, internal citation: G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, pp. 527–29.

the entirety of the text in the truth of sense” (TT, p. 82) corresponds analogically to deconstruction’s task of encapsulating the signification of the text “as a whole” in the figure of the *signifier* of a single word (or at times even one silent letter).¹⁴ Any Polish language dictionary will offer many definitions of “closeness,” including those that define it as what is exact, specific, and precise. Derrida introduces his famous notion of *différance* with the sentence: “I will speak, therefore, of the letter a (...).”¹⁵ If, by addressing this letter **a** in *différance*,¹⁶ Derrida directs his language “towards the interior,” then does he perhaps merely sketch its “external” surface? How **close** to one another are the *signifiant* and *signifié* located?¹⁷

The Praxis of “Closeness”

Marian Stala titles one of his books on contemporary poetry *Close to the Verse (Blisko wiersza)*. This formulation – as the author freely admits – is a “maximally compact discourse [...] on the program of literary critique.” Stala writes: “we are closest to verse when we drill down into the very words, sentences and images that co-create it; when we attempt to penetrate the mysteries concealed within it. And when we record that essential encounter with the poet’s voice,

¹⁴The passage Szaj evokes from Derrida appears – contrary to Szaj’s claim – in the second Polish edition of *Positions (Pozycji, FA-art)*, Katowice 2007, trans. A. Dziadek, although its wording is somewhat different: “accumulating the whole of the text in the truth of its sense” (“zebranie całości tekstu w prawdę jego sensu” [p. 44]). The phrase comes up at a point in the text where Derrida is explaining the distinction between polysemy (recalling Ricoeur’s hermeneutic theory of polysemy), which offers some progress from the notion of the “linearity of writing,” or “monosemic reading” yet remains at risk of teleology, eschatology and dissemination, which “in order to create an infinite volume of semantic effects, does not allow itself to yield any simple beginnings [...] or eschatological presence,” (pp. 44–45), mainly due to its semantic power. In some sense, then, polysemy is only the effect of dissemination, or its image. See also: J. Derrida, *Mallarmé, [in:] Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge, New York: 1992, pp. 33 - 75. This text is also where the phrase “reservoir of meaning” first appears, defining the limits of polysemy.

¹⁵J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass, Chicago: 1982, p. 3

¹⁶What function does the letter “a” have here? “It is a question, rather, of producing a new concept of writing. This concept can be called *gram* or *différance*. [...] Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which is not simply present. This interweaving results in each “element” — phoneme or grapheme — being constituted on the basis of the trace within it of the other elements of the chain or system. This interweaving, this textile, is the *text* produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. [...] The gram as *différance*, then, is a structure and a movement no longer conceivable on the basis of the opposition presence/absence. *Différance* is the systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive (the *a* of *différance* indicates this indecision as concerns activity and passivity, that which cannot be governed by or distributed between the terms of this opposition) production of the intervals without which the “full” terms would not signify, would not function. It is also the becoming-space of the spoken chain— which has been called temporal or linear; a becoming-space which makes possible both writing and every correspondence between speech and writing, every passage from one to the other.” (P, pp. 26–27, emphasis – GP). As we see here, the “a” to which the above passage from Derrida alludes (although the letter “a” is concealed in parentheses), as a “trace of traces,” becomes both the starting and endpoints of the individual elements of the chain, system, or system of micro-dissections.

¹⁷The externality of the “transcendental *signified*” (whose existence is posited by traditional hermeneutics) would be truly (radically and absolutely) beyond language. For it would not only be derived from the difference between the sign’s *signifiant* and *signifié*: “[...] ‘transcendental signified,’ which in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier.” (P, p. 21). Does this also imply that the “inside” (surely just as radical as it is true) ought to be situated on the level of the signifiers? If we read further (with Derrida): “[...] from the moment that one questions the possibility of such a transcendental signified, and that one recognizes that every signified is also in the position of a signifier, the distinction between signified and signifier becomes problematic at its root.” (P, p. 21). And yet Derrida often describes writing that “literally meant nothing,” or the risk of entering into the associated “play of *différance*” to “mean-nothing.” (P, p. 17). This play, then, “prevents any word, any concept, any major enunciation from coming to summarize and to govern (...).” (P, p. 14) Can we discern here a longing for conceiving a *signifiant* without a *signifié*?

imagination and sense of the world.”¹⁸ Given the ongoing, expansive emancipation of so many theoretical discourses (a process that continues today) that spawn analyses of themselves with unbridled pleasure, does keeping “close to the text” not refer to the very **practice of interpretation**? Towards the end of the 1970s, Janusz Sławiński described the acute effects of this emancipation: “[...] today, our tools and procedures are less interesting in terms of their potential analytical usefulness and more so as the object of potential explications, commentaries and additional thoughts. We are not drawn to their capacity to describe or clarify, but rather, to the extent to which the tools themselves can be further clarified.”¹⁹

Bearing in mind Sławiński’s diagnosis alongside Stala’s criteria for understanding “closeness,” for some time now theory has occupied a position vis-à-vis literature that is AS DISTANT as possible. As a result, the methodological postulate asserted by the urgent need to practice “close” readings of the text is essentially fulfilled by a double-entendre that enjoins as it prohibits. For “closeness” can be expressed exclusively outside of itself, disregarding the object of speech or even contradicting that which is openly expressed. The postulate of “close” reading might therefore consist of edging away **from reading the declarative content of the reading that unfolds**, expressed from a certain distance that grows wider and wider (with each new letter), but also expressed from a place of **deferral**.²⁰

Let us note the fact that Szaj postulates “close” reading while **postponing** the reading itself. He practices close reading in its “pure” form, which can only be realized in the metadiscourse. How might we begin to **implement** “close” reading, then, if even its most basic definition, subject to the inevitable law of deferral, turns out to be a negative definition? Sławiński describes a scenario in which theory, having rendered itself the object of its own research, has usurped the function of literature and is therefore merely a specific form of literature. From this perspective, theory occupies a position vis-à-vis literature (with literature’s definition now partially modified) that is AS CLOSE as possible. Without addressing literature at all, it remains faithful to it. The *praxis* of “closeness” only makes sense under these conditions, on the basis of the tightly bound self-referentiality produced when theory merely “says that when it speaks, it is speaking.”²¹ Within the most perfect form of this relation, “close” (self)-reading

¹⁸M. Stala, *Blisko wiersza. 30 interpretacji*, Krakow 2013, p. 5.

¹⁹J. Sławiński, *Zwłoki metodologiczne*, [in:] *Teksty i teksty*, Warsaw 1991, p. 39. Elsewhere in the text, Sławiński comments: “The evolutionary process of today’s humanities resembles [...] a series of epidemics– they spread rapidly, but have extremely short lifespans. One has not yet been extinguished, and another is fast on its tails [...] The rapid rotation of languages that have not yet been fully fleshed out means that none of these languages get the chance to fully conquer a discipline. As a result, none have the chance to supply a discipline with an authoritative paradigm that might provide some order for these constantly accruing methodological experiences.” (ibid, p. 40)

²⁰“The rise of methodology and its pursuit of autonomy [...] is surely governed by the **law of deferral** [...] Effusively indulging in the ceaseless work of mulling over methodologies, we defer to an unspecified point in the future the moment when we might actually make use of them.” (J. Sławiński, op. cit., p. 41, emphasis - JS).

²¹Michel Foucault has written: “In forthrightly saying ‘I speak’ I am exposed to none of these perils; the two propositions hidden in the statement (‘I speak’ and ‘I say that I speak’) in no way compromise each other. I am protected by the impenetrable fortress of the assertion’s self-assertion, by the way it coincides exactly with itself, leaving no jagged edges, averting all danger of error by saying no more than that I am speaking. Neither in the words in question nor in the subject that pronounces the is there an obstacle or insinuation to come between the object-proposition and the proposition that states it. It is therefore true, undeniably true, that I am speaking when I say that I am speaking.” (M. Foucault, *Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman, Brian Massumi [in:] Foucault | Blanchot New York 1989, p. 10

coincides with **not-quite-close-enough** reading, or to go even further: it is suspended at a certain distance, perhaps the **distance of the trace** that reading has always co-created.²² A “truly” close reading would therefore imply the frontier of commentary. In this sense, the postulate of “displacing understanding as far away as possible” (TT p. 84), which in this case, paradoxically means “as close as possible” (the textual letter, the *signifiant*) is a metaphysical postulate.

This also implies that “acuteness” is a **limit case** (perhaps Derrida would say negation)²³ of “closeness.” From outside its sphere, “acuteness” attempts to describe “closeness” from a new angle. At its very best, “close” reading can – let us repeat – *achieve* a status of “acuteness,” but it can never actually accomplish this, even if “acuteness” also refers to the awareness of the impossibility of ever finalizing a relation of “closeness:” “this word seems to indicate [...] the acute impossibility of fully embracing the findings of interpretation and the acute ambiguity of meanings of the text, which cannot be resolved through the hermeneutic procedure” (TT, p. 90). Szaj associates “acuteness” with Gadamer’s formula evoked earlier, which describes “the experience of literary text as meaning’s capacity to ‘shock that which has been stated.’ This does not yield a harmonious union of sense; it **transgresses the horizon** of **all** expectations” (TT, p. 90, emphasis – GP). “In the original German,” he goes on to write, “‘shock’ is expressed as *Betroffenheit*, a word that phonetically connotes the verb *treffen* (**to hit or strike**) and its passive mode (*betroffen werden* – to be hit, struck, found out)” (TT, p. 90, emphasis – GP). The phrase also conjures Heidegger’s notion of “acuteness” that comes as a “blow” (*Stoß*). Finally, it is linked to Derrida’s experience of reading as an “acute test,” whose acuteness is derived from the fact that each poem is a wound itself and can wound others to equal degrees (TT, p. 90). These many metaphorical connotations are united by their intentional reduction of separation, which is the constituent material of “closeness.”

The “Closeness” of the Trace

According to deconstruction, there is no meaning of the text that can ever step “beyond” its borders. The debate between deconstruction and modern hermeneutics reconstructed by Szaj is rooted in this claim, for hermeneutics asserts the existence of a transcendental *signifié*. Modern hermeneutics has no interest in the text itself and is only concerned with its meaning, for which the text is merely a vehicle. It therefore seems appropriate to describe this mode of reading as **external reading** (vis-à-vis the text). The “externality” (we could also say mediation; inaccessibility) of meaning **is not derived** from the text as a product, say, of its inexhaustible multiplicity of meanings. To the contrary, sense **betrays** the text, for as soon as meaning surfaces, text establishes its derivative and therefore imperfect figure. By adopting such a **far-ranging** perspective, the reader becomes desensitized to the forms that mediate his access to meaning: the textual (signifying) aspect of the work (let us acknowledge, however, that this idea is inevitably laden with faith in the transparency of language). What

²²Szaj evokes the words of Paweł Dybel: “each signifier is itself only insofar as it is already outside of itself” (TT, p. 87; P. Dybel, *Oblicza hermeneutyki*, Krakow 2012, p. 42). Is this not a formulation of transcendence?

²³See: J. Derrida, *Ousia et gramme: Note sur une note de Sein und Zeit* [in:] *Marges*, p. 31–178 (and in particular, *La paraphrase: point, ligne, surface*).

is essential here is that which is partially or entirely invisible (concealed, veiled) and can only be made manifest in the process of comprehension. The invisible, exactly like the mediated, must therefore imply the **distant** (further). The tangible absence of the signifier is therefore the burden of hermeneutic reading.

In deconstruction, as we have already established, we encounter the opposite problem. Hermeneutics, by understanding sense as an **effect** of the textual game (text **betrays** sense), practices an **internal reading** that focuses its attention – by analogy – on that which is visible through and through (yet) is only acknowledged in the tradition of western metaphysics as a **representation**. And the discernible (the visible) surely coincides with what is closest, or (least) distant. Whoever wishes to think of deconstructionist reading as a form of reading (par excellence) that gets close to the text must locate within his material a stable reference point (stable as in distanced, relative) for defining the relationship of proximity. True (not illusory) closeness cannot be relative or qualified in any way, which is to say, it cannot be defined on the basis of some other thing that either does not exist at all (for deconstruction, external meaning) or has an undefined position (for hermeneutics, “the mediated”). Closeness can only appear vis-à-vis that which IS. And this appearance must necessarily be fixed, occurring once and for all, as in the case of **writing** which, for Derrida, figures in western tradition as a mere representation or externalization of language.²⁴ On the other hand, Derrida also writes that “deconstructing this tradition will therefore not consist of reversing it, of making writing innocent,”²⁵ which implies, in these circumstances, not only the **reduction** of writing to the status of the *signifiant*, but the act of asserting it as the **internal** (privileged) side of language. “This is precisely why Derrida has always insisted on the primacy of **writing over speech**.”²⁶ “While Gadamer is concerned with what plays out on the level of the signified, this Derridean **reduction to the signifier** significantly complicates matters...”²⁷

The ontology of text as a trace does not satisfy these conditions: “[...] precisely this logic [the logic of *différance* – italics GP] determines the **“trace-like status” of the text** and the extent to which it has been ‘contaminated.’ For if every sign carries within itself some kind of “recollection” of the signs that preceded it, then it simultaneously “foreshadows” the signs to come, which brings about the **fragmentation of its stable identity** (TT, p. 86, emphasis GP). The trace, collapsing the opposition between present/absent (text/sense), can be identified with

²⁴See: J. Derrida, *The Outside Is the Inside*, [in:] *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore 1998, pp. 44-64.

²⁵J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, op. cit., p. 37.

²⁶P. Szaj, *Czy można pogodzić...*, op. cit., p. 72. Emphasis- GP. Naturally, in somewhat of a defensive maneuver, the author cannot at this point justify the claim that deconstruction conceives the meaning of *writing* absolutely outside of the order established by the metaphysical tradition (the phonocentric opposition of speech versus writing). As a result, assigning *writing* to the dimension of the *signifiant* is unfounded. However, since deconstruction conceives of *writing* as something that transgresses the traditional order, how can it possibly offer a *contrast* (opposition) to Gadamer’s move to reinforce this tradition when he writes that he “invariably treated writing as alienated speech?” (p. 72). Earlier, Szaj even wrote: “For Gadamer, etymologies (understanding and self-understanding – GP) prove that the fundamental concepts of hermeneutics already contain the motif of *différance* that Derrida will distill even further, and that – to put it simply – any practitioner of hermeneutics would affirm Derrida’s thesis on the ontological precedence of difference over identity: [...] ‘difference is latent within identity, for otherwise identity would not be identity’ [...] and Derrida [...] is not at all (or perhaps: not exclusively) concerned with the difference latent in identity, but rather (as we are well aware), with the very mechanism of differentiation” (ibid, p. 72).

²⁷Ibid. Emphasis – GP

neither the presence of something, nor its lack. To put it simply: when we try to speak of the trace, we ought to deny it precisely that to which it might be linked (essence? objecthood?). Nor is the point that the trace – in its failure to be close – is something we get “in exchange,” something distant. We cannot say the trace *is* (telos); it merely **references**. Like displacement, dissemination, or even *différance*, the trace has an inherent *genetic motif* that generates **distance** (difference). It is precisely because of the trace that “close” reading (like transcendental reading, for that matter) is just as necessary as it is impossible. Yet there are other ways to understand the trace. Just like closeness is necessarily closeness vis-à-vis something else (e.g., vis-à-vis the text), the trace turns out to be a trace **of something**.

How do we understand new hermeneutics’ postulate of “keeping close to the text?” We might posit a particular form of “tracking the traces,” or perhaps, as Andrzej Zawadzki writes, “pursuing, following the trail of traces, tracking and reading them, answering to them with a trace of one’s own. To put it simply: the act stepping over/among these traces by following them [the traces of the text] is a form of play that generates meaning.”²⁸ (TT, pp. 88-89, emphasis – GP)

In the thoughtfully worded expression “trace of the text” (or “traces of the text”), the trace itself is relegated to a position of lower importance. We might say it gets disenfranchised. Contrary to appearances, the “trace of the text” is not the same thing as the “trace-like status of the text” that corresponds to the logic of *différance*, just as the figures “following the trail of traces” and “following the traces of the text” can never be equated when they apply to reading. In the compound expression “trace of the text,” where the word “text” inevitably appears to the Polish reader in the **genitive** form (and for this there is no recourse), this text inevitably becomes something **belonging to the past**, something absolutely **former**. Although some trace of the text (still) **is**, the text itself **is no longer**. It is as if the text were the whole, and the trace merely one of its fragments. The trace does not reference subsequent traces in order to reveal to the reader that she must constantly start from scratch and perpetually hover at the very beginning of the path of reading.²⁹ It refers, rather, to its own past, to the text that was once **something greater** than the mere trace that remains.

Szaj bases his definition of **non-transcendental** reading, which consists of **not** going beyond an interest “for the signifier, form, language and matter from which the text derives its structure” (TT, p. 83), on an **inversion** of one of Derrida’s definitions of the verb “to transcend.” “‘Transcend’ here means going beyond interest for the signifier, the form, the language (note that I do not say ‘text’) in the direction of the meaning or referent [...]”³⁰ Is it enough to replace the verb “to go beyond” with a form that contradicts it, writing instead: “to not go beyond an interest” for the signifier, to turn transcendental reading into a form of **non-transcendental** reading? Derrida – and please note the subject here – only describes the text in the sense that he says he will not describe it. This text clearly transcends the order described in this passage as if it were entirely obvious and unambiguous, namely: the order of the signifier, or the order of

²⁸Internal citation: A. Zawadzki, *Literatura a myśl słaba*, Krakow 2009, p. 157.

²⁹See: P. Szaj, *Czy można pogodzić...*, op. cit., p. 74.

³⁰J. Derrida, *This strange institution...*, op. cit., p. 190.

form and language.³¹ This is not to suggest that the text is most likely something greater than (and entirely different from) (only) the *signifiant*. Perhaps the trace **materially** breaks out of this order to occupy a position vis-à-vis the text that is **symmetrical** to that of the text, if we assume we cannot collapse meaning with the order of the signified, just as we cannot collapse the trace with the order of the signifier. The trace would then be located outside of the text, or perhaps “on the other side.” Functionally speaking, this makes the trace an inversion of meaning. Since it consistently IS (delivered visibly to the reader), precisely as a chain of *signifiants*, there is no way for us to **hunt it down**. For to hunt it down (track it down) would necessarily mean to make it manifest. When we turn to the “traces of the text,” however, we reverse this procedure. We might say that we posit its remnants as a **trace-like figure**, which is inevitably linked to that particular form of manifestation that is the manifestation of the absent, or a form of **unabsent-ing** that *strives towards* absence. “Hunting down” the trace therefore takes no part in this game. But “something greater” in the text’s relation to the trace might imply not only a quantitative dynamic that retains its essence, but perhaps a qualitative one as well. The traces of the text simultaneously become the traces **that follow** the text. For by reading, we can only pursue **after/upon** these traces. In this instance, the special status of the Polish “*po*” (“after/upon”) means that syntagmatic rules assign the preposition a status that is in conflict with the status assigned to it by semantics. According to the **line of interpretation** taken up here, “after/upon” as a constituent part of the formula “traces after/upon the text,” reveals to us the paradoxical position of traces that *signifié* – willingly or not – appear twice: “before” and “after” the text.

³¹Text transcends the order of the signifier for yet another reason. “For the text, as a textile (from the Latin *texere*) of textual folds, layers and warps offers the very conditions for reading as a practice of de-constructing or unwinding. For Derrida, however, this work inevitably remains unfinished, for the fold as well as the wrinkle – *le pli* – is that “elementary” element of the text that precludes its semantic culmination. A complete *ex-pli*-cation of the meaning of the text, a “smoothing out” of all its folds, therefore proves impossible. For hermeneutics, of course, this is the root of drama. At the same time, it is also simply the precondition for practicing any kind of hermeneutics: if all the textual folds could be conveniently “straightened out,” then hermeneutics would be entirely unnecessary.” (TT, p. 89) What determines the inexhaustibility of the work of interpretation, the impossibility of a “complete *ex-pli*-cation” of the meaning of the text? Could it be the **amount** of folds in the text, which is to say: is there no way to smooth out all the folds of a text simply because, as a rule, they are infinitely numerous? Or is it rather a question of their **quality**? Since “not all” folds can be conveniently “smoothed out,” might we simultaneously posit that there exists among these folds a few that actually cooperate quite well with this procedure? How might we identify the fold that **can be smoothed**, versus those that cannot? On what basis might we gauge the *smoothness* of the text and a reduction of the fold?

KEYWORDS

transcendence

text

trace

reading

CLOSENESS

ABSTRACT:

This article offers a polemical response to Patryk Szaj's text, titled *Tracking the (Traces of) Sense: Text and Reading in Modern Hermeneutics*. In his article, Szaj demonstrates how the category of "closeness" he uses to define the ontology of reading practiced in modern hermeneutics is metaphysically charged. The specific conception of deconstruction we encounter in Szaj's analysis frames it as an inversion of modern hermeneutics, which not only implies that "closeness" privileges the interior (at the expense of the exterior) and the *signifiant* (at the expense of the *signifié*). It also implies that the "trace" is an inversion of "meaning." We might say that their result is merely the text.

MEANING*immanence***INSIDE***a f t e r / u p o n**o u t s i d e***SIGNIFIÉ SIGNIFIANT****NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:**

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