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Unconditional Hospitality and Rape by Reality as Models for Philosophy

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Introduction

¹ Throughout the first volume of his 1995-1996 Seminar, entitled *Hospitality* and published in 2021, Derrida insists on, emphasizes and sometimes struggles with the contradictory, aporetic dimension(s) of the notion of “hospitality”. One might say that this is the normal, natural dimension of philosophical research or enquiry, especially in the context of a ‘Seminar’, with its trials and errors, its hypotheses, its uncertainties ; that, moreover, it is the very way in which Derrida, or deconstruction, brings out or allows to come out contradictions, double-meanings, in the notions or texts of the authors who precede him in the history of philosophy; and that, therefore, “hospitality” would receive the same deconstructive treatment from Derrida as the “parasite”, the “writing”, the “pharmakon”, the “trace”, the “step”, the “between”, and so on. In a sense, of course, one would be right to look at things in this way, and I will not hide the similarities in Derrida’s treatment of hospitality and other notions in this paper. However, what I would like to do today is mainly to try and highlight what is particular, even singular, about Derrida’s treatment of the notion of hospitality. For reasons that I will try to identify and explain, Derrida’s position on hospitality seems to me to have two rather unusual characteristics: on the one hand, the highlighting of an

¹ Written version, expanded and modified, of a lecture given at the Conference *Entre guerre totale et souci des autres – Politiques de l’hospitalité* [Between Total War and Care for Others – Politics of Hospitality], Organized by Stéphane Lojkin and Francesca Manzari, EA 4235 CIELAM, Aix-Marseille University, Aix-en-Provence, France, September 22-23, 2022 (See [here](#)). Reference text: Derrida, *Hospitalité* [Hospitality], Volume 1, Séminaire (1995-1996), Pascale-Anne Brault and Peggy Kamuf eds., Paris: Seuil (Collection “Bibliothèque Derrida”, Directed by Katie Chenoweth), 2021. French version [here](#) ; English translation is my own.

‘antinomy’ of hospitality, i.e. an extremely strong type of contradiction, insurmountable so to speak – which is not, I will try to show, Derrida’s usual way or usual posture ; and secondly, the creation, on Derrida’s part, around or as a result of this hyper-aporetic atmosphere, of a context of unusually violent and disturbing references and evocations, whereas the subject (hospitality) seemed, on the contrary, likely to generate or develop in a happy, peaceful, even grateful context. The violence of the context and the tensions of the logic of hospitality can perhaps be explained (this is the hypothesis I propose to test) by the fact that they force Derrida into a difficult position in relation to the question of the “real” or “reality”. Since its inception, has philosophy not prided itself on being much more than a game of arguments and demonstrations? On being a welcome to reality, a host to reality, an inn for reality, a place of hospitality for reality? Isn’t this “hospitality to reality” (the reality that comes knocking at the philosopher’s door as it does at the end of *Plato’s Pharmacy*), the very definition of truth? Derrida couldn’t really be at ease with these weighty questions. I will try to understand why, by hypothesizing that the question of hospitality manifests the attraction, both strong and disturbing, that “realism” exerts on Derridian “deconstruction”, as if it concentrated all the weight of philosophy itself.

I. The Antinomy of Hospitality

Long before Derrida himself uses the word “antinomy” to describe hospitality (p. 146 ff. of the Seminar), he sketches a portrait of a notion that is intrinsically “aporetic”, “paradoxical” and “contradictory”.

In the first few pages (p. 21 ff.), he stresses the common root and meaning, in Latin, of “hospes” and “hostis”. The Latin “hospes”, like the French “hôte”, designates both the one who receives, who welcomes, and the one who is received or welcomed. In this second sense, “hospes” means “host” in the sense of “foreigner”: the person I welcome is always, in some way, a foreigner. The first meaning of “hostis” is precisely “stranger”, and hence “enemy”. Derrida plays on the proximity of the terms “hospitality” and “hostility”, and creates the term “hostipitality” (“hostipitalité”). The person I welcome is indissociably a host, a stranger and a potential enemy. The etymology here is normally and correctly invoked by Derrida in support of an ambiguity that each of us can know and have experienced. This “undecidability” reveals superimpositions of meanings, as when the “parasite” stands both inside and outside its host. Everyone perceives the proximity between “host” and “parasite”:

“Hospitality [...], a Latin word that allows itself to be parasitized by its opposite, hostility, an undesirable host that it harbors as the contradiction of itself in its own body”.²

A second, if not contradictory, at least enigmatic dimension of hospitality is raised by Derrida when he points out the asymmetrical or strictly anthropological

² « Hospitalité [...], mot latin qui se laisse parasiter par son contraire, l’hostilité, hôte indésirable qu’il héberge comme la contradiction de soi dans son corps propre. » (Derrida, *Hospitality*, p. 21).

dimension of hospitality, wondering whether “hospitality” would be the right word to “welcome – or be welcomed by – the other or the stranger, as God, as animal or as plant”... All this leads to *L’animal que donc je suis* [*The Animal That Therefore I Am*], to Derrida’s cat, which he sees as a kind of God who “looks at him” / who “is his business” [“mon chat me regarde” means both], and to the considerations on “divinanimality” developed in *La bête et le souverain* [*The Beast and the Sovereign*]:

“Shouldn’t this place of the Other be anhuman? If it were indeed so, the anhuman, the figure, at least, of some divinanimality, in a word, and even if it were presaged through man, would be the quasi-transcendental referent, the excluded, forclosed, denied, tamed, sacrificed foundation of what it founds, namely the symbolic order, the human order, law, justice.”³

Derrida is right to make this point: hospitality concerns, in the ordinary use of language, a human being. Derrida attaches importance, in his Seminar, to the method or philosophy of ordinary language, which consists in asking “what do we say when?”, in other words in questioning the common, ordinary use of terms – a method I find particularly fruitful.⁴ So we won’t “say”, usually, ordinarily, that we are showing hospitality to a plant, an animal or a God. This remark may seem banal, obvious or of little importance. I will try to show below that this is not the case, and that the question of hospitality to the “All-Other” underpins almost all of Derrida’s analysis.

The third contradiction or logical difficulty of hospitality is one of the most important. At the point where he enunciates it (p. 23), Derrida declares that the Seminar could have ended there, because basically he has said it all. It’s about the contradiction between hospitality and mastery. When we offer hospitality to others, we are, according to Derrida (and in my opinion this is quite simply correct) performing a double contradictory gesture: we are giving up part of our mastery over our home, our schedule, our habits, etc., in order to make room for the other; and at the same time, we are asserting this mastery, because only he who is master in his own home can offer hospitality to others. And the more generous, open and welcoming our hospitality, the more paradoxically it will accentuate our control. Here, Derrida is not content to speak of undecidability or superimposed meanings; he speaks of a “contradiction” that “violently strikes at the very concept of hospitality”. Note the adverb “violently”, a little out of place in a logical discussion of the delimitation or determination of certain concepts:

“Basically, before we even begin, we could stop our Seminar there, on the formalisation of a law of hospitality that violently contradicts the very concept of hospitality [my emphasis] by setting the limit, by determining: hospitality is good, it is necessary, it is a right, a duty, an obligation, a law,

³ « Ce lieu de l’Autre ne doit-il pas être an-humain ? S’il en était bien ainsi, l’anhumain, la figure, au moins, de quelque divinanimauté, en un mot, et fût-elle pressentie au travers de l’homme, serait le référent quasi transcendantal, le fondement exclu, forclos, dénié, dompté, sacrifié de ce qu’il fonde, à savoir l’ordre symbolique, l’ordre humain, la loi, la justice. » (Derrida, Seminar *The Beast And The Sovereign*, I, p. 177).

⁴ Cf C. Ramond, *Vingt-quatre études de philosophie du langage ordinaire* [*Twenty-Four Studies in the Philosophy of Ordinary Language*], Limoges: Lambert Lucas, 2022, 472 p. See [here](#).

it's the welcoming of the other stranger as a friend, but on condition that the host, the *Wirt*, the one who receives or shelters or gives asylum remains the boss, the master of the house, on condition that he retains the authority of the home, that he guards and looks after what concerns him and thus affirms the law of hospitality as the law of the home, *oikonomia*, the law of the place (house, hotel, hospital, hospice, family, city, nation, language, etc.), the law of identity that is the law of the home, a law of identity that delimits the very place where hospitality is offered".⁵

Derrida will never cease to return, in a thousand different ways, to this "contradiction" that "violently strikes", as he says or writes, the concept of hospitality. I would emphasise the slightly tense dimension of Derrida's tone: in fact, the whole point of deconstruction (parasitism, invagination, specters, etc.) is to show that things can be themselves and their opposites simultaneously, and even that this is the only way it works ("the conditions of possibility are the conditions of impossibility", but they neither cancel nor prevent each other: a prosthesis strengthens and weakens a limb, a dopant or pharmakon strengthens and weakens the memory or the muscles, a parasite (or a virus) is internal and external, a judgement made by a judge consists of applying and not applying the law, etc.). So why here, on the subject of hospitality, worry about these contradictions, instead of seeing in them the normal undecidability of things?

The fourth contradiction of hospitality (the set of contradictions constituting the "antinomy of hospitality", just as Kant's antinomies comprise several contradictory propositions) is a little more complex and less common, and involves us in a "temporal contradiction", as Derrida puts it, from which it would be impossible to escape. This "temporal contradiction" only emerges at the end of a mental experience, in which we push the "logic" (in reality illogical, because contradictory – Sartre's famous "turnstiles" come to mind) of hospitality to its logical conclusion. And here's the thing. If I truly offer hospitality, I must make the other person not only my guest, but also my master. And so I offer him everything that is most precious to me – even my wife... Here we see the emergence of the theme of the "offered woman", which is to play such a major role in the Seminar. But then, if we follow the logic of hospitality, a reversal necessarily occurs: since my guest is now the master, and since I have offered him everything, including my wife (or my daughter, if we follow Diderot's account in the *Supplément au voyage de Bougainville*), then I am now his guest; and therefore, according to the same logic, he must offer me everything, including "his wife", who was in fact mine, and whom I can thus recover... And instantly the tables are turned

⁵ « Au fond, avant même de commencer, nous pourrions arrêter là notre Séminaire, sur la formalisation d'une loi de l'hospitalité qui frappe violemment d'une contradiction le concept même de l'hospitalité en arrêtant la limite, en déterminant : l'hospitalité, c'est bien, il en faut, c'est un droit, un devoir, une obligation, une loi, c'est l'accueil de l'autre étranger en ami mais à la condition que l'hôte, le *host*, le *Wirt*, celui qui reçoit ou héberge ou donne asile reste le patron, le maître de maison, à la condition qu'il garde l'autorité du chez soi, qu'il se garde et garde et regarde ce qui le regarde et donc affirme la loi de l'hospitalité comme loi de la maison, *oikonomia*, loi du lieu (maison, hôtel, hôpital, hospice, famille, cité, nation, langue, etc.), loi de l'identité qui délimite le lieu *même* de l'hospitalité offerte. » (Derrida, *Hospitality*, p. 23).

again, with each person taking its turn as host, offering everything it holds most precious to the other...

It's hard to imagine how such scenes could occur in ordinary, or at least familiar, life. This instability of places in hospitality is obviously a borderline experience. We might think of certain descriptions of the *potlach*, where assaults of generosity lead to the greatest violence... But Derrida does not mention them, and to illustrate this temporal contradiction of hospitality (pp. 33-34), he relies significantly on Klossowski's novel *Roberte ce soir* [*Roberte Tonight*], which evokes the "difficulties" of hospitality from a libertine point of view. This is indeed the context of "hospitality" taken to extremes. If you read books about libertines, such as the *La vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* [*The Sexual Life of Catherine M.*]⁶, you'll see that the couple who go to a libertine party both offer and take their partner (often taking him or her back) to those who welcome them and treat them in the same way. So this situation of inversion of the positions of the giver and the taker is not entirely absurd or impossible, even if it probably never occurs with the contradictory purity that Derrida evokes. Derrida's general thesis is valid above all because of the logical contradiction it highlights: hospitality cannot "last", because it can only be "reversed" into its opposite, if we follow its unstable "logic". And something that cannot last cannot exist either. This is undoubtedly why Derrida gives a significant place in his Seminar to the text on "The Distracted" from La Bruyère's *Characters* (pp. 257-258, 260): Menalchus, being received by a friend, forgets that he is not at home, believes that he is in his own flat, that he is receiving his friend at home, and ends up finding that the latter's visit "lasts" too long, without knowing how to get rid of it, while his host (the one who is actually receiving him) is thinking exactly the same thing at the same time... The absurdity of this situation did not fail to interest Derrida, as an illustration of the impossibility of lasting and happy hospitality.

Basically, all these contradictions are simply different forms of the fundamental antinomy of hospitality as presented and developed by Derrida throughout the Seminar, but explicitly and synthetically on pages 146 and following. Derrida's famous scheme of thought, according to which "the conditions of possibility are at the same time the conditions of impossibility" (which is why Derrida's philosophy, or deconstruction, seems to me to be aptly described by the expression "paradoxical transcendentalism"), finds here a new application. For Derrida, this schema applies mainly to the difference between Justice and Law: If a judge were content to apply the law to the letter, like a machine or a computer, he would be applying a "programme", but he would not be just. True judgement, true justice, therefore, presupposes that, at the very moment of judgement, the rule or programme is suspended in order to be applied justly, taking into account all the circumstances, the context, the framework. This scheme is present in the Seminar on Hospitality (120 n.2, 182). It applies as such to the distinction that Derrida wishes to introduce, which is at the heart of this Seminar, and which has acquired a certain diffusion, the distinction, then, between a hospitality that is "conditional", regulated by "law", "norms", "pacts" or "contracts", and a

⁶ Book by Catherine Millet, Paris: Seuil, 2001.

hospitality that would be “unconditional”, and therefore outside the law, a-nomic or a-nomal. Derrida’s choice of the term “antinomy” is thus perfectly consistent with the general framework of his discussion, namely a confrontation with Kant’s theses on hospitality and, as we shall see, on the moral law itself. In the *Project for Perpetual Peace*, Kant allows only regulated and “restricted” hospitality, which must be subject to “restrictions” (*Einschränkungen*) or a set of “conditions”. In response to this demand, Derrida is going to oppose an ‘unconditional’ hospitality, respecting exactly the Kantian vocabulary of the antinomy which, in all cases, consists of opposing formulas expressing a condition to formulas expressing something unconditioned.

It is not easy to understand why Derrida wanted so insistently (indeed, he returns to it again and again in the Seminar, as the heart of the heart of what he wishes to posit), why he wanted so insistently, at all costs, to postulate the existence, next to or below the conditional hospitality that each of us has had the opportunity to experience one day or another, the existence, I say, of an “unconditional hospitality” of which there can be by definition no example, since in society as in nature, there is nothing that is absolutely without conditions, causes or limits. I will therefore propose a number of hypotheses, not to explain Derrida’s intentions, which I know no more about than anyone else, even supposing that the term “intention” could be relevant here, but to try to explain the architectural or systemic necessities of the notion of “unconditional hospitality”.

II. Unconditional and Conditional Hospitality

Derrida visibly conceives the duality “conditional hospitality” / “unconditional hospitality” according to the pattern of inseparable dualities which make it possible to account for phenomena. For example, in Aristotle, the “matter / form” couple is inseparable: we only know objects composed of matter and form. A pure matter is no more encountered than a pure form, but these concepts in their purity make it possible to account for natural phenomena. We could also think of the “angel / beast” couple posed by Pascal to reflect the paradoxical nature of man. In Derrida, a pair of the same order would be found in the notions of “trace” and “line”: there is no trace without a line having been drawn: he who traces a letter, who writes, accomplishes a movement, he “draws a line”; in the written letter, the trace of this movement is visible, but paradoxically as if immobilized: the written trace only preserves the form of the movement, but loses the movement itself. There is something quite Bergsonian there, in the opposition between a creative, dynamic outpouring and a crystallized, cooled down aftermath, like the lava of a volcano congealing into rocks. If we accept such comparisons, “unconditional hospitality” would be like the life or the dynamics of hospitality, this burst of altruism which pushes us to open ourselves to others; and “conditional hospitality” would be the set of repercussions and concretizations, or concretions, of this original movement, which we could thus only grasp, paradoxically, in the norms, pacts, behaviors regulated while it was free of all this at the start.

From this point of view, unconditional hospitality would prove necessary for conditional hospitality. We would never offer hospitality to anyone if this pure movement of oblation did not exist. At least that's what Derrida thinks. And he points out, as if in passing, a striking argument in favor of this position: no one criticizes hospitality in itself:

“Everyone says: ‘hospitality is good’”, we have never met people saying: ‘hospitality is not good’, even the worst, the hardened xenophobes claim to support this which they will not admit as xenophobia, but support their xenophobic policy from the conditions of hospitality. “If we want to honorably welcome strangers [...], if we want to welcome them honorably and with hospitality worthy of the name, let's drive out the others.”⁷

No one criticizes hospitality in itself, Derrida believes, because hospitality is linked to the identity of the one who welcomes, that is to say, as we have seen, to his mastery, to the fact that he has a “home” and indeed a “self”. To reject the very possibility of hospitality would amount, by a strange return, to getting rid of one's own identity, autonomy, “selfhood”, mastery, subjectivity, authority, as these notions are intimately linked to the possibility of offering hospitality.

“I can't say, ‘One must not be hospitable under any circumstances’ without ruining my own identity, as they say my own selfhood.”⁸

This legitimizes the position of an “absolute” or unconditional hospitality (Derrida sometimes says “hyperbolic”), which would be like a “categorical imperative” (p. 146) at the source of all forms of conditional or “ordinary” hospitality, even if by definition we can never observe or experience it.

However, this unconditional hospitality, as evanescent and elusive as it may be, is the object, on the part of Derrida, of a faith, a certainty, I would almost want to say an strange exaltation, which sometimes make him switch into positions, and even into formulations that he himself characterizes, most often, as traditional, even metaphysical schemes – as if there were here a powerful and obscure source of attraction, capable of temporarily overcoming deconstruction.

First, Derrida, very unexpectedly, posits a hierarchy between unconditional and conditional hospitality: very unexpectedly, in fact, because deconstruction could be defined as the refusal of the “spontaneous” hierarchies between the pairs of concepts which structure our thoughts (“deep / superficial”; “reality / appearance”; “model /

⁷ « Tout le monde dit : ‘l'hospitalité, c'est bien’ », on n'a jamais rencontré de gens dire : « l'hospitalité, ce n'est pas bien », même les pires, les xénophobes endurcis prétendent soutenir ce qu'ils n'avouent pas comme une xénophobie, mais soutenir leur politique xénophobe à partir des conditions d'hospitalité. « Si nous voulons accueillir honorablement des étrangers [...], si nous voulons les accueillir honorablement et avec une hospitalité digne de ce nom, chassons les autres. » (Derrida, *Hospitality Seminar*, p. 181).

⁸ « Je ne peux pas dire : ‘Il ne faut en aucun cas être hospitalier’ sans ruiner ma propre identité, comme on dit ma propre ipséité. » (Derrida, *Hospitality Seminar*, p. 181).

copy”, “oral / written”, etc.), and which characterize the conceptual system of “metaphysics”:

“This aporia is indeed an antinomy in the strict sense of the word, for it does not oppose a law to a nature or to an empirical fact, but two laws, two regimes of non-empirical law: it opposes *The* law and some *laws*. The tragedy, for it is a destinal tragedy, is that the two antagonistic terms of this antinomy are not symmetrical: there is a hierarchy, *The* law is above the *laws*, therefore it is illegal, transgressive, outlawed, like an anomic law, *nomos a-nomos*, law above the law and out law.”⁹

Derrida opposes the singular of “The Law” of unconditional hospitality to the plural “of the laws” of conditional or ordinary hospitality. Now, the opposition between an essentializing and original singular and a plural of derivation and secondarity is surprising in a deconstructive discourse, to the extent that it is typical of the most classic Platonism, as we can read in *The Symposium*, and mainly in the speech where Socrates recounts how Diotima taught him to raise from the multiplicity of “beautiful objects” to the unique “beautiful in itself”. The thesis of an unique “Law of unconditional hospitality” which would be superior hierarchically (that is to say ontologically or even chronologically) to the multiple laws (ordinary, relative, contingent) of ordinary hospitality is therefore clearly, on the part of Derrida, a lurch into the field of metaphysics. Since the edition of the Seminar on *Hospitality* was made with great care from the manuscripts or rather typescripts or compuscripts left by Derrida, the reader of the Seminar can see something that the listeners may not have perceived at the time: Derrida almost always capitalizes the word “The” when he speaks of “The Law” of unconditional hospitality, while he leaves the lowercase in the plural “the” when evoking “the laws” of conditional or ordinary hospitality. This typographical practice is constant in the Seminary. Sometimes Derrida even uses a double capital letter when he talks about “The Law” of unconditional hospitality: one for “The”, and another for “Law”. The passage is to be found in the concluding paragraph of the seventh session, i.e., in a place which is in itself a moment of insistence:

“For *The* Law of absolute hospitality is also a universal law of singularity, a right to absolute singularity and otherness.”¹⁰

These doubling of capital letters when speaking of “The Law” is reminiscent of the typographical devices by which God is evoked in written texts, or in “Holy

⁹ « C’est bien, cette aporie, une antinomie au sens strict de ce mot, car elle n’oppose pas une loi à une nature ou à un fait empirique, mais deux lois, deux régimes de loi non empirique : elle oppose *La* loi et (à) *des* lois. La tragédie, car c’est une tragédie destinale, c’est que les deux termes antagonistes de cette antinomie ne sont pas symétriques : il y a une hiérarchie, *La* loi est au-dessus des lois, donc elle est illégale, transgressive, hors la loi, comme une loi anémique, *nomos a-nomos*, loi au-dessus des lois et loi hors la loi. » (Derrida, *Hospitality*, p. 146-147).

¹⁰ « Car *La* Loi de l’hospitalité absolue est aussi une loi universelle de la singularité, un droit à la singularité et à l’altérité absolues. » (Derrida, *Hospitality*, Seventh Session, Concluding Paragraph, p. 273. Capitalization and italics are Derrida’s).

Scripture” (with capital “H” and “S”). Derrida knows this process very well, and made fun of it by creating the neologisms “majuscule” (“capitalize”) and “émajusculation” (“put in lower case / emasculate”)... Traditional metaphysics hardly separates the figure of a higher concept from that of a masculine, capitalized Father figure. Respect for capital letters is therefore as much a mark of respect or belonging to this tradition as “emajusculation” is a mark of disrespect or mocking indifference towards it:

“Emajusculation. Compound term of ‘capital letter’ (French ‘majuscule’) and ‘emasculate’, hence ‘emajuscule’ and ‘emajusculation’. To remove the capital letter (e.g. from the word ‘God’ or from the word ‘Being’) is, in a way, to emasculate, castrate, cut off the attributes of paternal or royal power. ‘Différance’, insofar as it undermines any origin conceived as unique and divine, is in itself a process of emajusculation (*Marges*, p. 28-29; *Glas*, p. 13; *Genesis, Genealogies*, p. 20). ‘**Majuscule**’ (English ‘capitalize’) is the opposite operation, by which Genet, for example, gives common names with capital letters to some of his characters: ‘Mimosa’, ‘Quarell’ [French ‘Querelle’], ‘Divine’, etc. (*Glas*); it is also practiced by Lacan (cf. Derrida, *The Beast and the Sovereign*, I, p. 148).”¹¹

In a text by Derrida, therefore, these hierarchies, these distinctions between the singular of “The Law” of unconditional hospitality and the plural of “the laws” of conditional hospitality, and the capitalizations that indicate and support them, cannot be considered of little importance.

As surprising as it may seem, Derrida often borrows, in the *Hospitality Seminar*, a language and thought patterns that he most often criticizes or deconstructs elsewhere. The opposition between “The Law”, absolute, unconditional, and “the laws” relative, conditional, accompanied by the superiority of the first over the second is one of the most classic schemas of political thought, illustrated since antiquity by the opposition between Antigone and Creon. And in a passage in which Derrida evokes the dual necessity of “The Law” of unconditional hospitality and “the laws” of conditional hospitality (i.e., broadly speaking, morality and politics), one senses that he is forced into a kind of conciliation between the two types of law that is hardly more satisfying for thought than it is for him:

“It’s the question of politics, that’s why it’s very difficult – that’s the *double bind* here – to settle, as far as hospitality is concerned, in the political that limits hospitality too much, but it’s also difficult to criticize politics and say: ‘Well, we’re going to cross the boundaries of politics to approach or access pure hospitality’ because at that point, you can get nowhere, and confuse hospitality with the opposite and give free rein to hatred.”¹²

¹¹ Ch. Ramond, *Derrida Dictionary*, Paris: Ellipses, 2016.

¹² Derrida, *Hospitality*, p. 196: « C’est la question du politique, c’est pourquoi il est très difficile – c’est ça le *double bind* ici – de s’installer, pour ce qui est de l’hospitalité, dans le politique qui limite trop l’hospitalité, mais il est difficile aussi de critiquer le politique et de dire : ‘Bon, on va franchir les limites du politique pour aborder ou accéder à l’hospitalité pure’ parce qu’à ce moment-là, on peut aboutir nulle part, et confondre l’hospitalité avec le contraire et laisser libre champ à la haine ».

My hypothesis is that Derrida is attracted to metaphysics particularly in the Seminar on *Hospitality*, because this question of hospitality, even if it doesn't necessarily appear at first glance, and even if Derrida himself doesn't formulate it, is a way for philosophy to express in a somewhat roundabout manner its main haunting, namely the haunting of his relationship with reality.

III. Philosophy as a Welcome to Reality

In the *Hospitality* Seminar Derrida often insists that the question of hospitality is conceptually close to (if not equivalent to) the question of "welcome". The phantasm of welcoming reality undoubtedly runs through the entire history of philosophy. Philosophers, until contemporary times, are almost unanimous on this point. From the outset, philosophy conceives of itself, in the most famous text of its nascent history (the Platonic allegory of the cave), as an entirely passive ecstasy, in which the prisoner is penetrated, transfixed, filled, by the luminous flux coming from the sun, which he welcomes, and from which he begins to pronounce the discourse of philosophy and truth. Philosophy is full of this phantasm of passivity, of an entirely passive reception of reality, which corresponds quite well to the "unconditional hospitality" of which Derrida speaks. We see it among the Stoics, who sought agreement with the order of the world. We find it in the modern era in two of its main representatives, Descartes and Spinoza, both of whom agreeing on the fact that knowledge consists in some way of opening the door to a truth which comes to invade you, and towards which it is appropriate to be entirely welcoming and passive. Descartes wrote for example, in a letter to Regius in May 1641:

"Intellection is properly the passion of the soul, and volition its action
<*Intellectio enim proprie mentis passio est, et volitio ejus actio*>."

"Intellection is the passion of the soul"... A magnificent formula, which sums up well the highest ideal of knowledge: welcoming the true, or the real, as it is, without intervening, without modifying it, as a truly hospitable host welcomes the traveler without imposing anything on him... Descartes will thus welcome within him with total passivity, in the fifth *Meditation*, the evidence of the existence of God; and he will specify a few years later (in 1648, to the Marquis of Newcastle), that

it is "not so much a question of grasping the perfections of God as of being grasped by them <*illasque non tam capere quam ab ipsis capi*>."

The word "concept" (Latin *conceptus*, German *Begriff*) envelops the idea of a "grasp". But the ultimate knowledge, that of God, consists of renouncing the grasp, and on the contrary of letting oneself be taken, in a passive intellectual ecstasy, by the divine perfections. A comparable idea is to be found in Spinoza when he writes, in his *Short Treatise*:

“To understand is a pure passion, that is, a perception in the soul of the essence and existence of things; so that it is never we who affirm or deny anything of the thing, but the thing itself that affirms or denies something of itself in us.”¹³

Or in the *Metaphysical Thoughts*:

“Ideas are nothing else than narratives or stories of nature in the mind <narrationes sive historiae naturae mentales>.”¹⁴

This idea of welcoming reality as it is, of a pleasurable submission to reality, runs through all of philosophy, whether we consider it as a search for truth or wisdom. It is expressed by Sartre in an amusing and joyful way in a text published in 1982 in the *Review Modern Times [Les Temps Modernes]*, where Sartre recounts a superb “kick in the ass” he had received, and enjoyed, in captivity during the war:

“Last night, for example, I enjoyed receiving a kick in the ass. I had lingered and the curfew time had long passed... As I slowly arrived in the side alley, I was hit in the face by an electric lamp... The sentry started yelling, threatening me with his bayonet. I understood that he did not intend to plunge his bayonet into my stomach, but that he was toying with the idea of pricking my buttocks: he was waiting for me to turn my back on him. I slowly turned around; never have I felt so vividly and so clearly all this impotent meat that is compacted at the bottom of my back. Finally, I received a tremendous kick that threw me against the door. I said to my friends: ‘I just got one of those kicks in the ass!’ and they all started laughing heartily.”¹⁵

The joyful side of this kick seems to me to be symbolic of the philosophical expectation. The philosopher waits for reality to ‘kick him in the ass’. It’s a sign that contact has been established, and that he may not have been on the right track until now. Reality has awoken the philosopher. It now points him in the direction of truth, perhaps wisdom...

The unconditional law of hospitality, as presented by Derrida, concentrates and brings together all these traditional features of philosophy. On numerous occasions in his *Seminar*, Derrida develops the idea that true hospitality, absolute or unconditional,

¹³ Spinoza, *Short Treatise, Part 2, Chap. 16, § (5)*.

¹⁴ Spinoza, *Metaphysical Thoughts*, part I, chapter 6.

¹⁵ Jean-Paul SARTRE, « Les carnets de Mathieu » [« Mathieu’s Notebooks »], in *Les Temps Modernes*, september 1982, p. 451-452, Quoted in Annie COHEN SOLAL, *Sartre*, Paris: Gallimard, 1985, p. 214-215 : « Hier soir, par exemple, j’ai pris plaisir à recevoir un coup de pied au cul. Je m’étais attardé et l’heure du couvre-feu était passée depuis longtemps... Comme j’arrivais à pas de loup, dans l’allée latérale, j’ai reçu en plein visage le feu d’une lampe électrique... La sentinelle s’est mise à gueuler en me menaçant de sa baïonnette. J’ai compris qu’il n’avait pas l’intention de me plonger sa baïonnette dans le ventre, mais qu’il jouait avec l’idée de m’en piquer les fesses : il attendait que je lui tourne le dos. Je fis lentement volte-face ; jamais je n’ai senti si vivement et si nettement toute cette viande impotente qui se tasse au bas de mon dos. Finalement, j’ai reçu un formidable coup de pied qui m’a projeté contre la porte. J’ai dit aux copains : ‘je viens de recevoir un de ces coups de pied au cul !’ et ils se sont tous mis à rire de bon cœur. »

consists in welcoming the one who asks for hospitality, not only without asking him any questions or asking his name, but even more than that, in

“giving the newcomer your entire home and your self, giving him his own, our own, without asking his name or anything in return, or fulfilling the slightest condition.”¹⁶

a hospitality, says Derrida a little further on,

“that begins by opening up unquestioningly and unconditionally with a ‘Come’, ‘Come in’, ‘Come inside’, whoever you are and whatever you want.”¹⁷

“Whoever you are and whatever you want”... You feel like shouting: “Careful, Jacques, that could be dangerous!” But Derrida doesn’t stop there, he doesn’t listen more to anything or anyone... He goes even further, asking (and implicitly answering in the affirmative) whether we shouldn’t go so far as to say that unconditional hospitality

“commands, invites, calls, commands to, invites or perhaps calls upon us to offer ourselves, to offer hospitality, and therefore to offer ourselves, indiscriminately, not only to the living animal, human or divine, but to that non-living thing we call a dead person, a dead person who asks for hospitality, [...] a dead person who in some way knocks at the door, a specter, a dead person as a returnee, whether animal, human or divine.”¹⁸

Unconditional hospitality, which Derrida does not hesitate to call a “madness” (French “folie”, p. 88 and 212), would thus consist not only in welcoming the other, whoever he may be (“I don’t even have to know who the other is, the one I’m welcoming, the one I’m receiving”, declares Derrida on p. 179, in a formulation that is at once theological and hyper-sexualised, backroom style), letting him penetrate my interiority completely, but also offering him everything I hold most precious, right down to my wife or my partner, and finally “offering myself” in a kind of sacrifice that is obviously pleasurable, by which I strip myself, for the benefit of the Other with a capital “O”, not only of all property, but of every trace of autonomy, subjectivity or mastery.

Derrida has greatly sexualised ontology and theology, notably in *Glas*. The Seminar on *Hospitality* in turn expresses, throughout, the fantasy of a rape by reality (which can be the object of a secondary rationalization, as a description of the very

¹⁶ Derrida, *Hospitality*, p. 146: « donner à l’arrivant tout son chez-soi et son soi, lui donner son propre, notre propre, sans lui demander ni son nom, ni contrepartie, ni de remplir la moindre condition. »

¹⁷ Une hospitalité « qui commence par s’ouvrir sans question et inconditionnellement par un ‘Viens’, ‘Entre’, ‘Rentre’, qui que tu sois et quoi que tu veuilles. » (Derrida, *Hospitality*, p. 266).

¹⁸ « commande, invite, appelle, commande de, invite ou peut-être appelle à s’offrir, à offrir l’hospitalité, donc à s’offrir soi-même, indistinctement, non seulement au vivant animal, humain, divin, mais à ce non-vivant qu’on appelle un mort, un mort qui demande l’hospitalité, [...] un mort qui de quelque façon frappe à la porte, un spectre, un mort comme revenant, qu’il soit animal, humain ou divin ». (Derrida, *Hospitality*, p. 280).

heart of the philosophical process, as I have just recalled). Hospitality, for Derrida and in general, cannot be separated from consideration of the “arriving”, of the one or that which arrives in an unforeseen or even unpredictable way, and therefore of the “event” – some would name it a “gift”. All these notions are linked. Absolute or unconditional hospitality is thus presented in the *Hospitality Seminar*, as in *The ‘Concept’ of September 11th*, as the “pure eventuality of the event”, in the form of a rapture, an “abandonment”, a mystical ecstasy, something “that comes to me from above”, in which we should experience a genuine pleasure in passively undergoing a kind of eventual rape¹⁹, like Ganymedes kidnapped by Zeus, a rape which would leave us panting and helpless under an “event worthy of the name” which would only be such if it could never be “understood.”²⁰ We find the same insistence in “Le temps des adieux”²¹, where Derrida insists on the need to “let oneself be surprised” by what one does not expect (p. 6), and on the fact that the true “event” must come

“from the ‘back’, by what comes and returns from behind me, always, behind my back, never presenting itself face to face with me, not even as the face or visage of the other.”²²

It is easier to understand, then, the particular insistence (I would even say the troubled complacency) with which Derrida evokes at length, in the Seminar on *Hospitality* (p. 172 ff.), the abominable, almost unbearable story of the “daughters of Lot”, the man who, according to the *Old Testament* (*Genesis*, chapter 19), in order to preserve the travellers (in truth angels) to whom he had offered the hospitality of his house while a band of sodomites (i.e. inhabitants of Sodom) demanded to rape them, chose to offer his two virgin daughters to the assailants:

Lot went outside to meet them and shut the door behind him and said, “No, my friends. Don’t do this wicked thing. Look, I have two daughters who have never slept with a man. Let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don’t do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof.”²³

In the *Genesis*, the “travellers”, having the power of “angels”, protect Lot and prevent his two daughters from being raped. But it is quite different in the parallel story of the *Book of Judges* (chp.19, episode of the “Crime of Gibeah”): the master of

¹⁹ See Derrida, *The ‘Concept’ of September 11*, p. 194.

²⁰ Derrida, *The ‘Concept’ of September 11*, p. 139; a theme taken up again in *Penser à ne pas voir* [Think About Not Seeing], p. 61-62, where the dimension of desired rape is almost explicit.

²¹ « Le temps des adieux. Heidegger (lu par) Hegel (lu par) Malabou » [The time of farewells. Heidegger (read by) Hegel (read by) Malabou], *Compte rendu par Jacques Derrida de Catherine Malabou, L’avenir de Hegel. Plasticité. Temporalité. Dialectique* [Book review, by Jacques Derrida, of Catherine Malabou’s *Hegel’s future. Plasticity. Temporality. Dialectics*], Paris: Vrin, 1996, in *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger*, t. 188, n° 1, *Hegel* (January-March 1998), p. 3-47.

²² Derrida, *Le temps des adieux*, p. 31.

²³ *Genesis*, 19, 6-8.

the house begins by offering his virgin daughter to the attackers, as in the story of Lot. But, as the attackers do not want this virgin girl (they want to rape the very man protected the laws of hospitality), the host delivers his own concubine to them:

“The owner of the house went outside and said to them, ‘No, my friends, don’t be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don’t do this outrageous thing. Look, here is my virgin daughter. I will bring her out to you now, and you can use her and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don’t do such an outrageous thing.’ But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them.”²⁴

The biblical text is then particularly explicit and atrocious: the assailants rape the woman handed over to them by her own husband, in front of the house in which the laws of hospitality shelter her husband’s guest, “all night long”, until she dies in the early hours of the morning²⁵... It is very surprising for the contemporary reader to see that at no point does the text of the Bible make the husband responsible for the appalling fate of his own wife. All the responsibility for this crime is placed on the “assailants”, namely the Benjaminites, whom Yahweh will soon help to defeat and destroy.

Derrida reminds us (p. 208) that Augustine was somehow involved in this infamy. In his book *Against Lies (Contra Mendacium)*, Augustine generally condemns the idea of “compensatory sins” (*peccata compensativa*), and in this he condemns Lot’s act. But he writes nonetheless:

“there is less evil in dishonouring women than men <*minus malum est feminas quam viros perpeti stuprum*>; and so we can say that the fact that he preferred this to be inflicted on his daughters rather than on his guests is part of the justice of this just man <*etiam hoc ad justitiam justii illius pertinuisse dicatur, quod in filiabus hoc maluit fieri quam in hospitibus suis*>.”²⁶

“A just man”... *Justitia justii illius*... My copy of the “Jerusalem Bible” states coldly in a note about this episode: “A woman’s honour was then of less value than the sacred

²⁴ *Judges*, 19, 23-25.

²⁵ *Judges*, 19, 25-28 : “But the men would not listen to him. So the man took his concubine and sent her outside to them, and they raped her and abused her throughout the night, and at dawn they let her go. At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying, fell down at the door and lay there until daylight. When her master got up in the morning and opened the door of the house and stepped out to continue on his way, there lay his concubine, fallen in the doorway of the house, with her hands on the threshold. He said to her, ‘Get up; let’s go.’ But there was no answer.”

²⁶ I translate. The French translation quoted by Derrida on p. 208 of his *Hospitality Seminar* (i.e. Saint Augustin, *Contra Mendacium / Contre le mensonge*, in *Problèmes moraux. Oeuvres de saint Augustin. 1^{re} série : Opuscles*, vol. II, texte de l’édition bénédictine, traduction, introduction et notes de [Text of the Benedictine Edition, Translation, Introduction and Notes by] Gustave Combès, Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 1948, p. 392-393) is rather imprecise and watered down.

duty of hospitality”²⁷. It was less serious to rape a woman to death than a man... Probably because women were more used to it?... Or because they were (are?) predisposed to this sort of thing? Ready to welcome otherness?... Hospitable?...

Conclusion

It has been impossible for me to understand what Derrida was trying to say or get across by dwelling on this appalling story. He doesn't explain himself at all on this point. Did he mean to denounce the folly of unconditional hospitality? To illustrate the possibility within it of a “radical evil” (p. 195-196)? To suggest that the truth of any gesture of hospitality lies in its acceptance of the possibility of rape and murder? A little of all this, no doubt. Perhaps Derrida was vaguely aware (that would be my reading) that the realist conception of philosophy, i.e. the most traditional conception according to which philosophy consists in passively welcoming reality, a conception that the whole of deconstruction combats as typically phantasmatic (see the final scene in the painting gallery in *The Voice and the Phenomenon*), that this conception, then, of philosophy as “realism” and as “hospitality to reality whatever it may be” was not only impossible but dangerous and violent. In fact, that would be my reading, because I have long thought that a “realist” position in philosophy can be a source of violence – one of the reasons why I fight it philosophically by trying to highlight its aporias and impasses.²⁸

In this way, Derrida might have glimpsed what Kant had clearly seen, namely that maintaining a “realist” position made it impossible to resolve both the antinomy of pure and practical reason and the antinomy of hospitality. It seems to me that adopting not a “transcendental idealism”, as Kant did, but a rigorously constructivist (or deconstructivist, as you will) point of view, according to which categories or concepts never have anything to do with “reality”, and therefore do not have to welcome it or offer it hospitality, would make it possible to envisage a solution to the aporia of hospitality by considering that it takes three forms rather than two.

The first kind of hospitality would be hospitality with an “invitation” and a “welcome” speech. This is conditional hospitality, the kind we experience, for example, when we are invited to a conference, and it is often happy. As Derrida rightly says, this form of hospitality and generosity is inseparable from the assertion of authority and

²⁷ *La Bible de Jérusalem*, Translated into French under the direction of the École Biblique de Jérusalem, New edition entirely revised and enlarged, Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1979, p. 48, note e).

²⁸ See in particular C. Ramond, “Clément Rosset – The Coherence of Realism”, Preface to the book by Stéphane Vinolo *Clément Rosset – Philosophy as anti-ontology* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012, p. 9-35 ; read [here](#) in French); and “Philosophy Without Objects Or Concepts”, Conference “*The Concepts in Philosophy*”, International College of Philosophy, Paris, January 15th, 2022 (read [here](#) in English).

control in the context of owning a home. It is the only one that really bears the name “hospitality” in ordinary language.

The second kind of hospitality would be the welcoming of others without “invitation”, but nevertheless with “consent”. This form of hospitality would be more feminine, whereas the first would be more masculine; seduction and motherhood would come under it. We can welcome or consent to someone we haven’t invited. A child developing in its mother’s womb is not like an adult ringing the doorbell. This second form of hospitality would also include the one offered by Bishop Myriel to Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*; Jean Valjean has not been invited, yet he is welcomed and offered precious possessions, even though he has committed theft. Most hospices (Mother Theresa comes to mind) fall into this second category (consent to be welcomed, without invitation).

The third kind of hospitality (penetration by force, without invitation or consent) should not be called “hospitality”, but rather “rape”. Derrida’s “unconditional hospitality”, as well as the whole tradition that conceives of philosophy as welcoming a “reality” that you haven’t invited, that you don’t want, and that nevertheless imposes itself on you by force and without mercy, belongs entirely to this third category (forced acceptance, rape, without invitation or consent): viruses, accidents, death, everything we “stumble upon”. We have to accept all this even though we didn’t invite it and are far from having always consented to it. Since most wisdoms aim to achieve a form of this consent, the third kind of hospitality therefore generates both rejection and a secret attraction. The most popular and general definition of philosophy, as a stoicism, is to accept and welcome “reality as it is”, i.e. what we have not invited and to which we have not even consented, including death. As we see in Spinoza and Nietzsche, this popular definition envelops at the same time the highest ethical categories: a “consentment” that is at the same time “contentment” (*acquiescentia in se ipso*), or a great “yes” to the world (*amor fati*). Our reading of Derrida’s ‘unconditional hospitality’ thus leads us to an unexpectedly violent dimension of one of philosophy’s main models.

Summary

I propose here a new interpretation of the “unconditional hospitality” developed by Derrida in volume 1 of his Seminar *On Hospitality* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2021). The tension that Derrida introduces into the very heart of the notion of hospitality (through the numerous aporias and antinomies he identifies in it, and through his insistent recourse to violent, even unbearable texts, such as the history of the “Daughters of Lot”) is seen here as a symptom of a much more general problem. I try to show that Derrida’s exalted defense of an “unconditional hospitality” that no one (including himself) has ever experienced is an unconscious way of revealing a temptation towards “realism” that his entire philosophy combats, but which nevertheless exerts a strong attraction on him, as it does on every philosopher. The history of philosophy, from Plato to Derrida via Descartes or Spinoza, has most often made “hospitality to reality” the very definition of philosophy. For millennia, truth and wisdom have been conceived as the acceptance of the violence inflicted on us by the “reality” that penetrates us without our invitation or consent, until it damages us and finally drives us out of existence. Our reading of Derrida’s ‘unconditional hospitality’ thus leads us to an unexpectedly violent dimension of one of philosophy’s main models.