Reading Derrida: Deconstruction as Self-Inheritance

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Abstract

Derrida argued at great length early on in his career that texts live on in the absence of their author. The question remains, however, of precisely how this survival takes place. In this paper I argue that the life of Derrida’s own oeuvre is sustained through his particular practice of self-inheritance. I justify this claim by focusing on one moment in the text *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, in which Derrida inherits from himself through self-citation. In citing himself while at the same time modifying his citation, Derrida sets into motion a deconstruction of his own text that he does not seem to anticipate. It is this movement of deconstruction that enables Derrida’s text to live on.
Derrida’s text is so brilliant, so incisive, so strong that whatever happens in Derrida, happens between him and his own text. He doesn’t need Rousseau, he doesn’t need anybody else…


An interviewer once said to Derrida, almost in exasperation, ‘To read you, one has to have read Derrida…’ (Derrida 1995: p. 117). This is a thought that has no doubt occurred to many of Derrida's readers. He published so much, and his books are difficult, never linear, such that in reading one of his texts one sometimes wishes to have read, if not all, than at least some of the others first. Reading Derrida seems to require that one has already read Derrida. Reading Derrida requires repetition.

In response to this comment, Derrida quickly retorted, ‘But that’s true for everyone! Is it so wrong to take account of a past trajectory, of a writing that has in part sealed itself, little by little? But it is also interesting to undo, to unseal. I also try to begin again in proximity to the simplest thing, which is sometimes difficult and dangerous’ (Derrida 1995: p. 117). This somewhat defensive remark suggests that the necessity of repeated readings is not particular to Derrida’s own work, but applies to all writers and all bodies of work. Reading requires repetition, Derrida would have us understand, in the sense that it is never enough to read any single text in isolation, no matter who is being read.

In one sense Derrida is absolutely right in his response. Texts do not stand alone, for the fact that they share their signature with other works automatically places them in an oeuvre,
which calls to be read as a whole. In order to read any single work in an oeuvre, one should try to read some of the others as well. Hence the injunction to undertake repeated readings. But does the truth of this statement mean that there is nothing specific about the injunction to reread this particular writer, Derrida? Does it hold simply because it is ‘true for everyone’? I want to resist this thought. Derrida’s works do share the name of their author, but they do more than this. They also actively refer to each other, explicitly citing other writings that also carry the signature 'Derrida.' This began in 1967, when Derrida published more or less simultaneously three major texts that already contained a web of cross-citations.¹ And this practice has only increased with the passage of time and the growth of his oeuvre, so that it now seems impossible for a Derridean text to appear without those footnotes where he politely refers the reader to another of his works in which such and such an idea is developed further. Thus, while Derrida is well-known for always reading the work of others, there is another other to whom he constantly refers – himself. To read Derrida, to read any text signed by Derrida, one must thus read Derrida. Read, that is, all of those other works signed by him that appear in all of those footnotes.

It is this practice of self-citation that concerns me in this paper. What takes place when Derrida cites himself? How does it shape his oeuvre? And what is the relation between this practice and the life of this oeuvre? In what follows I focus on one moment in one text – ‘The Reason of the Strongest (Are there Rogue States?)’ – in which Derrida refers to his own work. I argue that in this moment Derrida sets in motion a process that is best understood in terms of a concept recently appearing in his work, that of autoimmunity. Further, I show that it is precisely in being autoimmune that this act of self-citation allows the Derridean text to survive, living on beyond the control of its author. But to understand this act, we first need to make a slight detour
across time and space to an incident that may have taken place in Oxford a few days prior to 6 June 1977.

1. ‘…that I should kill myself…’

Early on in *The Postcard*, Derrida recounts the story of how the postcard is first encountered. This story winds through several side stories, much like the path taken through the streets and colleges of Oxford. The day before, Derrida had given a seminar, in English (‘more than ever I pretended to speak, or to think what I was saying at the same time…’ (Derrida, 1987: p. 15)²), on the theme of ‘philosophy and literature,’ ten years after having read the paper ‘La Différance’ to the embarrassed silence of Ryle, Ayer and Strawson in that very same location. The discussion continued on the lawn, where a young student (‘very handsome’) attempted ‘to seduce’ Derrida by asking him why he doesn’t kill himself. ‘In his eyes this was the only way to “forward” (his word) my “theoretical discourse,”’ the only way to be consequent and to produce an event.’ Rather than arguing, than ‘sending him back to this or that,’ Derrida responded with a ‘pirouette,’ ‘by sending him back his question, by signifying to him that he must have been savoring, along with me, the interest that he visibly was taking, at this very moment, in this question that I moreover concerned myself with along with others, among them myself. *In private*. And what proves to you, I said to him if I remember correctly, that I do not do so, and more than once.’

I like to think that this post-seminar discussion on that green lawn of Oxford took place in English. Derrida would then have only been pretending to speak, or pretending to think what he was saying at the same time, mechanically returning the question to its sender. But even if it was
all said in French, automation was already at work. We know this not only because of what
Derrida has told us (along with Ryle, Ayer, and Strawson) about the repetition inherent in
speech. The story of the discussion is itself ample proof. It is written from memory, ‘if I
remember correctly.’ It is immediately posed again to ‘you,’ ‘I ask you the same question, by the
same courier.’ It is transcribed by Derrida from the postcard to the book manuscript, after
passing through a sorting procedure to which I will turn shortly. The book is typeset, printed,
translated, read, cited, recited… this conversation arrives to us through countless repetitions.3
And I ask you the same question, by the same courier. Both questions. Why doesn’t Derrida kill
himself? And what proves to you that he does not do so, and more than once?

The second question disarms the first in already affirming the threat. Suicide may no
longer be a threat, for perhaps, the second question suggests, it has already taken place. More
than once. Derrida kills himself more than once.

How are we to understand this claim? How can it be that Derrida kills himself, and more
than once? An answer, of sorts, is given at the published end of the entry. After Jonathan and
Cynthia, and the labyrinth of Oxford, after the encounter with the postcard that will never cease
to repeat itself, we read the following:

they are not sure of it, as they are of my 'suicide'—making my way toward it, you hear,
toward you. And je me trie* [I sort myself]

The footnote, the first of the envois, follows, stating
Suicide returns here in the closing of the entry, more than once. Directly, then as a supplement to the strange phrase ‘je me trie.’ Je me trie/je me tue. I sort myself/I kill myself. Killing myself is here indistinguishable from sorting myself, and bad writing makes it so. In this sense, perhaps, Derrida can claim that he kills himself more than once.

But does this make any sense? While we might have some idea as to what killing oneself involves, it is far from clear what we are to make of the phrase ‘I sort myself.’ However, it turns out that sorting appears more than once in *The Postcard*. In the short preface to ‘Envois,’ Derrida introduces us to the principle by which the postcards are partially incinerated (represented by the 52 blank spaces that continually recur throughout the text). He has reservations about this process, seeing it more than ever as contestable, as ‘the grate, the filter, and the economy of sorting [l’économie du tri] can be on any occasion’ (Derrida 1987: p. 4). The selection procedure is thus identified with a sorting procedure, and we can thereby begin to understand why sorting himself would be akin to killing himself. Sorting in this archive is a process of incineration, a whiting out and destruction of the text constituting that which here writes ‘I.’ ‘I sort myself’ would refer in advance (or perhaps it is just Derrida reading back into his bad handwriting that which he had later come to see) to this process of self-effacement. Moving beyond *The Postcard*, but not too far, the verb ‘to sort [trier]’ returns in *Specters of Marx* as one of the words associated with the practice of inheritance: ‘An inheritance is never gathered together, it is never one with itself. Its presumed unity, if there is one, can only consist in the injunction to reaffirm in choosing. “One must” means one must filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out [trier] several
different possibilities that inhabit the same injunction’ (Derrida 1994: p. 16). Sorting here becomes synonymous with inheriting. Following this link, we can view the sorting procedure as an enactment of inheritance, not of another as is thematized across *The Postcard* from Socrates to Freud and beyond, but of another who also carries the signature ‘Derrida.’ The incineration would thus be a form of self-inheritance, an inheritance by Derrida of the postcards written by Derrida that form part of the archive/book *The Postcard*.

Under this light, the undecidable couple I sort myself/I kill myself associates self-inheritance with a self-killing. In this sense Derrida may well claim, even in the form of a question returned, that he kills himself more than once. Not only on that day in June 1977 when he spoke in English in a semi-automatic fashion, or even ten years earlier when he recited the discourse on *différance* before a crowd that might also well have been described as dead. But every time he inherits from himself, which is at least every time he refers to his own work.

2. ‘I could have in fact said…’

Which these days seems almost all the time. For as I have already noted, as time passed Derrida referred to his own writings more and more frequently, either through the use of citation, the repetition of phrases that we have read before, or references in footnotes to other works. This is no doubt to some extent simply the natural outcome of the growth of his oeuvre. The more he published, the more he had said, and so the more there is to which the reader could be referred. It is also not without relation to what seemed to guide the content of these publications. Derrida remarked somewhere that he almost always gave a talk or wrote a paper in response to an invitation from others. One would expect that these invitations were themselves to some extent
made in response to what Derrida had already published, and so in this way Derrida’s writings appear as a kind of delayed or deferred response to themselves. Consequently, it is unsurprising that they would refer to themselves. We might thus view many, if not all of Derrida’s writings as responses to themselves, and so as acts of self-inheritance.\(^5\)

Among these invitations, and their responses, a certain group has come to form what can perhaps now be seen as a sub-genre in Derrida’s writings. These are the papers he delivered at the Cerisy-la-Salle conferences held ‘around the work of Jacques Derrida.’ These conferences, and there were four, were ten-day marathons focused on some or other theme relating to Derrida’s thinking. Thus in 1980 the title was ‘The Ends of Man,’ in 1992 it was ‘The Passage of Frontiers,’ in 1997 it was ‘The Autobiographical Animal,’ and, most recently, in 2002, ‘Democracy to Come.’ Derrida’s own interventions on these occasions were themselves marathons, long papers that lasted several hours in which he recast the theme in question, always in a somewhat oblique fashion, never quite in the way one might have expected. Derrida thus reads a rather obscure piece by Kant in order to revisit the question of the end (‘On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy’), compares Ariès and Heidegger on that non-passage beyond a frontier that is death (\textit{Aporias}), recounts an autobiographical story about being naked in front of his cat (‘The Animal that Therefore I am’), and speaks of rogue states, sovereignty, and democracy in today’s political climate (‘The Reason of the Strongest (Are there Rogue States?)’).\(^6\)

In addition to their twists and turns, each of these Cerisy papers also contains a rather refreshing moment of directness. This occurs when Derrida takes a little time to list for us the occasions in his past writings where he has discussed the topic in question. In this way we learn of passages before 1982 when the apocalypse appeared in his texts (Derrida 1993a: pp. 161-3),
of aporias before 1992 (Derrida 1993b: pp. 12-21), of animals prior to 1997 (Derrida 2002a: pp. 405-8), and of democracies to come that pre-date 2002 (Derrida 2005b: pp. 81-91). These moments are of great use to those of us who wish ourselves to pursue the subject under discussion – we are given page numbers, as well as commentary. They also provide excellent examples of Derrida inheriting from himself. In what follows, I focus on one moment in one of these examples.

It is towards the end of ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ that Derrida reflects on his past uses of the phrase ‘democracy to come.’ After pointing out that in several texts he had linked this phrase to ‘the inheritance of a promise,’ and then distinguishing in some detail the democracy in question from a Kantian idea (in pages that, almost word for word and without citation marks, are inherited, or inherited from, elsewhere7), Derrida speaks a little of the link between democracy to come and justice. This link, he tells us, is first made in Specters of Marx, and reappears one year later in Politics of Friendship. Derrida then passes to another motif in the latter text, namely the question of the name of democracy (a question he has in fact just evoked, a few pages earlier, citing the essay ‘Sauf le Nom’). He recalls his discussion of what was said in Plato’s Menexenus of ‘a form of government which receives various names, according to the fancies of men, and is sometimes called democracy (dēmokratia), but is really an aristocracy or government of the best which has the approval of the many’ (Derrida 2005b: p. 88; 1997: p. 95), and then cites himself from Politics of Friendship asking questions about this instability in (and simultaneous persistence of) the name of democracy. This citation is long, and I will not reproduce it here. What interests me is what follows, when Derrida writes:
This did not thus exclude the possibility, even the right, of perhaps one day abandoning the inheritance or heritage of the name, of changing names. But always in the name of the name, thereby betraying the heritage in the name of the heritage:

Saying that to keep this Greek name, democracy, is an affair of context, of rhetoric or of strategy, even of polemics, reaffirming that this name will last as long as it has to but not much longer, saying that things are speeding up remarkably in these fast times, is not necessarily giving in to the opportunism or cynicism of the antidemocrat who is not showing his cards. Completely to the contrary: one keeps this indefinite right to the question, to criticism, to deconstruction (guaranteed rights, in principle, in any democracy: no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction). One keeps this right strategically to mark what is no longer a strategic affair: the limit between the conditional (the edges of the context and of the concept enclosing the effective practice of democracy and nourishing it in land and blood) and the unconditional which, from the outset, will have inscribed a self-deconstructive [auto-déconstructrice] force [I could have in fact said “autoimmune” force] in the very motif of democracy, the possibility and the duty of democracy itself to de-limit itself. Democracy is the autos [I would today say the ipse or ipseity] of deconstructive self-delimitation. Delimitation not only in the name of a regulative Idea and an indefinite perfectibility but every time in the singular urgency of a here and now. (2005b: pp. 89-90).
The long citation is again from *Politics of Friendship* (Derrida 1997: p. 105). Its presence is enlightening for the reader, for it brings attention to part of the debt that ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ owes to *Politics of Friendship*. Three pages earlier Derrida had made a claim almost identical to the remarks cited above: ‘The expression “democracy to come” does indeed translate or call for a militant and interminable political critique […] But, beyond this active and interminable critique, the expression “democracy to come” takes into account the absolute and intrinsic historicity of the only system that welcomes in itself, in its very concept, that expression of autoimmunity called the right to self-critique and perfectibility’ (2005b: pp. 86-7). If the two are compared, this passage from ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ appears to reproduce the message of the citation from *Politics of Friendship* faithfully. But for one difference. For while both speak of democracy’s right to critique, and relate this to democracy’s self, the passage from ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ introduces a new term, ‘autoimmunity,’ which does not appear in the original citation from *Politics of Friendship*. Or, more accurately, which does not appear in the original passage in *Politics of Friendship*, for in the citation Derrida inserts the lightest of commentaries – ‘I could have in fact said “autoimmune” force [j’aurais pu alors dire “auto-immunitaire”].’ In thus suggesting that we today read ‘self-deconstructive’ as ‘autoimmune,’ *in changing names*, Derrida ever so gently brings the earlier analysis into line with the later.

Now at this point in the text this insertion, along with its partner ‘I would today say the *ipse* or ipseity,’ seems quite natural, almost obvious. For Derrida has already spent a large part of ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ developing the notion of autoimmunity by demonstrating its operation in democracy, and this is done in part through reflections on ipseity. Thus, if he had not made these insertions himself, there is a good chance that the reader would have done so for him. Derrida adding his own commentary as he does thus seems almost redundant, barely saying
very much at all. Consequently, we could tell a rather straightforward (and short) story to summarize the relationship between these two texts: Derrida receives an 'invitation' to give a paper at the conference devoted to his own work around the theme of democracy to come. He had started on a certain path of thinking concerning democracy in *Politics of Friendship*, which he now develops further, introducing autoimmunity into the analysis. This story need not necessarily be limited to the theme of democracy’s right to self-critique. For much of ‘The Reason of the Strongest,’ most notably the extended reading of Jean-Luc Nancy, appears to be a direct continuation of *Politics of Friendship*. Taking seriously Derrida’s claim that this book ‘resembles a lengthy preface. It would rather be the foreword to a book I would one day wish to write’ (1997: p. vii), we might have expected more works of this kind to appear, enabling more stories like this to be told.

And yet, this kind of story does not tell all that can be told. It is not simply that Derrida wrote one text, and now writes another that incorporates and extends the first, confining it to the past. In the writing of the second text, more specifically in this citation in the second text, Derrida does not just change the name. For I want to argue that in this act of citation the first text is transformed in a fundamental way – *Politics of Friendship* no longer stays the same in appearing as it does in ‘The Reason of the Strongest.’ And as I will now attempt to show, it is in the interjection that Derrida makes – ‘I could have in fact said “autoimmune” force’ – that this transformation occurs.

What happens in this interjection? We might first note that Derrida states ‘I could have in fact said…’ and not, as he does three lines later, ‘I would today say…’ This suggests that at the time of writing *Politics of Friendship* Derrida could have just as easily used ‘autoimmune’ instead of ‘self-deconstructive’ – that this vocabulary was then available to him. And in fact it
was. For the term ‘autoimmunity’ appears in print both prior to the publication of *Politics of Friendship*, and in the text itself. In *Specters of Marx*, dating, as we have just been told, from one year earlier, Derrida writes that the ‘living ego is auto-immune, which is what they do not want to know. To protect its life, to constitute itself as unique living ego, to relate, as the same, to itself, it is necessarily led to welcome the other within…it must therefore take the immune defenses apparently meant for the non-ego, the enemy, the opposite, the adversary and direct them at once for itself and against itself’ (1994: p. 141). And at the beginning of the chapter from which the above citation from *Politics of Friendship* comes, Derrida states that ‘the modality of the possible, the unquenchable *perhaps*, would, implacably, destroy everything, by means of a sort of self-immunity [*auto-immunité*] from which no region of being, *phûsis* or history would be exempt,’ and speaks of the ‘the time of a world without friends, the time of a world without enemies. The imminence of a self-destruction by the infinite development of a madness of self-immunity [*auto-immunité*]’ (1997: pp. 75-6). The term had thus already started to circulate in Derrida’s texts, and so it seems that he could have easily written, in the passage cited above, ‘autoimmune force’ instead of an ‘self-deconstructive force.’

We can accept, therefore, that such a substitution is possible, and affirm that Derrida could have in fact said ‘autoimmune.’ This adds a plausibility to the interjection in the later text. But we can now ask what are the consequences of this substitution. What are the effects of Derrida here saying ‘autoimmune’?

3. ‘…in short, against its own…’

To explore these effects, we must first understand a little more of what is meant by the word in question. ‘Autoimmunity’ is a relatively new term in Derrida’s lexicon, first appearing in print,
as far as I know, in the citation above from *Specters of Marx*. Passing by the two brief mentions in *Politics of Friendship*, it is only in ‘Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of “Religion” at the Limits of Reason Alone’ that the term plays an important role in a Derridean text. Derrida uses it there to think through the contradictory relationship between religion and technology. Religion, Derrida argues, must both distance itself from technology to protect its sacredness, and at the same time rely on technology to propagate its message. In this way religion attacks itself (in undermining its sacredness) in order to survive. Derrida labels this process autoimmune:

The same movement that renders indissociable religion and tele-technoscientific reason in its most critical aspect reacts inevitably to itself. It secretes its own antidote but also its own power of auto-immunity. We are here in a space where all self-protection of the unscathed, of the safe and sound, of the sacred (heilig, holy) must protect itself against its own protection, its own police, its own power of rejection, in short against its own [son propre tout court], which is to say, against its own immunity. It is this terrifying but fatal logic of the auto-immunity of the unscathed that will always associate Science and Religion. (2002b: pp. 79-80).

This passage is immediately followed by a footnote, where, after discussing the function of immunity in the politico-theological contexts of the Church and international law, Derrida cites the biological roots of the term ‘autoimmune’: ‘It is especially in the domain of biology that the lexical resources of immunity have developed their authority… auto-immunization… consists for a living organism, as is well known and in short, of protecting itself against its self-protection by destroying its own immune system.’ Thus, in ‘Faith and Knowledge’ autoimmunity is
described as a paradoxical process in which the self protects itself against its own protection, attacking its own defenses. Derrida diagnoses this process at work in religion since it must both protect against the technological (to safeguard the sacred) and suspend this protection in order to use the technological to survive.

Returning to the citation from Politics of Friendship, we can see that the notion is thus well placed in Derrida’s re-reading. In question is a contrast between the conditional in democracy, which Derrida associates with its borders of all sorts (‘the edges of the context and of the concept enclosing the effective practice of democracy and nourishing it in land and blood’), and the unconditional which challenges these borders. In this challenge the unconditional can be said to attack these borders, to call into question the defenses that democracy, in its conditionality, erects. The unconditional dimension of democracy attacks the defenses of democracy – Derrida is thereby justified in claiming that it inscribes an autoimmune force ‘in the very motif of democracy, the possibility and duty of democracy to de-limit itself.’

So not only could Derrida have said ‘autoimmune’ in this passage from Politics of Friendship, given that the word was then available to him, but perhaps he should have done so. Such a description seems eminently appropriate, according to the later development that the autoimmune process undergoes in ‘Faith and Knowledge.’ What, then, does this change do to Politics of Friendship? As a change in the name, does it merely name something that was already there? To some extent it does, in that democracy’s attack against its own defenses is already present in Derrida’s description of the unconditional and the conditional. But at the same time, this naming also introduces a certain instability into the text. As we have seen, autoimmunity already appears in Politics of Friendship. But an ambiguity now arises in this text because between the third, new use of the term, and the other two already in place, the phenomenon
under discussion named in each instance does not seem to be quite the same thing. The original uses speak of the destruction of ‘everything, by means of a sort of self-immunity [auto-immunité] from which no region of being, phûsis or history would be exempt,’ and ‘a self-destruction by the infinite development of a madness of self-immunity [auto-immunité].’ Here autoimmunity points to a phenomenon of total self-destruction, in which the whole self is effaced. But with respect to the conditionality and unconditionality of democracy, a more limited phenomenon is being described. Here it is a question of the self attacking, not all of itself, but only a part of itself, namely its borders and defenses. This is far from a total destruction, but is rather a limited suspension enabling democracy to survive, to live on.

*Politics of Friendship* thus now contains a tension between understanding autoimmunity as a phenomenon of partial self-attack and one in which there is projected the total destruction of the self. This tension was not there before the citation in ‘The Reason of the Strongest.’ How should we respond to this ambiguity? What is the proper definition of autoimmunity? The answer lies not in privileging one side of this tension over the other, claiming that one is a more authentic use of ‘autoimmunity’ and the other less. For the passage cited above from ‘Faith and Knowledge,’ which contains something very close to a ‘definition’ of the term (in ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ Derrida himself refers to this passage as a formalization of the ‘general law’ of the autoimmune process (2005b: p. 35)\(^8\), is already marked by a similar instability. Derrida here claims that at stake is ‘a space where all self-protection of the unscathed…must protect itself against its own protection, its own police, its own power of rejection, in short against its own [son propre tout court], which is to say, against its own immunity.’ I have argued elsewhere that in stating ‘in short against its own,’ Derrida moves beyond describing a phenomenon in which only the self’s protection has the potential to be attacked, to one in which any part of the self has
this potential (Haddad 2004). With this phrase an attack against anything that can be called ‘its own’ is classified as part of the autoimmune process. As a consequence, the self said to be autoimmune is one for which any part of it is a part of its defenses – it is a self fundamentally structured around a notion of defense.9

Here I would propose an alternative yet still compatible interpretation of the implications of the presence of this phrase, ‘in short against its own.’ In thus marking autoimmunity as an attack against a self’s propriety, and thus on its very integrity as a self, any partial attack can be thereby seen to tend towards the whole. For in the division it entails, the autoimmune process challenges the very idea that a self can indeed form a coherent whole. In this sense any self-attack against a part is an attack against the whole. In this way, the ambiguity now found in *Politics of Friendship* between autoimmunity describing both partial and total destruction can be seen to adhere in the notion as it is more fully developed in ‘Faith and Knowledge.’ This tension is irreducible in autoimmunity as it is presented in the Derridean text.

Derrida’s citation of the passage from *Politics of Friendship* thus returns the use of autoimmunity in this text to an instability that could be said to ‘properly’ belong to it. Now to acknowledge this might seem to take us back where we started when first examining this citation. For one might argue that if the definition of the autoimmune always holds within it a certain tension between the part and the whole, then Derrida’s intervention into his own text through his citation is redundant, indeed saying nothing at all. Against this view, however, I would maintain that something is nonetheless happening in this moment of self-citation. For the tension in autoimmunity is now heightened in the text *Politics of Friendship*, being displayed more openly than before. Further, it now becomes harder to pinpoint the origin of the somewhat peculiar operation of this term, for it is no longer so clear that ‘Faith and Knowledge’ should be
the proper point of reference for all subsequent uses. There is perhaps an earlier instance than this, one to be found in *Politics of Friendship*. Noting that this text is now better understood as being constituted in a time of self-inheritance, which is, as are all acts of inheritance, a time out of joint. These effects follow from Derrida’s act of self-citation, and would not be produced in its absence. There is, therefore, something going on when Derrida cites himself.

Can we understand this occurrence more precisely still? These features (a heightening and more open display of a tension, a doubled and unstable origin, a text constituted through the disjointed time of an act of inheritance), as well as the general uncertainty about whether something is in fact happening in a particular reading at all, are no doubt very familiar to readers of Derrida. For they are among the characteristics belonging to what Derrida does all the time – deconstruction. When Derrida reads the work of others, he opens up particular tensions in their text, tensions of which one can never pinpoint any first instance, and one is never quite sure if this is something Derrida has done, or whether it was always already there at work. I propose that what we witness here in this moment of self-citation is a similar event. It is a deconstruction of another, the only difference being that the other being read is Derrida himself. Indeed, how could we think that it would be otherwise? Given that Derrida has shown so many others to be open to deconstruction, it would be strange if he were immune to it himself, even if it is he himself who appears to be doing all of the work.

4. ‘…life is survival.’

Derrida thus inherits from himself – the I that signs ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ inherits from the I that signs *Politics of Friendship*, and both of these I’s fall under the proper name ‘Derrida’
– and this event of self-inheritance produces an event of deconstruction. One last step to take in this analysis, one that begs to be taken, is to consider whether this event itself might be seen as part of a process of autoimmunity. For recall the original substitution, where Derrida replaced ‘self-deconstructive’ with ‘autoimmune.’ If the validity of this substitution is accepted, an act of self-deconstruction might thereby be understood as autoimmune.

Is this plausible, within the confines of autoimmunity’s definition? The self-inheritance is an action by the self ‘Derrida’ against itself, thus the requirement that it be a self-relation is rather easily established. More specifically, the act of self-citation involves an attack against defenses, in at least two senses. First, any act of citation involves a certain suspension of defenses, since the boundaries marking the limits of the text cited are ignored so as to lift out the passage in question. Citation already involves an act of transgression. Second, this particular act of citation involved an insertion and suggested modification of the original text from Politics of Friendship, compounding the already violating nature of the act. The self-deconstruction that takes place in Derrida’s self-inheritance would thus qualify as autoimmune.

Let us return, then, to where we began, that blue-sky day in Oxford in June 1977. There we found an association between killing oneself and sorting oneself, a sorting that I suggested could be understood as inheriting from oneself. Now that we have brought together self-inheritance, via deconstruction, with autoimmunity, can we thereby consider autoimmunity as suicidal? How might this self-attack be related to a self-killing? Derrida himself has associated the two, more than once. The most obvious place is in the title of the interview ‘Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides.’ Further, in this interview Derrida describes the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which he inscribes in a more general process of democracy’s autoimmunity, as ‘two suicides in one’: that of the hijackers ‘but also the suicide of
those who welcomed, armed, and trained them’ (2003: p. 95). This analysis is extended in ‘The Reason of the Strongest,’ where Derrida speaks of ‘the law of a terrifying and suicidal autoimmunity’ (2005b: p. 18). In this text he also uses the suspension of elections in Algeria in 1992 as an example of this law, describing this event as ‘a certain suicide of democracy’ (2005b: p. 33). Suicide thus substitutes for or modifies autoimmunity in Derrida’s discussion of contemporary democracy.

When recounting the story from The Postcard, I claimed that we had some idea of what killing oneself involved, whereas sorting oneself was rather puzzling. In the light of what I have discussed, we now might want to reverse the terms, and question whether we in fact know what suicide here means. On Derrida’s understanding, self-killing is far from a common sense notion. This is evident in the two texts just cited, for while the association is made between autoimmunity and suicide, it is not done without qualification. The title of the interview already makes us pause, speaking of suicides ‘real and symbolic.’ Derrida also on two occasions describes autoimmunity not as ‘suicidal,’ but as ‘quasi-suicidal’ (2003: pp. 94, 115). The qualifier ‘quasi-‘ is appears regularly throughout Derrida’s oeuvre, and is used in a wide variety of contexts to mark the impurity of the concept it accompanies, suggesting that the concept in question cannot be separated from its opposite.10 The use of the ‘quasi-‘ thus suggests that what is here under discussion is perhaps not a pure suicide, but one that must be understood together with what it opposes, namely a maintaining alive. Finally, Derrida pursues the implications of autoimmunity to the point where the integrity of the autos, the self, is itself called into question. In attacking itself, he asks, can a self still be considered a unified whole? The meaning of suicide is thus also called into question – autoimmunity ‘consists not only in committing suicide but in compromising sui- or self-referentiality, the self or sui of suicide itself. Autoimmunity is more or
less suicidal, but, more seriously still, it threatens always to rob suicide itself of its meaning and supposed integrity’ (Derrida 2005b: p. 45). When the self is acting according to a process of autoimmunity, there is perhaps no longer a stable self that can be seen to be putting itself to death, and suicide starts to lose its meaning.

These qualifications suggest that for Derrida the suicide implicated in autoimmunity no longer means a complete or total destruction of the self. Which is to repeat the point I have made regarding the definition of autoimmunity – while two of its uses in Politics of Friendship call for a total destruction, these are tempered, as we have seen, by the third use, which speaks of a partial attack. There is always a remainder, a reste that exceeds complete annihilation. In its suicide the self thus does not completely pass away, but remains in some form. We can thus consider the self-killing involved here to be yet another word for the living on or survival that Derrida has explored so persistently across his writings, from his early examination of the ‘living present’ in Husserl through to his final interview, where he reaffirmed that ‘life is survival [la vie est survie]’ (2005a: p. 26). When Derrida kills himself, which he does every time he inherits from himself, this self is not put to death, but instead lives on. Self-citation is thus one of the mechanisms by which the Derridean text survives.

5. ‘…pure sovereignty does not exist…’

In many respects the moments of self-inheritance in Derrida’s writings are moments in which he is most sovereign. In referring us to his texts, and in citing them, Derrida is owning these texts as his, confirming an identity between what in many other respects are quite different objects. Each such moment thus strengthens our impression of a coherence in this oeuvre. Certainly, Derrida
himself at times makes a concerted effort to undermine this impression. The sorting procedure of *The Postcard* is one example of this, where Derrida gives himself over to an automated other who decides what is retained and what is erased in a text that nonetheless carries his signature. But challenges to consistency and coherence rarely, if ever, take place in the references and citations between Derrida’s works. To my knowledge, Derrida has never stated that he was wrong in such and such a text, or retracted anything that he has written. His own practice of self-reference always seems to affirm what he has written elsewhere. Those times in his Cerisy papers where he reflects on his past uses of a certain phrase or notion are, I would suggest, extreme examples of this tendency. They constitute an almost reverse movement to what takes place in *The Postcard* – rather than handing them over to another, Derrida’s words are recalled to their father, gathered together around his feet in a harmonious family portrait. In these moments especially, an accord dominates, in which no text contradicts another.

But ‘pure sovereignty does not exist; it is always in the process of positing itself by refuting itself, by denying or disavowing itself; it is always in the process of autoimmunizing itself, of betraying itself by betraying the democracy that nonetheless can never do without it’ (Derrida 2005b: p. 101). The accord is never total. In ‘The Reason of the Strongest,’ Derrida’s citation of and gentle commentary on the passage from *Politics of Friendship*, even while it appears to take command of this text, sets into motion a deconstruction that Derrida himself does not seem to anticipate. His texts are an unruly lot, never content to sit still or do as they are told. Which is heartening for those of us who like to read Derrida, even for those of us who like to read Derrida reading Derrida. There is always the chance that every such reading, every such reading of readings, will have something more to say.
References


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**Endnotes:**

1 *Speech and Phenomena* refers, in addition to Derrida’s earlier writings on Husserl, to *Writing and Difference* on one occasion (Derrida 1973: p. 63), while *Of Grammatology* refers to both *Speech and Phenomena* and *Writing and Difference* on a number of occasions (Derrida 1976: pp. 324, 326, 328, 329, 340, 348, 352).

Regarding the complicated relation between these three works, see Derrida’s remarks in *Positions* (1981: pp. 3-5).

2 Unless otherwise noted, all citations of this text are from pages 14-16. I have at times slightly modified Bass’s translation.
Further, we might also note that this story is by no means the first to recount a young man posing such a question to a philosopher, with such a response returned. In *Phaedo* Socrates is pressed on whether it is right to kill himself, and presented with the common opinion that ‘it was a very good hit at the philosophers to say that they are half dead already, and that they, the normal people, are quite aware that death would serve philosophers right.’ He responds: ‘And they would be quite correct, Simmias – except in thinking that they are “quite aware.” They are not at all aware in what sense true philosophers are half dead, nor in what sense they deserve death, or what sort of death they deserve’ (1961: 64b-c).

I pursue further the link between sorting and inheritance in Derrida’s work in the article ‘Inheriting Democracy to Come’ (Haddad 2005).

Geoffrey Bennington makes a related suggestion in claiming that ‘[o]ne way of reading Derrida's work as a whole is as working through, not only the inheritance of the tradition, but the inheritance of the event of his own early thought: it could be argued, for example, that insights formulated in the early *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry* (and maybe even *The Problem of Genesis in the Philosophy of Husserl*) provide the matrix of which all the rest of Derrida's work is the (often surprising) reception’ (2000: p. 199). I do not necessarily want to go this far, as I think there have been events decisive to Derrida’s work as a whole that have come after his own early thought, but this remark does highlight nicely the insistence of repetition we find across Derrida’s work.

Another series of texts to examine would be those given by Derrida at Cerisy conferences devoted to the work of others. For a list of these, see ‘The Reason of the Strongest’ (Derrida 2005b: p. 2).

See Derrida’s ‘Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides’ (2003: pp. 134-5). Can we say which one of these texts is inheriting from the other? They are both dated, although this does not tell us with certainty which came first. The interview is marked as taking place on October 22, 2001, while the talk was first delivered on July 15, 2002, but this does not exclude the possibility that Derrida had been working on the passage in question long before (which would entail that the ‘original’ source of this legacy is perhaps some other manuscript).

See also ‘Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides’ (2003: p. 94), where Derrida again refers the reader to this passage from ‘Faith and Knowledge.’ In this instance Derrida makes a citation, and modifies it in emphasizing the word ‘terrifying’ in order to bring out the connection between autoimmunity and terrorism that he develops in this interview and in ‘The Reason of the Strongest.’
In ‘Derrida and Democracy at Risk’ (Haddad 2004) I pursue the consequences of this claim for Derrida’s analysis of democracy as autoimmune in ‘The Reason of the Strongest.’ By describing the deferral of elections and the suspension of liberties as part of an autoimmune process, Derrida is implicitly asking us to view these aspects of democracy as a part of its immune system. I suggest that this produces a vision of democracy, in which every part is mobilized in its defense, that we may not in the end want to endorse.