

SUPPLEMENTING THE ABYSS – H. P. LOVECRAFT AND E. A. POE

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it's enough
to say: abyss and the satire of the abyss

Jacques Derrida

However odd such a start appears, contrary to the epigraph, always all ready to exercise power over the sequel, now it is not enough to say that. The master's signature – though it emphatically prompts a key-phrase to the cryptograph – falls somewhat short of the current predicament, and “this current leads us to the southern pole itself” [PT: 198], “the south of language”¹ that is its fountainhead and origin, at least as Rousseau claims it in the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*. Therefore, to be precise, say – possibly precise, the deconstructive angel is here just one of our summoned guardians; others being on this occasion the memorable angel of the odd or, better still, the imp of the perverse.

The traces of Poe's texts, his paper-shrouded, black and white imaginary figure has haunted Lovecraft's tale of horror “At the Mountains Madness” in an almost too obvious, excessively literal fashion, as if trying to cast on the audience some sort of irresistible intertextual spell. Not only is one of the few survivors of the Miskatonic University Expedition, Danforth, “a great reader of bizarre material” [MM: 6] with Poe among his favorites, but also direct references to Poe's works, including a cited fragment of “Ulalume”, turn up in Lovecraft's story several times in a manner quite far from just accidental. The scattered particulars disseminate like a meshwork of signs, suggesting a calculated strategy of an intertextual encounter, an attempt to resist the anxiety of influence. According to a comprehensive typology of intertextual relations proposed by Gérard Genette, this type of explicit “transtextuality” may be classified as “allusion” and “quotation”, virtually the simplest of all indices of

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 277.

intertextual linkage.² In order to neutralize, however, his threat of all too easy, precocious conclusion, it remains to be said that the text most frequently referred to by Lovecraft's narrator is *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.

Even a slapdash comparison of both stories reveals their evident generic affinity. Namely, they are both travelogues – stories of travel based upon “the conventions of the contemporary mariner's voyage tale”³ culminating in the first person narrative partly stylized as a journal often relieved with typical “stop-off points”⁴ to supply learned information on the visited regions of the world: their topography, minerals, climate, plants, animals, resources, and peoples. Consequently, bound by their generic contract, both protagonists: Pym and Dyer, even facing hair-raising perils, do not neglect to describe their whereabouts, drawing from various genuine and fictitious sources which, at least in the case of Poe, have been largely identified by the critics.⁵ On the level of genre the relationship between *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* and “At the Mountains of Madness” exemplifies still another term from Genette's “transtextual” repertoire: “hypertextuality”, defined as “any relation uniting text *B* ... to an anterior text *A* ... on which it grafts itself in a way that is distinct from that of commentary”.⁶ Supplementing his matrix, Genette respectively calls “text *A*” a “hypotext”, whereas “text *B*” is recognized as its “hypertext”, with the proper generic model functioning in each instance as a kind of paradigmatic interpretant without which the relation as such cannot take place.

Arguably, it seems that “Genette's triangle limits textual relations to one kind: that between hypotext and its genre, or that between hypertext and the same genre”,⁷ thus *a priori* excluding all “lateral” or “horizontal” connections between the texts in question. Nevertheless, disrupting this constraint, the tale by Lovecraft and the tale by Poe expressly present an “unwarranted” kind of relatedness: that of overt thematic supplementarity. Although framed with a Preface and a final Note, the unfinished *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, lacking a proper closure, “does not let itself to be read” [PT: 388] and notoriously tantalizes its commentators with the image of an enormous “shrouded human figure” [PT: 1179] hovering over the brink of the terminal

² Thaïs A. Morgan, “Is There an Intertext in this Text? Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality”, *American Journal of Semiotics*, vol. 3, No. 4 (1985), 29.

³ Daniel Hoffman, *Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 264.

⁴ Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 148.

⁵ cf.: Edward H. Davidson, *Poe: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1955), 157.

⁶ Morgan, 30.

⁷ Morgan, 32.

abyss. Focused from the very outset on the same region of the South Pole, “At the Mountains of Madness” resumes the exploration of Poe's “never-to-be-imported secret” [PT: 198].

As a matter of fact, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* has been perplexing its readers without end. Called “either absurd, monstrous, or mysterious”⁸, the book was paradoxically claimed both peripheral and central in Poe's literary legacy.⁹ On the one hand separated from the main corpus of tales even for its sheer irregular length, on the other it has been acknowledged to implement all the crucial tenets of his poetics. The dominant tradition of criticism, rooted in the 1933 monumental study by Marie Bonaparte, favored Freudian psychoanalysis as the key to the meaning of the text, so that it has been routinely construed as “a passionate and frenzied search for Mother”¹⁰, “a psychological drama”¹¹, “a subterranean allegory of psychomachy”¹², and “a study of emerging consciousness”¹³, at times, as in the case of Leslie A. Fiedler, supplemented with the theory of latent racial prejudice.¹⁴ Apparently, for more than four decades Poe's enigmatic “scripture” [éncriture]¹⁵ of *The Narrative...* remained mainly under the sway of the post-Freudian discourse. Either more or less marginal considerations on “intertextual” links with other tales, including “The Imp of the Perverse”, “MS. Found in a Bottle”, “The Colloquy of Monos and Una” and the unfinished “Journal of Julius Rodman”, or the recognition of Poe's definite influence on Melville's *Moby Dick* did not effect any alternative approach. A radical shift was brought about in the late seventies, with the works of Joseph N. Riddel (1979) and especially John T. Irwin (1980).

What has been noticed though early enough and with major consequences for the reading of *Pym*, was the significant perseverance of “the theme of deception: nothing really is what it seems”.¹⁶ To begin with, the framing Preface, allegedly written by the narrator himself, displays an intricate hide-and-seek game with the audience, since the tale – in fact fiction *par excellence* – is endorsed as truth published “under the garb of fiction” [PT: 1008], this in turn quite surprisingly rejected by most subscribers of *Southern Literary Messenger* who prefer to believe it at any rate, even against the odds

⁸ Davidson, 158.

⁹ cf.: Patrick F. Quinn, “Poe's Imaginary Voyage”, *The Hudson Review*, Winter 1952, 576.

¹⁰ Quinn, 572.

¹¹ Quinn, 569.

¹² Hoffman, 263.

¹³ Davidson, 160.

¹⁴ cf.: Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London: Paladin, 1970), 368-71.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Scribble (writing-power)”, trans. Cary Plotkin, *Yale French Studies* 58 (1979), 120.

¹⁶ Davidson, 164.

and contrary to reason. However, the status of this claim is fictitious too – as reported by the protagonist inscribed in the text just as well. As a result, fiction and truth flicker, subvert, and violate each other, despite the metatextual authority conventionally granted to forewords. In short, the story, which has not even started, demonstrates *already before its proper beginning* “the essential precariousness ... of the narrative act”¹⁷; the queer force of undecidability. “Writing the sea” and reaching the polar abyss, Poe charts “a voyage to the limits of differentiation”,¹⁸ exemplified by the colors of Tsalal and Tekeli-li: black and white, parallel to the opposition of print on paper. In an attempt to get beyond the vapor of words, he scribbles on other texts; by Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldts, James Bruce, Joshua N. Reynolds, Captain Cook, Benjamin Morrell, John Cleve Symmes, and S. T. Coleridge, all of them contributing to a palimpsest so dense that there is “no first text, not even a virgin surface for its inscription”.¹⁹ The topos of discovery is as persistent as the antique *locus amoenus*, placing lions, olive trees, palms, and cedars in the medieval North of France²⁰: by the same token Pym travels to the South, since the conditions of the journey to the source of the Nile are imprinted on the romantic quest discourse with equivalent force.²¹ For Poe then, according to Riddel, “Nature is not an origin but a run-down trope”²²; inevitably “his world becomes a text, or a library of multiple texts”.²³

Besides the pattern of exploring voyage, Poe activates in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* another topos with a long tradition: that of the Book of Nature. Trapped in the subterranean caverns on the Tsalal Island, Pym discovers that their shape resembles inscriptions in some unknown language; later the Note deciphers them as an Ethiopian verbal root “to be shady”, an Arabic verbal root “to be white”, and the full Egyptian word signifying “the region of the south”. [PT: 1181] Moreover, as stated by John T. Irwin, “upon minute philological scrutiny” [PT: 1182], it turns out that the phonetic realization of the first word is “tsl” – the consonant cluster of “*Tsalal*”, while the meaning of mysterious “*Tekeli-li*” (an Ethiopian root “tkl”) is “that which is immovable, fixed, firmly established”, like “nail” (*clavus*), “pin”, “post” or “pole” (*paxillus*).²⁴ In such a way, the textual voyage to the South Pole is finally completed.

¹⁷ John T. Irwin, *American Hieroglyphics: The Symbol of the Egyptian Hieroglyphics in the American Renaissance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 128.

¹⁸ Derrida, “Scribble...”, 146.

¹⁹ cf.: Ernst Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), 183-5.

²⁰ Irwin, 128.

²¹ Joseph N. Riddel, “The »Crypt« of Edgar Poe”, *Boundary 2*, 8 (1), 1979, 122.

²² Riddel, 120.

²³ Irwin, 232.

²⁴ de Certeau, 138.

Precisely at this moment the written universe of the tale all of a sudden dissolves into writing: Poe, its creator and proprietor, treats it simply as another component of his narrative palimpsest. He scrawls his words on the printed surface of things because they are words too: “a library circumscribes the field within which [Pym’s] travels are elaborated and unfold”.²⁵ And yet, even supported with the lore of dictionaries, the tale rapidly opens up a circular pit: the abyss at the end of the world, a “vor-textual” whirlpool that engulfs the narrator only to put him back into his signature under the Preface. Oddly enough, the reader follows the same route; having reached the outer edge of the Note including the linguistic information, he returns back to the depth of the Tsalal caverns, and so on, wandering without end. Hence, “the curved narraive”²⁶, though unable to penetrate the veil of the white cataract, proceeds to reproduce the yawning chasm in the written matter of language:

As if a discourse on the circle also had to *describe* a circle, and perhaps the very one that it describes, describe the circular movement at the very moment that it describes a circular movement, describe it displacing itself in its meaning [*sens*]; or else as if a discourse on the abyss had to know the abyss, in the sense that one knows something that happens or affects one, as in “to know failure” or “to know success” rather than to know an object. The circle and the abyss, then, the circle *en abyme*”²⁷

That is where we are now again, cast ashore by the re/current maelstrom of Poe’s text: once more at the rim of the precipice, once more facing with Arthur Gordon Pym the “shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men”. [PT: 1179] The inscribed system of repetition imposes on the tale a perpetual equilibrium of simultaneous loss and gain, the economy of an inevitable fall always already succeeded by an equally inevitable ascent:

economize on the abyss: not only save oneself from falling into the bottomless depths by weaving and folding back the cloth to infinity, textual art of the reprise, multiplication of patches within patches, but also establish the laws of reappropriation, formalize the rules which constrain the logic of the abyss and which shuttle between the economic *and* the aneconomic, the raising *and* the fall, the abyssal operation which can only work toward the raising *and* that in it which regularly reproduces collapse”²⁸

As a result, the pit and the pendulum come together, converge, coalesce with each other, become one. This is the only unity at hand, accessible in the world of differences among meridians, parallels, colors, letters, and sounds; differences reproduced on the map, in reality, in writing. Reaching beyond their range, beyond Poe’s scenery of the ultimate borderline “would require that one

²⁵ Irwin, 196.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 24.

²⁷ Derrida, *The Truth...*, 37.

²⁸ Irwin, 135.

express in language the conditions of no-language"²⁹, the origin of writing which rises above its own horizon as a transcendental signified. This, however, is both quite beyond Poe and beyond the pale of any verbal communication. In order to fill up, to put under erasure the indelible vacuum, the post-Kantian aesthetics invented the concept of the "undifferentiated sublime" which bridged with its rhetoric of paradox the poles of the finite and the infinite, the monstrous and the beautiful, the presentable and the unrepresentable. Always bordered on silence, the romantic discourse of the sublime could not ignore the problem of representation, substituting by analogy "the indefinite for the inconceivable" and bringing into play the cryptic images of vapor, the abyss, and the colossal, which oscillated on the edge of the nameless, of the *almost* indescribable. Still, despite all the effort, "representation is inadequate to the idea of reason but it is presented in its very inadequation, adequate to its inadequation. The inadequation of presentation is presented. As inadequation, it does not belong to the natural sensible order, nor to nature in general, but to the mind, which contents itself in *using* nature to give us a feeling of a finality independent of nature".³⁰ Yet nothing else can possibly be done; in the same way in Poe's text "the most accurate linguistic representation of the undifferentiated is provided by the narrative's sudden termination as Pym enters the mist, the emptiness of the white page imagining the blankness of the white curtain".³¹ The endeavor to invade the other side, or, the side of the other, proves an *abysmal* failure but, incidentally, "does not the distance required for the experience of the sublime open up perception to the space of narrative?"³²

What Poe leaves unexplained on this side of the cataract is the cry of the "gigantic pallidly white birds" [PT: 1179]: "*Tekeli-li!*" The linguistic Note which interprets all other cryptic words does not mention it at all, so that its status remains more animal than human, if not altogether out of this world. For the sound of "*Tekeli-li*" comes from behind the veil – and indeed, is not *Abyssinian* the natural language of the abyss? Even though it turns into a word only on this side of the vapor, its meaning is concealed till the very end and beyond it. Suddenly, the clamor of the birds returns on the final pages of "At the Mountains of Madness".

One of the best of Lovecraft's tales of horror, approximately equal in length to *Pym*, is an evident sequel to Poe's *Narrative*. The Miskatonic University Expedition, lavishly equipped with two former whaling ships, five planes, drills, burners, electrodes, books, maps, etc., sets out to the South Pole

²⁹ Derrida, *The Truth...*, 131-2.

³⁰ Irwin, 224.

³¹ Derrida, *The Truth...*, 142.

³² Jacques Derrida, "Sending: On Representation", trans. Peter and Mary Ann Caws, *Social Research* 49 (2), Summer 1982, 324.

"from Boston Harbour on September 2nd, 1930". [MM: 4] The progress of modern technology and navigation seems to guarantee its success without any doubt, and even the name of the leader – a geologist, Professor Dyer – anticipates much more than just the monotony of black and white. The expedition reaches the Antarctic in due time and by means of the planes explores the interior with good results. Soon they discover a range of enormously high mountains – not the Mountains of Madness themselves! – and begin a regular research in several disciplines of science. Unfortunately, working on strange specimens of unknown identity and origin, a part of the group is killed in mysterious circumstances, which makes the rest give up their enterprise and successfully return to the States. Before that, two of the explorers, Dyer and Danforth, manage to cross the mountains by plane, spend on their opposite slopes sixteen hours and come back safely with no reported revelations.

After several years Professor Dyer, hoping to stop another expedition on their way to the Pole, discloses the truth about his and Danforth's last lonely raid. On the other side of the mountains they found a plateau with the ruins of an ancient city, hundreds of millions years old and originally inhabited by the creatures called "the Old Ones" who had probably come from the outer space in time immemorial, developed a civilization far superior to human, and perished, wiped out by the unfavorable climate and enemies. Their long history is engraved on the walls of the buildings; notably, the artistic quality of the pictures has been gradually deteriorating and the latest reliefs look barbaric and primitive.

Danforth had the idea that it was a second carving – a sort of palimpsest formed after the obliteration of a previous design. In nature it was wholly decorative and conventional, and consisted of crude spirals and angles roughly following the quintile mathematical tradition of the Old Ones, yet seemingly more like a parody than a perpetuation of that tradition". [MM: 95]

Curiosity drives both followers of Pym to the margin of the abyss that leads to the last subterranean resort of the Old Ones. Then, attacked by a monster called "Shoggoth", created by the Old Ones from living tissue, they rush back to the plane and hardly make it to the main camp on the seaside. Flying across the mountains, Danforth spots through a hole in the clouds something utterly dreadful which cannot be articulated in words and which stigmatizes him forever with a mental disturbance: a brief glimpse on the sky in the West, among remote peaks of the looming Mountains of Madness shunned even by the Old Ones in fear and respect. Later, as Dyer admits it:

He has on rare occasions whispered disjointed and irresponsible things about "The black pit", "the carven rim", "the proto-Shoggoths", "the windowless solids with five dimensions", "the nameless cylinder", "the elder Pharos", "Yog-Sohoth", "the primal white jelly", "the color

out of space", "the wings", "the eyes in darkness", "the moon-ladder", "the original, the eternal, the undying", and other bizarre conceptions; but when he is fully himself he repudiates all this and attributes it to his curious and macabre reading of earlier years. [MM: 109-10]

Any "reader of bizarre material" should easily recognize in his frantic eruption several bits and pieces of other Lovecraft's texts: titles, quotations, near-quotations, paraphrases. At last, the destination of the Miskatonic University Expedition proves no other than Pym's: it is the stacks of a library where "everything begins by referring (*par le renvoi*), that is to say, does not begin"³³. In this respect there is only one difference: Lovecraft's collection does not list any accounts of voyages. Instead, it accumulates various sources on the occult, the mythologies of nonexistent lands, and some unknown, sinister versions of the origin of life on Earth. All of them are faint echoes of other tales: unlike Poe, Lovecraft prefers to invent his antecedents by himself. Needless to say, with one important exception: he did not write *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*.

"At the Mountains of Madness" closes with the following sentence: "At the time, his shrieks were confined to the repetition of a single, mad word of all too obvious source: 'Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!'" [MM: 110] What is obvious though in this passage is not source but the rhetoric of emphasis which does not fail to provoke the reader's immediate distrust: why so much confidence, why this excess? Apparently, Danforth repeats in his fits of delirium the outcry of the Shoggoth following him in the maze of the polar city. The Shoggoths were unable to produce their own speech; as slaves, they "imitated accents of their bygone masters". [MM: 105] On the one hand then, "Tekeli-li" may be claimed to originate from the Old Ones, on the other, it comes from the story by Poe. Or, maybe, it derives from both sources at once, playing a tongue-in-cheek game of substitution and analogy?

According to its Abyssinian etymology, in Lovecraft's narrative "Tekeli-li" functions then as a nail of a hinge, a syllepsis which "consists in the understanding of the same word in two different ways at once, as *contextual meaning* and as *intertextual meaning*".³⁴ Within the local context of the tale, the Shoggoth's shriek signifies the primeval civilization of the South Pole; out of this context, it indicates an altogether different path, triggering a metaphoric shift from Lovecraft to Poe; from textuality to metatextuality. The space of the Antarctic reveals other signals of this direction as well: first, for some reason, the period of the most intense geologic activity on the continent is the Commanchian Age, suggesting the American Indian tribe living on the Mexican border; second, the emblem of a five-pointed star, typical of the Old Ones' ornamentation, metonymically refers to the "star-spangled banner". By

³³ Michael Riffaterre, "Syllepsis", *Critical Inquiry* 6 (4), Summer 1980, 637.

³⁴ Derrida, *The Truth...*, 117-8.

the same token, the horizontal design of the geological strata reflected in "the striated marking on the slate" [MM: 10], together with the five-pointed icon, contributes to the familiar American pattern of "stars and stripes", cast like a shadow on the region of the South Pole. Finally, during the run through the labyrinth, Danforth, scared to death, madly starts enumerating all the stations of the Boston-Cambridge subway line. His reaction to danger seems hysterically out of place, yet a comparison of the persecutor to a rain makes sense and strikes the reader with its weird relevance.

Consequently, the voyage to the secret of the abyss stops short of its goal, arrested by the active force of analogy. "Analogism recapitulates or reheads it. It saturates the *hiatus* by repetition: the *mise en abyme* resists the abyss of collapse, reconstitutes the economy of mimesis".³⁵ In fact, what else can be expected of a Shoggoth who emulates the work of his "bygone master"? The text of "At the Mountains of Madness" is composed of the corrupt Shoggoth tissue – merely "a sort of palimpsest formed after the obliteration of a previous design". It keeps playing the ancillary part of a supplement involved in a desperate struggle to fulfil its function, and the inaugural promise is indeed wild: to proceed beyond signification, to find the origin of language where it cannot possibly take any hold. On the other, petrified side Poe's white cataract which has already turned into Lovecraft's mad mountains there is nothing but another domain of texts, proliferating on and on without end: "there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the 'real' supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc."³⁶ Launching a supplementary chain, Lovecraft's tale seems to keep its main pledge, since it installs the bottom in the pit. Due to Danforth's verbal explosion, the chasm separating the final entry of Pym's journal and the outer edge of the Note is eventually levelled up, regardless of the fact that "the gentleman whose name is mentioned in the preface, and who, from the statement there made, might be supposed able to fill the vacuum, has declined the task". [PT: 1180] It is the necessary logic of deferral that requires the mountain range be doubled; thus the ensuing difference adds itself to the crucial differences between the two tales, two endings, two protagonists. As Derrida is eager to explain, the intertextual covenant has come into effect well enough, for "the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and

³⁵ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 159.

³⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 145.

makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [*supplant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the)-place* [*tient-lieu*]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness".³⁷

In the long run, however, the supplement must put itself under erasure: on the one hand it perpetuates the erratic movement of texts, on the other, it is bound to end in a spectacular disaster. After all, the other side of discourse has not been unveiled; its absolute origin does not exist, just as there is no landing ground beyond the cataract of words. To make it even worse, "At the Mountains of Madness" calls for, demands its supplement too: in the end, it paradoxically refuses to carry on without *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*: "folded, returning to itself, representing itself, sovereign, presence is then – and barely – only the supplement of a supplement". As a result, the elaborate hierarchy of anteriority falls apart, and the ordering of the supplementary chain is effectively deconstructed:

The supplement comes in the place of a lapse, a nonsignified or a nonrepresented, a nonpresence. There is no present before, it is not preceding by anything but itself, that is to say, by another supplement. The supplement is always the supplement of a supplement. One wishes to go back *from the supplement to the source*; one must recognize that there is a supplement at the source.³⁸

Playing its wicked game, the deconstructive "angel of the odd" once more disrupts Genette's triangle of hypertextuality. For in "the extraordinary case" of Lovecraft and Poe, both components of the hypertextual relationship lose their proper identity so that it becomes impossible to tell one from the other. Even though the common level of the genre remains essentially untouched, the borderline separating the hypertext from the hypotext is erased and the fundamental of their sequence annihilated. Still, no matter what, who could expect a theory – any theory – to contain the abyss? And the bottom of the abyss has been already – in fact, always already – most comfortably padded with words written on pages: black upon white, printed, made up, and bound.

Key to abbreviations:

1. PT: Edgar Allan Poe, *Poetry and Tales*, ed. by Patrick F. Quinn (New York: The Library of America, 1984).
2. MM: H. P. Lovecraft, *At the Mountains of Madness and Other Tales of Terror* (New York: Beagle Books, 1971).

³⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 298.

³⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 303-4.