The singular side of democracy in Jacques Derrida’s works: engagement politique and (inter)writing

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ABSTRACT

A critical re-appraisal of the relationship between deconstruction and democracy seems today to be advisable. The very bases of the so-called developed democracies are undermined by a process of desocialization of society and by a sort of individualism of indifference. This work will try to outline some preliminary reflections in order to question if, starting from Jacques Derrida’s works, a philosophical analysis of the ‘concept’ of singularity can be a consistent political counter-strategy in behalf of democracy. The complexity of the ‘concept’ as such in Derrida’s works will be stressed, showing its fluctuation between two forms: an evenemential and disappearing singularity and a persistent, resistant, and possibly existential one. Then the strategic value of this ambivalence within the singular/democratic dynamis will be questioned through the filter of Derrida’s interpretation of Nietzsche, whose distinctive ideas (such as writing, style, untimeliness) may converge into the notion of disarticulation. This will be used as a reading device, by which the philosophical quality of the singular/democratic chiasm can be rethought. Disarticulation also reconfigures the arrangement of singularity’s ‘internal’ relations, both in an aesthetic-stylistic and in an anthropological sense. From this, a significant recalibration of the concept of political engagement – between activity and passivity – can be attempted. A concrete example of this engagement may be the theoretical-practical question of Derrida’s interviews. They may somehow be conceived as an inventive effort of hybrid writing, where singularity appears both problematically disarticulated and ‘democratically’ interlaced to the outside.

KEYWORDS

Democracy, singularity, engagement

1. Singularity and/or democracy?

In the current political scenario, the social texture of the so called advanced democracies seems to be more and more torn by what may be termed ‘individualism of indifference’. In order to contrast this trend, a philosophical deepening of the very concept of democracy, both in its historical then its theoretical dimensions, seems to be necessary. This, being the most logic and common practice, is then the one that philosophers have obviously been followed from a long time. But one may also question this intellectual schema, someway proposing a shifting of the point of view: may a critical discussion on the notion of singularity in itself be a useful philosophical-political counter-strategy? Generally speaking, the term singularity can always refer to an unpolitical and individual subject;
anyway, and the same time, it may also suggests a creative difference within the democratic system. Moreover, singularity may be a morphogenetic force that can renew democracy, working at the level of its inter-singular relations. Thus one can try to rethink democracy through singularity, qua aporetic system originally hosting the a-democratic.

Philosophy must take into account the socio-political reality, and the reality of singularity, if it wants to give real answers. One must not delete singularity too fast, but read it by a philosophical strategy, in order to criticize or deconstruct it, and possibly reconstruct a renewed democracy.

In this very general and just outlined perspective, this article intends examining the role played by the concept of singularity, starting from Derrida’s texts and then proceeding beyond, in the frame of a critical re-appraisal of the relationship between deconstruction and democracy. Actually Derrida’s case seems very suitable. In fact from the one hand, Derrida has usually been considered a thinker of the democracy – in particular of the democracy to come – and not a thinker of the political singularity or individuality. But, from the other hand, it is not to be forgotten that the term singularity runs diachronically and synchronically through the whole Derridean corpus, even if its use does not appear immediately clear, and this is true not only in a political sense.

Some preliminary questions may clarify this sort of complexity. What could be the place of singularity in Derrida’s ‘political philosophy’ (if something like that exists)? Could singularity as such absolve to a pivotal theoretical function in the logical formulation, somehow spectral, of the nexus democracy/deconstruction? One could ask, for instance: where is and how does it work singularity in the emblematic chiasm ‘no deconstruction without democracy, no democracy without deconstruction’1 (Derrida 1994a, 128)?

In an interview with Richard Beardsworth, Derrida states that “‘the democracy to come’ is a democracy whose bonds are no longer those that can be deduced from the concept of democracy, such as this concept has been born and developed in the history of the West’. What is today going on in the world demands in fact also a deep reconfiguration of intersubjective political relations; therefore the democracy to come calls for “‘bonds [liens] between singularities’” (Derrida 1994b, 47-8). This syntagm is crucial. Derrida uses it rather rarely, though, even if it occasionally puts in an appearance right up to his later works (see Derrida 2003).

1 Where titles of books and articles appear only in French (or Italian), translation from the work is mine.
At first one is tempted to resolve it within the fundamental syntactic architecture of the ‘logical-political’ of Derrida, based on the notion of relational disarticulation among political subjects. There is no real democracy without a plurality of singularities in relation; but relations must not annul the distance: without distance, no relation; without relation, no democracy. The singularities interlace the threads, and a democratic new texture of relations forms. The word bonds ically renders the idea of knotting without phagocytation. Nevertheless the syntagm’s density persists, especially for the ‘philosophical’ sense assigning to ‘singularity’.

Actually Derrida’s philosophy lectures usually shift the centre of gravity of the couple singularity/democracy towards two points, which are essentially the pluralisation of the notion of singularity and singularity’s relational side. One can share this approach as it situates correctly the figure of the bonds among singularities in the theoretical and historical domain where it arises, that is within the well known set of Derridean arguments as, for instance, the de-localization of the polis or the post-Cold War reformulation of the political within a tension polis/cosmopolis. A reconstructive politics of singularity, starting from Derrida’s works, has prudently been argued from this perspective, among others, by Vaughan-Williams (2007). This sort of analyses, though, considers the notion of singularity in view of something else, that is from an external plane. I instead endeavour here to move in the opposite direction, focusing my attention mostly on singularity as such.

Now the question is: does the term singularity not reveal from the very start the undeconstructible point in the Derridean ‘X without X’ algebra, that is a supplement of impenetrability within Derrida’s thought itself on deconstruction of the democratic?

2. Two models of singularity in the same corpus: existence and resistance

Derrida seems to outline two paradigms of the political dynamics standing at the basis of the democractic, two ‘laws […] irreducible to one another’. On the one hand, ‘there is no democracy without “community of friends”’: it is the phenomenological intentionality of the democratic, as being-in-relation. But, on the other hand, there is no democracy without ‘respect of singularity’. These are two ‘tragically irreconcilable’ sides of the same problem (Derrida 1994a, 40), since we see here a sort of ‘aporia of the demos’ that ‘is at once the incalculable singularity of anyone, before any “subject”’ (Derrida 2003, 120).

But what does Derrida mean by ‘singularity’? There is no systematic or exhaustive argument: no ti esti, as always. So what is singularity not? It
cannot denote notions such as *subjectivity, political subject, citizen of the world* or *human being* (Derrida 1994b, 47). Since the anti-metaphysical disposition of deconstructive thinking, singularity can never restore the concepts of person, *ego*, individual conscience nor even the idea of an original *atom* of spiritual substance. There is no absolute origin.

The most frequent meaning of singularity is that of event, the act of occurring *as such*: the singularity is the universal attribute of ‘what happens in general’ (Derrida 1994a, 35). Singularity is the constitutive *datum* of experience, but also what exceed the very concept of experience: if ‘each time something is singular’ that is because it is ‘singularly iterable’ (Derrida 1994a, 247). Singularity’s characteristics - ‘individual’ (Derrida 1994a, 36), ‘lonely’ (Derrida, 1994a, 54), ‘incalculable’ (Derrida, 1994a, 244) - denote a neutral pre-subjective form of the ‘each-one [*chaque un*]’ (Derrida 1994a, 36). Anyway ‘in’ each singularity there always remains a *trace of the empiric*, that is the trace of an incalculable and heterogeneous element: singularity is both ‘absolute’ and ‘of the other’ (Derrida 1994a, 306). The simple form of this type of singularity, impersonal and without psychic individuation, tends to the geometrical model of an imploding and vanishing point. Its temporality is the instant. It *exists without essence*.

But there is another meaning, less frequent, which possibly opens to a second model of singularity. Singularity is something that *resists* its disappearance. In responding to the question posed by Élisabeth Roudinesco, whether ‘the singularity of a subject, even if deconstructed, exists and resists’, Derrida states that ‘of course, singularity resists [*résiste*], it remains [*reste*]. Sometimes it even resists to its being assigned to “subjectivity” [*même à son assignation à “subjectivité”*]’ (Derrida and Roudinesco 2001, 163). Its prevalent feature seems to be permanency and not adimensionality. May then singularity be considered as something of an *individual* that opposes the System? Derrida significantly declares himself very close to Kierkegaard, and states: ‘the absolute existence, the sense he gives to the word subjectivity, the resistance of existence to the concept or the system, is something I absolutely care about’ (Derrida and Ferraris 1997, 37). This *resistance of existence* always implies an ‘ethical-existential *pathos*’ (Derrida and Ferraris 1997, 37), to which usually Derrida adds an autobiographical intensity.

If it is true that already in the early seventies he affirmed that ‘all I write is terribly autobiographical’ (Derrida 1972, 15), here he is insistently asking ‘*who* thinks? *who* signs? What’s to be made of singularity in this experience of thinking?’ (Derrida and Ferraris 1997, 33). These are problematical points. What is to be made of subjectivity’s deconstruction in Derrida’s philosophy? An overflowing question. Of course it should not be
assumed that he is here attempting reinstate the ‘subject’ as such, since the concept of *first-person singular* is always approached critically: one must – each time – question ‘that which in the *autos* disrupts self-relationship’. But Derrida adds that this happens ‘always in an existential experience that is singular’ (Derrida and Ferraris 1997, 37).

Therefore, the philosophical question is now the following: what could be the value of the theoretical difficulty concerning the shifting between two forms of singularities, both acting in the same textual *corpus*? Could it not be a symptom of the fact that the totality of ‘his thought is laboured over [*travaillée*] by a fertile tension, divided between a rehabilitation of the *ego* and an egocide [*égicide*]’ (Rogoinski 2005, 65)? Or could it be that the ‘second’ singularity tends possibly to compensate for the ‘political’ insufficiency of the ‘first’ by an ethical-autobiographical *dilation*? And it is possible to conjecture that the effect of the *dilation* is a self-ex-position – a sort of de-singularisation – of singularity in the democratic space?

To summarise: the ‘first’ singularity burns itself up in the instant, and it is dangerously exposed to its nothingness, into which it suddenly returns. The ‘second’ singularity, indeed, remains and seems to be able to resist, also politically. It is as if the ‘second’ singularity were demanding, so to speak, a degree of spatial and material concreteness. Let us now examine how each of the two singularities can be specifically related to the idea of democracy.

3. The logical and morphological relation between the two singularities and the structure of the democracy to come

It is well known that, for Derrida, the spatial-temporal constitution of the *democracy to come* it is not univocal. For what that concerns its limits pattern, the *democracy to come* shows a double breaking. There is an ‘external’ breaking of the infinite horizon of space and of time. For Derrida, democracy is always elsewhere: the time and the space of *democracy to come* are a-topic and u-topic. But there is also an ‘internal’ breaking, that is an implosion of space and of time, since Derrida think that democracy is, also, what I am doing in my historical determined *hic et nunc*. The time and the space of *democracy to come* is also the singularity of the here-and-now: the ‘here-now [*ici-maintenant*]’ of the *democracy to come* is indeed nothing else then ‘the precipitation [*précipitation*] of an absolute singularity’, an this is because there is ‘no singularity without here-and-now’ (Derrida 1993, 60).

Within this scheme – perhaps excessively dialectic –, a political-constructive function for the first type of singularity may be drawn by virtue of its self-integration in the very structuring of democracy. And since it
produces itself in acto, it confirms also the Derridean idea that democracy to come is always, also, what I am performatively doing here and now. It should be observed also that, from this point of view, the fundamental structure of democracy fully subsumes the ambiguous political feature which is typical of singularity. Singular, indeed, stays for original, unique, but it stays also for suspect, strange. In Derridean terms, this confirms that what is singular is, at the same time, a resource and a threat for democracy. Singularity is democracy’s pharmakon.

This deep and someway structural ambivalence may be extended to a normative-abstract level. Metaphorically speaking, in relativistic physics the general functions defining the relationship between space-time (democracy) and any of its points (citizens) undergo a crunch because of gravitational singularity. This is the case, for example, of a point deprived of any event horizon. Singularity, in this sense, is the internal possibility of the impossible of space-time. Singularity is the here-now of system collapse, that is the point where physical properties – in so far as they are known to us – degenerate and lose every value. But one have to think also that these singular point remodel and renew the space-time curvature: singularity (the citizen) modifies the space-time (democracy).

Now this metaphor can help to understand the way by which singularity may at once be the democratic’s punctum caecum and its prop, its virtual failure and yet its secret glue. Singularity can be the intrademocratic black hole of democracy. But then this also suggests that democracy, within the experience of singularity, can display its auto-morphologic resource: it reorganizes its norm, each time, around points/singularities (internal/external elements).

Vice versa, the shape of the second type of singularity seems to be defined in the conceptual domain of strength or resistance. In this case – which will be successively clarified – singularity, in Derrida, is the tension of ‘its’ continuous self-reconfiguration in writing, giving the term the general meaning of spacing as externalization of a ‘writing singularity’. This singularity moves its first steps, almost invisibly, towards a political stage where it avoids its immediate re-absorption into the universal-democratic, which is instead precisely what the first type of singularity is fated. However this permanency re-inscribes the concept of singularity in the semantic chain – traditionally metaphysical – of interiority, described as ‘secret-private-invisible-illegible-apolitical, ultimately without concept’ (Derrida 1994a, 308). Deeply problematic terms, such as internal forum, can be found too: ‘for me, demanding that everything be paraded in the public square, and that there be no internal forum, is already democracy becoming totalitarian’
(Derrida and Ferraris 1997, 53). Nevertheless, Derrida thinks that something must resist, within its secret space, if the democratic is to exist.

Singularity and democracy, here and elsewhere, give rise to a chiasm – one seems to necessitate the other – which holds them in an uncertain relation: attraction, repulsion, a reciprocal redefinition of their theoretical space of existence.

4. A brief comparison with the position of Deleuze and Nancy on singularity

The well known analyses of Gilles Deleuze and Jean-Luc Nancy may afford a wider view of the theoretical-political field associated with the notion of singularity. In Mille plateaux (Deleuze and Guattari 1980) Deleuze suggests that a radical reconfiguration of the politic-democratic domain and therefore of individual-society dynamics, may be achieved by the morphogenetic power of singularity, the latter being understood as similar to Derrida’s ‘first type’ of singularity. Singularity is not individuality, nor subjectivity: it precedes individuality, being haecceitas originally occurring. Even when it connects itself to the manifold, singularity continues to be autonomous. Thus the new relations it determines - by deforming the force lines of the political field where it is immersed - emerge as free and creative. Also Nancy, in Être singulier pluriel (1999), presents the idea that being singular can work as a basis (instable) of the democratic by virtue of its ‘essential’ being-in-relation-with a kind of manifold. The ‘singularity of each one’ is ‘indissociable from a plurality’, to the point of identification: ‘the singular is a plural’ (Nancy 1999, 52). Nancy – also following Derrida – then proceeds to a deep de-ontologisation of the philosophical assumptions of the political discourse on the democratic. But Derrida’s singularity is something different from being singular: it laboriously works the democratic regardless of Nancy’s cum. Whatever could be the design (philosophical or post-philosophical) of their inter-con-nection to being, singularities in Derrida remain anonymously exposed to doubt, without any ontological tension.

Not unlike Nancy yet closer to Deleuze, there is a différence in Derrida’s singularity. The difference consists in the circumstance that, for Derrida, singularity’s form fluctuates from an implosive event to something approaching resistance, deferment or maybe a writing (of itself). Hence the question is now: how can this two so philosophically divergent extremes be conceptualised together? Let us now attempt a tactical digression to another Derridean topos: Nietzsche.
5. Singularity and democracy. Derrida passing through Nietzsche

Nietzsche is for Derrida also a thinker of individual singularity. His relationship with the modern idea of democracy is very problematic, being based on a radical form of anarchical singularity. The term anarchical should be considered carefully, since it denotes a groundless political-philosophical attitude (an-arché), but, at the same time, a placing of oneself outside any possible oppositional logic, including that logic that reactively each time reforms itself after any anarchical opening. After all, this Nietzschean quality of singularity resonates both in the functioning of the concept of singularity in Deleuze and in the provisionally de-liée feature of Nancy’s being singular.

In the very same years, when Derrida finally elaborates the grammar and the syntax of the democracy to come, and, even if only to some extent, turns out a number of observations on the existential-resistant singularity – for instance those referred to Kierkegaard –, Nietzsche is once again at the centre of his thinking. Let us examine now how in Derrida’s reading Nietzsche captures the point of the functional generality of the democratic, and how (and the crux of the matter lies precisely in this ‘how’) in doing this he makes plain the correlation between singularity and democracy.

In texts such Politiques de l’amitié (1994a) or Nietzsche and the Machine (1994b), one of the leitmotivs is the idea that in order to interpret reality in a philosophically convincing way, and from here also the aporetic structure of democracy to come, one needs to start, every time, from a text like Nietzsche’s. This appears self-disarticulated, open both to contradictions and to an extra-dialectical excess of contradictions.

The idea of disarticulation of textuality is somehow a final development of the work on the notions of writing and style, that marked Derrida’s initial interpretation of Nietzsche’s philosophy, in the well known texts of the sixties and seventies. This line of thinking may already be seen in the 1976 lecture Otobiographies, in which Derrida clarifies that the deeply philosophical value of Nietzsche’s writing and style(s) does not lie simply ‘inside’ his propositions, but also in their property as being a whole: ‘all statements, before and after, left and right, are at once possible (Nietzsche said it all, more or less) and necessarily contradictory (he said the most mutually incompatible things, and he said that he said them)’ (Derrida 1984, 60). Nietzsche’s textuality is built on a void among propositions, the disarticulating element that allows it to work in a instable manner: a continual forming and unmaking of figures of sense (virtuality) and the paralysis in front of the infinity of freedom of virtuality, that is the not-being-anymore-possible of any statement (aporia) (see Derrida 1986).
A constitutive disarticulation is the property that makes Nietzschean textuality a sort of *transcendental structure* of his philosophy, that is the *condition of possibility* and *functioning* of his philosophical discourse. As a result, Derrida’s interpretation makes clear the formal analogy between this instable or a-sensical *transcendental structure* and the law modeling the primary inner movement of the *democracy to come*. The syntactic-logical form is the same: a *syntax without syntax*; a rhetoric (virtually endlessly) of the contraries reversing one into the other; a logic of the dangerous *peut-être*. The latter leads to a mode of thinking beyond true/false and all metaphysical dualisms. It is a counter-logic and, at the same time, an a-logic that may disarticulate time itself: here Nietzsche’s *untimeliness* and Derrida’s concept of *à venir* tend to converge (Derrida 1994, 67-92).

It is important to point out the following: to begin to think adequately the *democracy to come* requires a violent, and almost corporal, reconfiguration of what we mean for ‘theoretical’. It requires the assumption of the semantics of the seism and vibration, shaking the very basis of the syntax and logic (theoretical *and* political). In these Derridean texts it is suggested that in order to allow a deep metamorphosis of rationality, a Nietzschean filter becomes necessary. One must face the typical paralysis of reason, which is an autogenic enigma that, ‘because it paralyses, it also engenders, stimulates’ thought (Derrida 1986, 136). The aporia causes shifting or ‘displacement of thinking’ - supplements of rationality inside rationality - because ‘the figures of rationality are profiled and outlined in the madness of aporetic’ (Derrida 1986, 132-3).

In order to understand the out-of-jointness of reality and time, one must accept a hybrid form of *textual rationality*. This rationality lets itself be run through by disarticulation. It is not irrationality, but a new and creative effort to comprehend the madness of time - its *alea* and *Unheimlich* - by a deranged reason, capable of inscribing ‘itself in the back of reason’, peering into its dark side and ‘re-organizing the tradition’s identifications of what is rational and what is irrational’ (Derrida 1994b, 22). *Through Nietzsche* reason can rediscover itself *qua* the paradoxical-necessary activity of *Selbstkritik*.

If this is, in broad terms, the *universal and abstract* side of Nietzschean textuality, what is its *singular* side? Let us go back to basics of Derrida’s interpretation. Essentially, Nietzsche is always *the one who writes*, strategically putting philosophy into crisis by a gesture that is basically a-theoretical *and* singular-stylistic: ‘Nietzsche has written what he has written. He has written that writing – and first of all of his own – it is not originally subordinate to the logos and to truth’ (Derrida 1984a, 19). The keystone, therefore, must be found in the *what* of Nietzschean *écriture*. 
6. Corpus and disarticulation. The morpho-logical level of the analysis

Nietzsche writes. He produces written objects, and they agglomerate themselves in a superabundant, apparently instable and more-than-contradictory corpus (Derrida 1994a, 96-9): an internally disarticulated corpus.

Disarticulation is, consequently, inside the Nietzschean corpus, qua active morphé; but it is in his textuality as well, qua a general ‘logical’ form. A reciprocal exchange takes place between the material corpus and textuality (as transcendental) at an ambiguous, auto-morpho-logic level. The writing singularity of Nietzsche is deeply rooted in that being-written.

Nevertheless, in relation to his corpus, Nietzsche is not only passive: he also actively writes his own textuality. Thus Nietzsche’s writing somehow shifts itself, becoming ‘writing of textuality’. As a consequence the very concept of ‘style of writing’ has to change. It can no longer only be referred to the style of a proposition, of an aphorism, nor even of a whole book, but style qua control on the overproduction of writing and qua orchestration and self-discipline on one’s own written parts. Style is then understood in its aesthetical-anthropological multidimensionality, as in Nietzsche’s notion of great style (not mentioned by Derrida).

Now the concept of disarticulation can help us find a philosophical connection between the democratic universal and singularity.

On the one hand disarticulation is all pervading: it works – and unceasingly replicates itself – in the textuality, in ‘the real’ and a fortiori in the de-structuring structuring of the democracy to come itself. Disarticulation ‘is’ inside time: there ‘is’ an inner articulation in the instant, which disjoints the metaphysical unity of the present. Disarticulation pervades perhaps even being, by a sui generis form of ‘ontology of the interruption’ – but here we are perhaps going too far, beyond Derrida’s own intentions – in which every entity can exist only starting from a fracture within being.

Then again, disarticulation is nothing more than the trace of the singularity of Nietzsche.

Disarticulation is the structural property both of the general and of the singular. In this light the disarticulated-disarticulating writing of Nietzsche can be taken as a paradigm. This passage help us to understand the kernel of the problem ‘singularity/democracy’, that is the way by which their chiasm become possible and historical: singularity de-singularises itself through democratisation, and democracy subsumes its a-democratic singular side.
7. *The living convergence ‘in’ Nietzsche of the two models of singularities*

It is now time to examine in depth the following question: how can the two singularities – the evenemential one and the existential-autobiographical one – find in Nietzsche their plane of convergence?

Nietzsche reinvents the disarticulation, each time. Affirmation and repetition: a doubling of singularity, in the structure of *eternal recurrence of the same*, combined with the iterability of the signature’s auto(bio)graphism (see Derrida 1984b). Each time Nietzsche begins to write, in the here-now of writing, the law is threatened by the very same *principium* from which it derives. Yet only thus can the novel, proper to disarticulation, *take place* and *have time*. Nietzsche’s gesture of singular invention, hubristic, hyperbolic or even anti-democratic (Derrida 1994b, 30), prevents textuality from being pureness and a-historical. Singularity grants the *quasi-trascendental* of the democracy to come.

Nevertheless, and this is a very thorny topic, Nietzsche does also another thing: he *lets himself be traversed by* disarticulation. In a sense Nietzsche is acted by disarticulation, and, simultaneously, he tries to *resist* it. Thus Nietzsche synthesizes this stylistic-anthropological contradiction, always reminding us, by his act of writing, the singular vertigo of responsibility. In a way it is an extreme and haematic writing practice: writing of (and in) the body. In doing so, Nietzsche *embodies* the extremes of reason – *extrema ratio* – that is precisely what letting himself be traversed by disarticulation amounts to. In a sense, the *pieces* of Nietzsche, that is his *remains* (of writing), are enigmatically in front of him. But he tries to re-shape his *corpus*. Therefore the pieces of Nietzsche are not only the efforts of an impressionist of philosophy: Nietzsche’s writing is instead a *cubist writing*. His writing is an artistic expression which discloses itself to what I propose to name a *cubism of reflection*. This means that in the same picture different perspectives act together; *thought dislocations* take place within the same pattern of thought; *figures of rationality* move themselves within rationality. Here lies the logical centre of *Nietzschean textual rationality*. Anyway it is not a matter of pure rationality, because, while approaching it, something happens to thought itself, to the very self of thought. Thought disarticulates itself. *With* Nietzsche, thought is ‘perhaps unleashed all the more violently and with all the more freedom’; but this is obtained ‘with all the more suffering’ (Derrida 1994b, 21).

The reference to suffering must be underlined, since in his philosophy Derrida has seldom made it explicit. Suffering leads to a corporal dimension of the disarticulation. Therefore, somehow, it contaminates the conceptual pureness of disarticulation.
Finally Nietzsche, in Derrida’s texts, is a complex field of writing: expressionism of pain is always superimposed over the cubism of reflection. Nietzsche is always – in Derrida’s corpus and thought – the text-Nietzsche, the dynamis body-corpus, where his pathetical writing arises from his self-disarticulation. Accordingly, disarticulation is both a general structure and a physical ‘presence’.

This is the reason why Nietzsche’s disarticulation should be seen as an element capable both of deeply penetrating the structure of the democratic and secretly innervate the corporal space of democratic (this last being also the space where the anthropological style arises, and where the singularity of the strength and resistance works).

As should be apparent to a Derridean reader, behind Nietzsche one can glimpse Derrida himself; the themes of hybris, of the singular ‘origin’ of the writing act or of the ‘quasi-trascendental’ are instances of this, as well as that kind of (problematic) autobiographism of the corpus, of his writing’s remains, and of physical pain too (the latter theme is not typically Derridean, but beginning in these years on, it comes out more and more tangibly between the lines of his ‘autobiographism’). All of the foregoing backs up the thesis – already contended at length by many authors, among whom Christopher Norris (1982) – that Nietzsche and Derrida ‘seem often engaged in a kind of uncanny reciprocal exchange’ (Norris 1982, 57).

It should be pointed out that right here, in these texts of the nineties, the level of exchange is complex. Both Derrida and Nietzsche self-deconstruct their own philosophy. But, in addition to this mutual similarity, I state that it is more evident also the strategic role played by either of their singularities in this self-deconstructing movement. This addiction can be significant.

8. The dynamis between singularities models as primitive space of political-existential engagement

After this long detour through Nietzsche, I came back to my main inquiry, asking if, in view of what has been discussed so far, a generalization can be drawn with regards singularity. Disarticulation and its seismic dynamic are all pervading. Moreover, we ‘belong to this tremor, if this is possible; we treble within it’ (Derrida 1994a, 98), even thought it be in the ‘X without X’ syntax of the belonging without belonging.

If the writing-written singularity is – or at least exists – qua reconfiguration of itself, this can only be in the complex field between activity and passivity: activity consists of producing one’s own philosophical
discourse, through the orchestration-writing of one’s own textuality; passivity consists of being severed by the *intra-extra opening* that precedes, determines and moves singularity.

Singularity can always take the form of an evenemential phenomenon. In this case its here-now *coincides* with the here-now of *democracy to come*. This coincidence is the *immutus motor* of democracy. Anyway if one stopped here, this would be a sterile structure, since the singularity would be transparent with respect to the democratic.

What the previous analyses suggest (chiefly the relation Derrida-Nietzsche I have just discussed), it is rather then one must join to this model of singularity another model, that is a writing singularity. This last ‘wants’ to space itself, it finally suffers since it is also something else. In other words: a singular form of *orchestration working upon its own writing remains*, exposed in the public-democratic space.

The incoherent movement between the two singularities, never attaining a synthesis, shows an evident theoretical insufficiency. But it is possible that this insufficiency may nonetheless translate into something productive, as well as an innovative ‘frame’ of *engagement politique*. Let’s see better, and trace briefly the schema.

Engagement needs singularity, but it is not unpolitical. How is it possible? This is because *engagement* connotes, first of all, an ex-position that is public, a sort of predisposition to the continuous reconfiguration of the ‘what’, that is of the object I have *written*. Each time one must restart from the remains. Moreover, one must let one’s own crisis (on the personal-political level) work. This predisposition is already *work*: a working on myself through the disarticulated autobiography of my *traces*, which can never come to unity; work as secular *ostensio* of my disarticulated *corpus*. This work, that completely wears itself out between forming and exfoliating, is already my *political engagement*.

In this context Nietzsche (and Derrida too, be it behind, through, or maybe even beyond Nietzsche) calls for supplementary philosophical attention in perceiving and interpreting one’s own crisis (‘my’ constitutive disarticulation) as something coming also *from outside*. Its hidden matrix lies in the interweaving between the evenemential singularity and the autobiographical one.

This *engagement* will operatively work towards a re-calibration of the decomposition acting between my public and my private sphere, concretely granting a piece of outside into ‘my’ inside and, at the same time, translating a piece of my-self – democratizing it – into the public space. ‘What have we here’, the reader may ask, ‘the recurrent motif of man discovering himself *qua* political entity suspended and held between *singularity and democracy*’?
Actually, today’s question is quite different: how can one concretely be active/passive? How can being-singular-in-democracy be made to become concrete through engagement? The elusive dynamis private-public that replicates the most general body-corpus reaches here its climax of incomprehensibility.


Engagement always risks remaining hypothetical, restricted to abstract analysis. In order to avoid over-abstraction, I propose now to examine – even if in a very preliminary way – the issue of Derrida’s interviews as a special form of philosophical communication in which Derrida is concretely en situation, uncertainly situated between activity (being-writing) and passivity (being-written) and perhaps engaging in a form of self-disarticulation of his ‘own’ singularity.

When Derrida answers questions in an interview, in the here-now of its occurrence, what happens? What is the philosophical value of his writing, if any? As a matter of fact he has given a great number of authorised interviews (about two hundred). Critics, showing little caution about their textual statute, have widely used these interviews, frequently quoting entire passages of Derrida’s answers, and possibly advantaging themselves of their prose qualities: condensation, brevitas, informality. As such, the interview may be considered as representing Derrida’s singularity as a writer: one of his many styles, and notably an attractive pseudo-aphoristic form of writing.

This stylistic simplification may also be considered as a partially intentional popularisation (and a democratisation) of his philosophy. Generally speaking, an interview always implies the author’s pre-disposition to the ex-position of his political commitment: in theory, through an interview one can take part in the public arena by space-temporal and material modalities that can be very different from those specific to an essay or a book. One need only think of the capillary circulation (space) and the rapidity of reception (time) of an interview, as well as of its further-future possibilities thanks to innovative media on the internet. But simplification can become also a notable theoretical problem for Derrida’s philosophy: an excess of evidence and easiness of his writing, with all the consequent risks of over-exposition and, not last, his becoming someway a cultural object of consumption or a ‘fetish-philosophy’.

On the formal level, each time a writing singularity enters the complex field of an interview, something intervenes and modifies it. At the basis of
every interview (inter-view; entre-tien) there is an interruption of ‘my’ writing, which is the disarticulation that takes place between question and answer, an empty margin that reconfigures ‘my’ writing. Through this white void, ‘my’ writing enters-into-relation with an inter and discovers itself as being built on discontinuity. The ‘outside’ intervenes on the ‘inside’, and breaks into it. Even if it evolves into a conversation or a dialogue, the interview, in its essence, is not speaking-together: no cum (con-versation), but interruption. Therefore no conciliation or hermeneutical fusion, but a vigilance against becoming the same speech.

‘My’ writing is deformed by the other: aphorisation is unintentional, ‘my’ rhetoric and conceptual concatenations are hetero-directed by an extraneous palimpsest. There will be a recording, editing and direction: these actions, thought, can not always be fully controlled by me. I am surprised and exceeded by the other, whatever the other’s appearance may be: an unpredictable question, a meaningless pause, the choice of the material supports of recording and publication, or of the interview’s title (a peritextual element which is obviously crucial in Derrida’s strategy of writing).

However, Derrida is fully aware of this complexity. There are more and more interviews over the years, and in different formats too: radiointerviews, videointerviews, up to an ideal extension in the documentary-film, where Derrida features as the actor of himself. It can be affirmed that Derrida accepts the genre of interview-writing. This means that somehow he ‘concedes’ himself: he grants interviews and gives a part of the ‘self’ to this techno-logical exteriority of writing.

The significant shift, concerning these matters, is the nature of this acceptance. It is a concrete attitude: it represents a sort of practical translation of many general themes of deconstruction (such as the ‘original’ contamination, or the ambiguity outside/inside of écriture). Derrida authorises the threat of the heterogeneous to install itself in the very centre of ‘his’ writing; he allows his writing to be run through by many different registers, which are irreducible to the logos, like chance, improvisation, all the technical delocalised devices and procedures, and also the iconic and sonic register of the documentary.

In other words, Derrida accepts an epoché of his creative-stylistic singularity, a de-singularisation of writing. Might not this be considered a movement toward democratic ex-positon? Let us go back to the very decisive point, that is Derrida’s awareness of the disarticulation running through him. For example, when he proofreads an interview transcription before its publication, he tries ‘to integrate and calculate the fact that it will be read at another pace’ compared to a book, in which his writing singularity
can express itself by ‘breath’, ‘syntax’ or ‘rhythm’. But he must admit that it is a ‘very difficult, if not impossible’ calculation (Derrida and Stiegler 1996, 101). Thus we are confronted a logical friction between the self-awareness of being conditioned (a state into which one voluntarily enters) and the choice of *letting-things-be* and they need to be. Derrida confesses that the interview always entails a ‘discomfort [*disage*]’, a ‘rigid and artificial’ speaking (Derrida and Stiegler 1996, 109) to which, moreover, he consciously *subjects* himself, by embodying estrangement.

The irreconcilability of these two aspects (awareness of the ambiguity of the interview-structure and the decision of letting-it-be) does not fully lie at a level at which a philosophical quality (moral, ethical, theoretical, political) may be derived. Perhaps it hints at another level of the singular responsibility, a deeper and possibly *existential* level.

10. *Engagement politique*

This is precisely the level at which the reformulation of *engagement politique* may be found. No traditional philosophical model of commitment allows for a share of *Gelassenheit* to be integrated into its concept. Thought is contaminated with the empirical, it resonates with the empirical. It *lets itself be run through* by technology, but it stays alert as well. Thought concerns ‘the will’ but also an ‘experience of a “radical passivity”’ (Derrida 1994b, 62). The mutual contaminations of activity and passivity are already *praxis* that contaminates the very paradigm of ‘my own’, of the ‘own’ as such, and of singularity *qua* figure of the own. All this produces effects on me in the first place.

It is, of course, an acting contradiction, namely the contradiction that structures the engagement. In this movement of meta-awareness, technique permanently threatens singularity, for it *runs through* and *disarticulates* my *singular* writing. But – Derrida reminds us – singularity is not simply opposed to technique, their relationship not being defined in terms of ‘an opposition’, because ‘they are irreducibly tied [*liées*], but there is a tension [*tension*], one must not minimize the tension’ (Derrida and Stiegler 1996, 95).

*I know* (but here the very concept of *savoir*, like those of commitment and awareness, wavers) my exposure to disarticulation, and I accept it: I *give myself in* to the interview and I partially *ex-author/ise* myself.

Here one can recognize the previously mentioned meaning of political *engagement qua* work of reconfiguration. *Engagement* must be a continuous calibration of the organization and of relations (theoretical, technical, corporeal) of one’s writing of oneself. This goes beyond any real or definitive
choice between ‘control and not-control’ or ‘mastery [mâitrise] and not-mastery’. The logic of choice as such must change: “‘choice’ between different configurations of mastery without mastery’ is not once and for all, but is each time and assumes a ‘phenomenal form of a war, of a conflicting tension among several [plusieurs] appropriation forces, several control strategies’ (Derrida and Stiegler 1996, 46) acting on my interruption, on my remains.

But the very point that, in a sense, summarizes and synthetizes all the threads of my arguments, is that in order to make real the singularity à venir of the democratic, a critical awareness of that hybrid morphology is needed. Even if all this involves only minimal shifts, and on a very subtle philosophical level, for Derrida it also clearly concerns, and à venir, the universal organization of historical and material relationships. One must pay extreme attention, and Derrida does, to the spectral functioning of the media in their techno-political dimension. But that is not enough. This metalevel of philosophy requires a difference. I am constitutively implicated – en situation – in the interviews. I am involved qua engagé, and engagé qua involved.

For example, the emersion of one’s own public image constitutes a phenomenon that shows, at least for Derrida, a number of evident contradictions between, to simplify, the inspiration towards a not institutable philosophy and that towards an image of his philosophy – and of himself – that tends to institutionalise itself. Engagement, in this case, means that Derrida is required to manage his ‘own’ image.

One can observe that the real novelty in the figure of the engagement as far as I have tried to suggest, it is the concept of managing: managing tension involves an alteration in the awareness level. However, these considerations may reveal a common predicament too: it is always difficult to see oneself, to see one’s own self-recording over again. Everybody is, and experiences themselves – today much more than in the past – as the technomorpho-logic set of their protean and metamorphic archive-corpus of writing.

Each published interview can present ‘one’ image of Derrida, or a provisionally stable set of images. But it also brings his up-to-then established public image(s) back into focus again, thus overwriting, modifying, and deleting it, all of which yields a further possibility for the orchestrating style of my written-traces, for managing the corpus of my recorded remains (fatally ex-posed to my outside). The relative easiness of the interview (today also available as a live-performance, or on internet TV, which can always develop into a video-message form of a self-interview, and involve a potentially enormous number of singularities in the world) introduces a creative shift, that is: a virtually permanent possibility of self-controlling ‘my’ public image. Derrida can be the hidden director of his being-subjected-to-interviews. He can intensify or reduce interviews, misdirect
the reader, describe himself *autrement*, disarticulating or pluralizing ‘his’ public image, by manipulating his agenda and working on minimal displacements of his image between one interview and another. It is a very sophisticated form of *engagement* as self-decentralisation, *écriture et différance* of himself from himself, which is immediately and ambiguously theoretical-practical. It looks like a heterotropy of ‘his own’ image, possibly not all that distant from the one strategically pursued by Michel Foucault with his interviews galaxy.

11. *Overall assessment about the interview qua engagement*

As pointed out by Peter Sloterdijk, perhaps the intellectual path of Derrida has been characterized by a ‘constantly alert concern not to be pinned down to one particular identity’ as well as by the ‘conviction that his place could only be at the forefront of intellectual visibility’ (Sloterdijk 2009, x). The sharp observation of Sloterdijk specifies also the double sphere of action of this tension. This tension is produced first in the media-sphere. But it is also in the existential singularity of Derrida, since ‘he experienced himself as a place of disarticulation between ‘mutually incompatible evidences’, concretely extending in ‘the tireless insistence on the ambiguity and polyvalence of signs and statements’ (Sloterdijk 2009, ix-x) of his thought-writing style.

The place where ethical-anthropological style, contradiction, and writing of the *corpus* cohabit, is precisely the space where we can, and must, rethink *engagement*. The latter is, in fact, essentially production and vigilance: one must know and experience the tension. The tension has a compound nature: it is also corporeal. It involves a ‘real transformation of the body’. In my reconfiguration – shifting incessantly between technical artifactuality and my resistance to it – *I let myself be run through by passivity*. Thus ‘little by little another body invents itself [s’invente], modifies itself, proceeds towards its subtle mutation [subtile mutation]’ (Derrida and Stiegler 1996, 109).

But a reflection on the interview completely exceeds the mere critical analysis of the media. The *inter* refers to a *être-en-inter* which perhaps is the form of a new all-embracing situation. I propose, then, to think about it in terms of an ‘*être-en-situation* of the interview’.

I force through this point of my analysis, someway to propose a reference with the existential, or Sartrian, concept of *être-en-situation*. The philosophical meaning of this gesture, to say it in a very condensed form, is to complicate and interlace the diad singular/universal with the *inter* dimension. It may sound quite strange to graft a Sartian semantics on Derrida’s. As well as it may sound not clear how one can put into relation the
concept of *engagement* with the condition of *being in situation*. In Derrida the form of the *engagement* is different from Sartre’s, and more composite. For example: it is a positive action, but paradoxically it also can be negative, because the *engagement* consists also in a coming away of the subject, and in the movement between the two modalities.

Anyway one can think that all these difficulties shows the shape of a new concept of *engagement*, which can somehow take into account the historical and technological differences intervened between pre- and post-structuralism thought.

What I called ‘*être-en-situation-of-the-interview*’ must then be conceived, but also experienced, as a tension- *engagement* towards the *being-in-democracy*.

Thus in its very first stage – a larval morphogenetic ‘activity’ – my political commitment is the effort exerted within this paradoxical *condition*. The inside must be turned inside out: *other* voices will make up the interview’s writing. They will import an *intermittence* into ‘my’ writing, which is democratically heterogeneous with respect to the *intermittences* I may also *auto-introduce*. I never fully master my *engagement*.

The *post-postmoderne condition* is this: there are questions, one writes answers. Each action is an answer. One should reorganize, hold, leave; one should ‘know’ that the structure of the interview is as much a ‘powerful programming machine’ as life itself with its ambivalences. In its widest sense and relevance the interview requires also a form of *political resistance* against both life and technique, against the very technique of writing. It demands an intellectual-corporal evolution. It is clear that here the speculative tension is stronger then ever, perhaps unbearable for philosophy.

However *de facto* tension *exists*, as well as singularity. This last consideration leads to a further question, which can only be mentioned here: who maintains, keeps and sustains the tension of *engagement*? Who is the subject of an interview? Who is the object? Who exists-resists? An evident answer is: the philosopher *engagé*. Even if it is true that the *autos* is disarticulated, perhaps a *revenant* of the existential-autobiographical side in Derrida’s works return here. And it is haunting. This *revenant* is perhaps visible in the heretical form of an *existentialism of writing*, of himself *and* of his ‘own’ remains, more and more patent in the so called ‘late Derrida’.

12. *Être-en-situation and the being-in-democracy: the singularity à venir*

Coming near to the end, I would like to propose to make all the different lines of my paper converging into some final questions, opening a further development. The question of singularity, in and/or out of democracy, has
led to the question about the tension between the two singularities models. Passing through Nietzsche, the problem gained a more existential level, notably in Derrida too. From these arguments, then, it arises the consequent question of the philosophical quality of my engagement, and from this the discussion was taken to the example of the hybrid writing.

But finally, what if the interview were to be thought of as the premise of a co-action? As a place of relations among singularities, at first intra-singular and then inter-singular? As an à venir form of philosophical co-writing that could sketch a singular-democratic political matrix?

The inter of the interview certainly represents a theoretical space that can be located within the borders of traditional philosophical concepts only with considerable difficulty. The general structure of many urgent problems is nevertheless inscribed in the inter. Take, for instance, the democratic participation of singularities in relation to cyberdemocracy. Today the effects of the constitutive ambiguity of the latter are patent. They are ramified in our experience of ‘the real’, from the a-sociality of social networks to the net-autobiographism flow, increasingly less controllable, for ‘authors’ too. Maybe the latter is no more than a teenager internet phenomenon. In any case teenagers are, here-now, the à venir voters. This shows, once again, the deep nexus between the here-now and the structure of the democracy to come. This example shows also the unpredictable outcomes for ‘democracy’ that this flow of writing, images and scripts of all sorts, or – to put it philosophically – this concrete net-anthropological externalization of ‘the singular self’, may imply.

But it should be added that what I denoted as inter, except for its implications in these and many other techno-political modern-day instances, may have been thought in its somehow universal philosophical quality. I suggest, in fact, that the first motility of the singularity/democracy chiasm, that is its first larval figure, rises from disarticulation. Disarticulation is always the atopic place where democracy can be fecundated by singularity and singularity can democratise itself by de-singularising.

It is not only a matter of acknowledging this fact, but to rethink philosophically the complexity of the inter, and hence of the being-inter as well as of the significance of democratic engagement. In the sense I try to illustrate below, at this level the signs and the intuitions I have traced in Derrida’s work – perhaps going beyond his intentions – may have affinities with other voices of the contemporary philosophical scene. In Sloterdijk’s spherology (1998), for instance, it is no a coincidence that the semantics of his boundary entities (indispensable to the sphere qua separation/link between inside and outside) like the membrane, the placenta and many others, develop around the Latin prefix inter. By virtue of the implicit
connections that one can establish between the concepts of interior, interstitial and intermediality, the term inter enables the spheres – since they are, somehow, also intermediate entities – to function as an anthropological anticipation of the modern-day media. The ‘être-en-situation-of-the-interview’ is not far off.

Yet again, at a different level – not onto-anthropological but logical-dialectical –, the decisive role of inter in Slavoj Žižek’s thought on the interpassive subject (1998) shows up in the disarticulation and re-articulation of the fundamental dichotomy subject/object. The notion of interactivity – which reveals itself as ‘false activity’ – and the related idea of my being ‘passive through the other’ lead Žižek to the general thesis that ‘perhaps, the fundamental attitude which defines the subject is neither that of passivity nor that of autonomous activity, but precisely that of interpassivity’ (Žižek 1998).

These examples may suggest that, qua general property, wherever it may be found inter brings along with itself the ambiguous quality of active/passive or inside/outside. The inter exhibits a strange quality of self-generation, that may even be a philosophical quality: the inter, in fact, is almost two kinds of philosophical objects. It is a concept; it is the streaming in ‘the real’ of the concept. Its ambiguity also affects the political field.

All I argued so far, about singularity and its tension, about engagement and ‘être-en-situation-of-the-interview’, can of course imply that reconstructing democracy on singularity is always subject to failure. That is because not only are singularities with respect to democracy permanently ‘dissymmetrical and heteronomic’ (Derrida 1994a, 222), but also because singularities can always be ‘anonymous’ and infinitely ‘indifferent’ (Derrida 1994a, 129). Hence one can see how singularities are also virtually implosive points (democracy’s black holes). After all, this is not far from the way singularity has been usually thought in the history of western philosophy. When predicated of infinite indifference and anonymity, singularities become similar to Leibnitian monads: entities with no doors or windows, and whose gates are often nothing but the illusory shadow of interactivity. Otherwise, they tend to Epicurean gods: absolutely indifferent, living in their intermundia. This last is notably an equivalent, but inverse, spatiality with respect to that of the interstitials between monadic spheres (and, once again, one can see the inner relation between the notions of singularity, monad, sphere and the morpho-logic of the inter).

With regards to all these problems, Derrida leaves us with no solution, not even with any real or somehow tentatively useable guideline. In his thinking, singularity itself represents also the impenetrability of/by thought. His thought here, as elsewhere, remains problematic and not thematic: à
That having been said, he questions the complexity inside the idea of re-placement of singularity. From here, a new kind of engagement arises *qua* productive aporia between different types of singularities. This engagement is conceived within a pathetic-existential tension, a physical suffering of commitment and contradiction, that ultimately means: the effort of a continuous self-reconfiguration of my writing, of concepts, of my body, and of the relationship between me and my remains.

In this sense, Derrida seems to illuminate about a double level of the problem concerning singularity/democracy. One level: the realism of the great trouble in modeling a democracy upon the concept of singularity. One other level: the necessity of something innovative concerning singularity. The two levels are superimposed. The new way of thinking singularity could be a political counter-strategy as far as it opens to an existential singularity. This last can be concrete as far as it remains anti-metaphysical.

This is the meaning both of *being engagé* and of the democratic singularity. But this singularity is not here, but always à venir. To end, with Derrida’s words: ‘this means that one must not renounce, but – this comes slowly, this is little by little – […] one must change all these spaces and these times. Perhaps one day this may be done in a better way, I hope so’ (Derrida and Stiegler 1966, 125).

References