

○ 'MY BUSINESS IS CIRCUMFERENCE'

A MEDITATION ON SCISSION, LOCUTION, CONFESSION

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This essay offers a speculative account of the metaphor of circumcision in Jacques Derrida's autobiographical writing. I draw upon Elaine Scarry and Nancy Jay in addition to psychoanalytic readers of the Hebrew Bible (Julia Reinhard Lupton, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan) in order first to explore the meaning of circumcision in its Biblical context before bringing this significance to bear on Derrida's work.

INTRODUCTION

My title is drawn from an 1862 letter of Emily Dickinson's in which she claimed that 'the Bible dealt with the Centre, not the Circumference'. This letter has been mobilized by Dickinson scholars to shed light on an earlier, far more enigmatic declaration that 'My business is Circumference'. I adopt Dickinson's phrase here to signal my own interest in circumference in that the business of this essay ripples outwards from the Biblical account of circumcision to an exploration of its significance on the periphery in the diasporic 'Jewish sciences' of psychoanalysis and deconstruction.

By way of introduction the paper draws upon Elaine Scarry's formulation of the relationship between God and the human as founded on the respective immunity of the one as opposed to the *woundability* of the other, and Julia Reinhard Lupton's Lacanian readings of Biblical texts in order to examine three particular facets of Hebraic circumcision: circumcision as signature or seal of God's covenant with Abraham, circumcision as a marker of ethnicity – paradoxically binding through scission, and circumcision as the literal instantiation of the Lacanian 'cut' by which the child is initiated into the Symbolic order. From here the paper explores the logic of circumcision as it is thematised in the work of Jacques Derrida. In doing so it traces a trajectory across the metaphor of circumcision in 'Shibboleth' and 'Ulysses Gramophone' before culminating in a speculative thesis regarding the 'cut' of autobiographical writing in one of Derrida's most personal essays: 'Circumfession'.

'SO SHALL MY COVENANT BE IN YOUR FLESH AN EVERLASTING COVENANT'

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'I am God Almighty. Walk before me and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly'. Then Abram fell on his face; and God said this to him, 'Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ... This is my covenant which shall keep, between me and you, and your descendants after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ... He that is eight days old among you shall be circumcised; every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. ... So shall my

covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant (Gen. 17:1-14).¹

From this passage it is clear that circumcision may be understood as the seal put to the covenant wrought between God and Abraham – a guarantee equivalent to a signature (Lupton 1998, 196), a password or *shibboleth* which ensures election. God promises to multiply Abraham's descendants and make him the father of a great nation. It is fitting, therefore, that the male organ of procreation should be marked as a reminder of this pledge. Yet the exact nature of Abraham's side of the bargain is less clear. It seems unlikely that a scarified penis was required in order to remind the sons of Abraham to procreate. Rather, circumcision was a mnemonic of faith. In *The Body in Pain* Elaine Scarry suggests that just such a link between body and belief is evident throughout both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. She argues that the relationship between God and humanity is always 'mediated by the sign of the weapon' in that the invisible divine power of the Word is substantiated and made visible in the wounding of human flesh. Moreover, these 'problematic scenes of hurt ... tend to occur in the context of doubt and disbelief' and are frequently framed by scenes of production (Scarry 1985, 183–4). While Scarry herself does not utilise this framework for an analysis of circumcision, the establishment of the ritual of circumcision as it is laid down in Genesis does adhere to the pattern she identifies.

Scarry proposes that it is through pain that the body exists in its most concentrated presence, and that this intensely felt presence is, in turn, the substantiation of the disembodied reality (God) which enacts the actual physical change in the human flesh (Scarry 1985, 194). That circumcision is primarily an act of wounding and scarification (rather than a necessary act of hygiene for example), is evident in the rabbinic ruling that even those male children who are born without a foreskin must be 'circumcised' by the drawing of blood. Rabbi Simeon b. Eleazer, for example, explains that 'when one is born circumcised, the blood of the covenant must be made to flow from him, because it is a suppressed foreskin' (Lupton 1998, 195). Lacan, too, cites Rashi quoting Abraham (on hearing that he is not required to sacrifice Isaac after all) 'have I thus come here for nothing? I am at least going to give him a slight wound to make him shed a little blood' (Lacan 1992a, 93). Thus, circumcision can be read as the ritualised performance of God's presence and power.

But while the pain ensuing from the wound inflicted by the mohel's knife endures for at least three days – as is evidenced by the revenge wrought against the Shechemites by Simeon and Levi in Genesis 34 – it does not last indefinitely. Instead, the scar remains as a continual substantiation of God's authority; a mnemonically apotropaic mark warding off doubt and disbelief.² Ironically enough, nowhere is this more crucial than in the scene of God's promise to Abraham. Although Abraham is hailed in Judaic and Christian commentary alike as a paradigmatic figure of faithfulness – not only did he leave his home and family at the Lord's command, but also proved himself willing to sacrifice his only legitimate son when called upon by God to do so (Gen. 12:1, 22:1-18) – even he must be branded in this fashion to avert a crisis of faith. In explanation for this, it is useful to return to Scarry's proposition that biblical scenes of wounding take place 'in the context of disbelief and doubt'. Immediately prior to the actual circumcision of Abraham and his household, doubt erupts into the covenant in the form of laughter:

And God said to Abraham, 'As for Sar'ai your wife, you shall not call her name Sar'ai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her; ... Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, 'Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old bear such child?' (Gen. 17:15-17).

Once the circumcision has been performed, however, there is no space for disbelief in the relationship between God and Abraham: he does not share in his wife's laughter when the promise is reiterated by their divine visitor in the passage that follows the forging of the original covenant.

The position of women in relation to circumcision is, on the face of it, unclear in Genesis. It may be that because women were regarded as chattel, it was not necessary for them to receive a mnemonic marker of faith if the men of their household had already received it on their behalf. Yet if this is the case, Sarah ought to have shown here the same unconditional faith as is displayed by Abraham after his circumcision. Alternatively, her scepticism may have more to do with having not yet given birth. It may be that women are not required to endure the pain of circumcision because God's power and existence has been inscribed upon them bodily since the Fall: 'To the woman [God] said, 'I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children'' (Gen. 3:16). Nancy Jay's work on sacrifice and descent gives a compelling account of the relationship between maternity and sacrifice which also offers us a handle on why circumcision is a specifically and necessarily masculine ritual. According to Jay, sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible is intimately linked to descent, in particular, the transition from matrilineal to patrilineal lines of descent. The pseudo-sacrifice of Isaac, she explains, marks his movement from being his mother's to his father's son. In the scene of reprieve, Isaac is significantly given life by his father in a way that overwrites his actual birth from his mother's body (Jay 1992, 102). Sacrifice, she contends, is thus 'a remedy for having been born of woman' (Jay 1992, 40). We might make the move from sacrifice to circumcision via Julia Kristeva's formulation of the latter as marking, as sacrifice does, a separation from maternal affiliation in order to join a wider s/Symbolic order (Kristeva 1982, 99). For both Kristeva and Jay, separation from the mother is a necessary precursor to integration into the nation of Israel. Ritual acts such as circumcision and sacrifice always perform dual actions of separation and incorporation.

Bearing out the suggestion that circumcision performs the dual function of separating the child from an actual mother, while simultaneously integrating the child into a wider genealogy, is the fact that the 'problematic' wounding of the penis by circumcision is flanked in the narrative by scenes of national procreation. Contiguous to and inseparable from the account of the covenant are the birth of Ishmael and the promise of the birth of Isaac:

Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him and make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly (Gen. 17:19-20).

Moreover, given the centrality of generation to the covenant, it is unsurprising that it is sealed by a mark inscribed upon the male reproductive organ. Indeed, because of the reproductive

function of the penis, its marking signifies not only the (self) perpetuity of the covenant, but also the eternity of God's existence. Circumcision ensures the regeneration of faith with each ensuing generation by emblematising the link between the proliferation of peoples and the reality of God's existence described by Scarry:

however more powerful the Word of God is than the Body of man ... the Word is never self-substantiating: it seeks its confirmation in a visible change in the realm of matter. ...the body is able not only to substantiate itself [through iteration and repetition], but to substantiate something beyond itself as well: it is able not only to make more amply evident its own existence, presence, aliveness, realness but to make ever more amply evident the existence, presence, aliveness, realness of God. With each successive increase ... they reassert not only the sensorially confirmable realness of their own existence (We are. We are. We are. We are.) but the sensorially confirmable realness of God's existence (He is. He is. He is. He is.), or in the voice that is attributed to him, 'I am. I am. I am. I am' (Scarry 1985, 193).

But these generations do not testify to the existence of just any divine power – the wound of circumcision (s)elects the children of Israel as God's chosen people. 'Physical yet not physiological, genealogical but not genetic', it functions as 'a nation-marking sign linking generations across time and space'. It is both the sign and the mechanism of '*naturalized citizenship*, ratifying membership in the nation' (Lupton 1998, 194–6). Abraham cut his ties with his biological family in order to become 'the stronger father of an even more determinate family – what remains of the cut cleaves more strongly together' (Derrida 1986a, 41). Citizenship in the nation of Israel thus does not depend on blood lines or birthright, but is open to, and indeed mandatory for, 'every male throughout your generations, whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring'. It is also probably for this reason that the rite of naming the male child came to be performed alongside his circumcision. While the account given in Genesis of the first circumcision does not explicitly establish the connection between circumcision and naming, the current practice may have arisen from the fact that Abraham and Sarah received their new names from God at this point (Gen. 17: 5, 15). The name conferred at the time of circumcision is traditionally Biblical in extraction and thus embeds the child within Judaic historico-religious culture – much in the same way that the adoption of saints' names by children from Roman Catholic cultures at the time of their confirmation situates them within the community of true believers.

'THAT LITTLE PIECE OF FLESH SLICED OFF ...'

The association of naming with circumcision is significant psychoanalytically in that circumcision physically enacts the 'cut' that brings the subject into existence under the *Nom/Non du Pere*. As Julia Reinhard Lupton writes:

[d]uring the rite of circumcision, the son receives a name linking him to the history of his people; by the proper name's expropriating cut, circumcision removes the infant from the realm of nature and situates him in a network of

social and linguistic relations. Circumcision resembles what Lacan ... calls a *point de capiton* or 'buttoning point', a primal or master signifier fastening the subject into the symbolic order through a real trauma, in this case the cut of the knife that forever inscribes his name, conferred by the father, on the infant's body (Lupton 1998, 197).

The conferring of the proper name chosen by the father inscribes the not-yet-subject in the symbolic order. The proper name projects 'the *proper* relation between the father and the son [which] bestows upon the son the *property* of identity' (Taylor 1987, 284). The name thus acts as a place holder, looking forward to the subject's coming into language via the 'Name of the Father' (Fink 1995, 53). This function of the name and the cut of circumcision as 'place holders' may shed some light on why circumcision is performed at such an early age, long before the subject's entry into language. In the same way that the christening involves the parents' promise to bring the child up within the Christian Church, circumcision can be seen as marking a parental pledge to rear the child as subject to Culture – not only Judaic culture, but the cultural injunction against incest. The penis without foreskin functions to remind the subject that he lacks; but by the same token (*du même coup*) the adult social subject must perceive this lack as always already having been there.

For Lacan, the birth of the subject is brought about by the 'catastrophic cleavage' from the mother that is wrought by the child's learning to speak in the Father's Name.³ The Name of the Father is Lacan's metaphor for the 'third term' – the paternal signifier – that ruptures the unity of the mother child dyad in the first year or so of the infant's life. Before the child's entry into language the mother exists for it as simply an extension of its own body. This state of absolute unity with the mother Lacan associates with the real – that realm that is presymbolic or prelinguistic. The paternal signifier cuts into the real, severing the relationship and creating a space between the mother and the child. It is within this space that desire circulates in that, for the separation to hold, the mother must be perceived as lacking or desiring. The child wants to be the mother's sole object of desire but is continually confronted with her desire for objects other than itself – either the father himself or another subject who fulfils the paternal function. But the mother's desire is dangerous. Lacan describes her as a crocodile: 'you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. That is the mother's desire' (Lacan cited in Fink 1995, 56). To arrest this consuming desire of and for the mother, the Father's Name is introduced as the name of the mother's desire. The child is distanced from the mother's desire by the intervention of language through the substituting of a name for the mother's desire. The substitution is made possible only by the child's entry into language. The distance that arises from symbolisation of the mother's desire affords the child a space of its own. It is no longer simply a place holder in the symbolic, no longer merely a proper name, but a desiring subject.

The cleavage is made final and lasting by the *Non du Pere* – the incest taboo. This is the point at which culture says to (m/other) nature 'here you go no further'. The paternal injunction against incest is internalised and the child is thus effectively 'castrated'. With the denial of sexual union, the mother's loss is deemed irretrievable and the subject comes into existence as a being separate from the m/other. But the process of repression of unconscious desires (performed by the Freudian superego) that is set in motion by castration causes the subject to become irremediably internally

divided against itself. In Lacanian symbology the eternal tension into which the consciousness and the unknowable Other of the unconscious are locked is designated by the 'barred' subject. At the same time as the barred subject is precipitated, the m/other's desire begins to function as the 'cause' of the child's desire. Lacan encapsulates this in the aphorism: '*Le désir de l'homme, c'est le désir de l'Autre*'. That is, 'the desire of man is the desire of the Other', or as Bruce Fink translates it, 'Man desires the Other's desire for him'. The child wants to be desired by the m/other, however, the m/other's desire is always in excess of the child. The total overlap of its desire and hers cannot be sustained and her desire's independence from the child 'creates a rift between them, a gap in which her desire, unfathomable to the child, functions in a unique way' (Fink 1995, 55). This gap reveals the *objet a*. The *objet a* is the remainder produced by the rupture of the originary unity of the mother-child dyad. It is the evanescent trace of that hypothetical wholeness. By cleaving to the *objet a* (the voice, the breast, the gaze, the faeces), the split subject can disavow its division and sustain the illusion of plenitude. For Lacan, the excised foreskin is precisely such an *objet a* in that its removal functions as a marker of man's separation from the real of God's *jouissance*. The 'Hebrew', he writes, abhors those rituals which would unite the community with God's *jouissance*. Judaism does not ignore or disavow the split between man and the divine:

[h]e accords special value to the gap separating desire and fulfillment. The symbol of that gap we find in the same context of El Shadday's relation to Abraham, in which, primordially, is born the law of circumcision, which gives as a sign of the covenant between the people and the desire of he who has chosen them what? – that little piece of flesh sliced off.

It is with that *petit a*, to whose introduction I had led you last year ... that I shall leave you (Lacan 1992a, 94).

The absence of the foreskin emblematises the cut, the rupture in nature, that is monotheism. The act of circumcision can therefore be read both as an avatar of God's creation *ex nihilo* and as a harbinger of the Tetragrammaton. In the beginning, the first act of creation was an act of scission as the word of God separated light from the darkness of the void:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

And God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day (Gen. 1: 1-4).

Like Heidegger's potter, God creates nature around a void (Lacan 1992b, 121). Over six days he creates the sky, the land and sea, the sun and moon, and every living organism upon the Earth's surface, culminating in the creation of man in the evening of the sixth day: 'God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him' (Gen. 1:27). The chiasmic structure of this verse testifies to the specular relationship between God and man. True to Lacan's conceptualisation of 'the mirror stage', man comes into being as a primordial ego via his reflection in

the eyes of the Other (Lacan 1977, 1–7). The solemnity of this pronouncement also serves to separate man from nature, to signify his ‘dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves on the earth’. But as Julia Reinhard Lupton and Kenneth Reinhard argue, this pronouncement also ‘underscores the radical difference between man and God upon which their likeness is predicated’ (Lupton and Reinhard 2003, 78). Their formulation runs thus: that God is not part of nature is evidenced by his creation of it; precisely what makes man God-like, then, is his alienation from nature via language. Moreover, they point out that the Hebrew word *tselem* – likeness, image – originally meant ‘something cut off’. The use of this term immediately defines man as ‘cut off’ from both God and nature through the alienating function of language (Lupton and Reinhard 2003, 79). In keeping with this thematic of scission, then, is God’s decision to rest on the seventh day of his creation – he could bring to fruition his creation of the world only by subtracting something from it. The day of rest (of *reste*, remainder) thus acts as a ‘period’, as an *augenblick* that delineates within creation the space necessary for ‘the possibility of symbolic significance’ (Lupton and Reinhard 2003, 83). God must deplete his own totality in order to make room for the world to come into being. Only by God’s absence can man come into being as a subject without fear of annihilation by *le désir de l’Autre*.

All that remains/reminds of God is the Tetragrammaton which doubly inscribes his absence. That God even has a proper name is a testament to his absence; that it is a name from which certain elements are lacking renders this absence present in every encounter with its four talismanic letters. For Lacan, YHWH functions as the original instance of the primary signifier, that signifier without signified which is exterior to the signifying chain that it inaugurates (Lupton and Reinhard 2003, 76). The primary signifier is the cornerstone of Lacanian alienation, that moment in which the subject must choose ‘meaning’, symbolisation over the pure possibility of ‘being’ (Fink 1995, 51). As noted above, Julia Reinhard Lupton has argued in relation to alienation that circumcision is also such a primary signifier. It is the Lacanian *point de capiton* that attaches the subject to the symbolic order (Lupton 1998, 197). I would like to further cleave circumcision to the unspeakable name of God by drawing upon Inge-Birgitte Siegumfeldt’s suggestion that the crescent shaped scar left by circumcision literally inscribes the infant’s penis with the first letter of the Tetragrammaton – *Yud* (Siegumfeldt 2005, 285, 292). Circumcision as ‘protocastration’ marks the child’s entry into the state of repression (Lupton 1998, 197); the intimate link between the *Yud* (and hence the name of God) and this act of ‘castration’ thus maintains the force of the taboo against entry into the jouissance of God the m/other.

‘CIRCUMCISION, THAT’S ALL I’VE EVER TALKED ABOUT ...’

Via the *Yud* the primal wound of ‘being’ can be understood as a ‘writing’ on the body. The final section of this paper, then, will both examine circumcision as a metaphor for writing and adopt it as a tactic for reading. Specifically, I will explore circumcision in the work of Jacques Derrida in terms of its function as a password that facilitates access not only to the scene of deconstruction (Siegumfeldt 2005, 283), but also the reading and writing of autobiography. In over forty years of writing circumcision has been a persistent motif in Derrida’s *oeuvre*. His preoccupation is made explicit by J.D.’s admission in 1991’s ‘Circumfession’ that it is, in fact,

all I’ve ever talked about, consider the discourse on the limit, margins, marks, marches etc., the closure, the ring (alliance and gift), the sacrifice, the writing

of the body, the pharmakos excluded or cut off, the cutting/sewing of *Glas*, the blow and the sewing back up, whence the hypothesis according to which it's that, circumcision, that, without knowing it ... I was always speaking or having spoken (Derrida 1993, 70).⁴

In Derrida's work circumcision stands in as the ur-metaphor for deconstruction. It is the cutting around of the circumference or margins of philosophy; it performs the work of the *pharmakon* in that it is an apotropaic simulacrum of castration, a mnemonic mark which protects the bearer from the threat of castration; it can symbolise the cut of language, the covenant and of sacrifice. But where the cut of language is a cut which severs the subject from the other, language can itself be circumcised in turn – cleft, opened to the *tout autre*, the reader.

In 'Shibboleth', his essay on Paul Celan, Derrida translates circumcision as it is used in Celan's work as 'reading wound'. He quotes Celan's injunction to 'circumcise the word', (note the caesura acting here as a performance of the cut):

Rabbi I grated, Rabbi/ Loew:/ For this one/ circumcise the word ...

TO ONE WHO STOOD BEFORE THE DOOR,/ one/ evening:/ to him/ I
opened my word-: (Celan in Derrida 1986b, 342–343).

Celan's word is circumcised in the sense that it is the word that gives access, a word open '[l]ike a wound you will say. No, first of all like a door, open to the stranger, to the other, to the guest, to whomever' (Derrida 1986b, 342). Yet as John Caputo points out, this reading of circumcision as open, embracing, heterogeneous seems somewhat implausible alongside the traditional understanding of circumcision as 'an exclusive ... point of entry into a self-enclosing community, a mark or trait setting the Jew apart' (Caputo 1997, 250). The very term 'shibboleth' itself signifies inaccessibility to the other – 'only those who know how to pronounce *Shibboleth* are allowed crossing, or indeed, life' (Derrida 1986b, 307). But it is precisely this 'double edge' of the shibboleth/circumcision with which Derrida is concerned. Circumcision is at once a mark of inclusion and one of discrimination and exile. Similarly, the word, the poetic text, also embodies the paradox of a singularity which is simultaneously collective – a paradox which Derrida figures in the trope of the *event*, the 'date' of circumcision. He identifies the one who stands before the door in Celan's poem as the prophet Elijah, he who is present at every *brit milah*. The circumcised word, then, is 'open to whomever in the figure of the prophet Elijah ... for Elijah is the one to whom hospitality is owed' (Derrida 1986b, 342).⁵ And since Elijah may come at any moment, the circumcised word must be open to the possibility of an encounter with the other at any given instant. But at the same time, every instance of the word's opening to the other, each encounter of the text with the other/reader, must itself remain ineluctably singular: 'There must be circumcision, circumcision of the word, and it must take place once, *each time* one time, the one time only' (Derrida 1986b, 346). The reading of the text is thus a singular event that is nevertheless endlessly iterable – an event that happens for the first and only time each time it occurs.

This dual aspect of the circumcised word can also be identified in the signature. For Derrida, the signature as proper name is an appropriating mark but can also function as a saying 'yes' to the other. In 'Ulysses Gramophone' an address given at the International James Joyce Symposium only a matter of months after 'Shibboleth', Derrida pursued his preoccupation with circumcision

arguing the case for a circumcision of the signature. On the one hand the signature that is circumcision bestows the legal and institutional proper name that in turn is protected, encircled, enclosed by copyright. But on the other hand, the circumcision of the signature opens the signature to the affirming counter-signature of the other. Derrida aligns these two facets of the signature/ circumcision with Ulysses and Abraham respectively (Caputo 1997, 257). The Ulyssean signature is the circumnavigational signature. It is the signature that returns to the place of origin, 'sending itself' only 'in order to gather itself together near itself' (Derrida 1992, 304). This signature is associated with Joyce's 'hyper-mnesiac mastery' whereby all possible reading strategies are always already collected in an encyclopaedic circumscription. The 'negative yes-laughter' of the Ulyssean signature circumvents, cuts off

all other possible mastery, [it is] as impregnable as an alpha and omegaprogramophone in which all the histories, stories, discourses, knowledges, all the signatures to come that Joyceans and other institutions might address would be prescribed, computed in advance outside the scope of any effective computer, precomprehended, captive, predicted, partialized, metonymized, exhausted, like the subjects, whether they know it or not (Derrida 1992, 292).

But as the signature in juridical discourse cannot be reduced to merely an inscription of the proper name, the signature in Joyce is similarly irreducible. The Ulyssean signature is traversed, divided, cut open, circumcised by the other 'yes laughter' – yes, the laughter of the other. The ostensibly impregnable circle of mastery, of competence can be breached precisely because of its hermetic pretensions. Derrida writes

this hypermnesic interiorization can never be closed upon itself. For reasons connected with the structure of the corpus, the project and the signature, there can be no assurance of any principle of truth or legitimacy, so you also have the feeling, given that nothing new can take you by surprise from the inside, that something might eventually happen to you from an unforeseeable outside (Derrida 1992, 283).

The Abrahamic and the Ulyssean collide again in the text that is (de)signed *Jacques Derrida*. This text consists of two parallel inscriptions. The first, which runs along the top two thirds of each page is Geoffrey Bennington's 'Derridabase', an attempt to systematise Derrida's thought over the past thirty years. As its title suggests, the governing metaphor of the piece is that of the computer program; G.B.'s self-confessed aim was to turn Derrida's thought into 'an interactive program, which, despite its difficulty, would in theory be accessible to any user' (Bennington and Derrida 1993, 1).⁶ Underneath it runs the counter-signature of J. D. entitled 'Circumfession', a self-conscious attempt to thwart and rupture the self-containment of Bennington's text. 'Derridabase', then, purports to perform the Ulyssean signature – the *encyclopaedic* totalising program in which all masteries are computed in advance. 'Circumfession' is the Abrahamic *signature* that punctures the hermetically sealed system of Bennington's text. Fittingly then, J.D. introduces his text with an image of the pen that would function as a syringe, 'a suction point' through which 'the blood would deliver itself...the inside of my life delivering itself outside' (10–12). And deliver it does. 'Circumfession' is a text overflowing with bodily fluids. J.D.'s inner life, his

‘prayers and tears’, bleed and suppurate across its pages. From the chronic weeping of the child, Jackie, to the blood that flows in his phantasmatic reliving of the moment of circumcision, to the open bedsores of his mother that are marked and remarked upon, effluvia can be read as a trope for the process of ‘autobiothanatohetero-graphical’ writing (213). It is by probing the cut of circumcision, by holding it open for inspection by the other that J.D. produces a narrative to challenge to G.B.’s carefully sutured patchwork of Derridean thought. Circumcision is the shibboleth that guarantees our seemingly privileged access to J.D.’s private life.

Throughout ‘Circumfession’ J.D. quotes extensively from the series of notebooks he began in 1976 after the death of his father. These collections of notes were to form the basis of a text never written, the ‘book of circumcision’ to be named *The Book of Élie* for both the prophet Elijah and for the secret name with which J.D. was himself bestowed at his circumcision. The first notebook begins with a meditation on circumcision and its representation in the Algerian Jewish community. He writes that in his family ‘one scarcely ever said “circumcision” but “baptism”, not Bar Mitzvah but “communion”.’ Their Jewishness was thus softened, dulled, made less violent and uncivilised, less ‘Arab’ – a ‘fearful acculturation’ from which J.D. still suffers – perhaps due, in part, to his expulsion as ‘a little black and very Arab Jew’ from the Lycée de Ben Aknoun in 1942 as a result of the ruling handed down from Vichy that no school could exceed a Jewish enrolment of 7% (58, 72–73). Indeed, the very idea of a ‘circumfession’ seems at first to Catholicise circumcision. J.D. quotes extensively from fellow North African, St Augustine of Hippo, structuring his confessional narrative around episodes from the *Confessions* of the patriarch. But where St Augustine wrote in order to reveal to the faithful ‘the floods of clear truth, from which each man may draw the truth’ (204), J.D.’s confession ‘has nothing to do with truth’ (107) making his ‘Circumfession’ less a Catholic circumcision than a circumcised Catholicism. ‘Severed from truth’, the text ‘bleeds’; if it doesn’t ‘it will be a failure’ (314, 130). In a gesture that echoes Celan’s circumcised word, J.D. writes that his ‘opus must have a circumcised form’ (235). Set adrift from truth, his words are open to a myriad of readings and readers to the extent that his circum(cised con)fession becomes *Everybody’s Autobiography* (311).

Moreover, J.D. cannot appropriate the words of his own autobiography simply because, as he claims, he has no language of his own (92). A Jew born into an Arab nation, he knows almost no Hebrew and writes and speaks in ‘Christian Latin French’ (58). Estranged from the language of Judaism but excluded by virtue of his Jewishness from the language of the coloniser he has no words to name as his own. He therefore describes himself as a ‘sort of *marrane* of French Catholic culture’ (from the Spanish term *marrano* designating those Jews who publicly converted to Catholicism but continued to practice Judaism in secret), but as a *marrane* with a twist in that he no longer claims to be a Jew ‘even in the secret of [his] heart’ (170). He describes pretending to learn Hebrew, reading it phonetically without understanding it (288). As a boy of thirteen he would truant from his bar-mitzvah classes, an action he describes as ‘fleeing’ not only from Jewish school but from the ‘alliance’ (the covenant) for which it stood (175). At around the same time he was expelled from the Lycée when French Algeria, ‘without the intervention of any Nazi’ withdrew his French citizenship (288). Thus, he ‘became the outside’:

try as they might to come close to me they’ll never touch me again, they masculine or feminine, and I did my ‘communion’ by fleeing the prison of all languages,

the sacred one they tried to lock me up in without opening me to it, the secular they made clear would never be mine (289).

Neither Jewish outwardly nor Christian French inwardly J.D. is dispossessed, nomadic in his own language and culture. But this dispossession is liberating in that he revels in the resultant ‘nomadic play’ of the practice of writing (Caputo 1997, 232). In subverting the encyclopaedic, eternally self-reflexive system of ‘Derridabase’ J.D. evinces a writing that endlessly disseminates, disperses.

Throughout ‘Circumfession’ this open, bleeding, weeping language is thematised as a circumcision – the circumcision that ‘among the Jews alone’ is before speech (288). It is the first cut which heralds the cut of language. And like language, which separates the child from the other, but also initiates the child in the symbolic order, circumcision is a cut which attaches, ‘for he who is not circumcised remains “cut” from his community’ (309). It is precisely the alienation that J.D. speaks of which constitutes the Jewish subject. As Julia Reinhard Lupton writes,

[c]ircumcision separates the individual from the nation in the very act of joining him to it, naming his strangeness to the symbolic in the very moment of estranging him within it. ... In this sense, every Israelite is a ... ‘stranger in a strange land’, adopted by his own family and converted to his own religion (Lupton 1998, 198).

Mirroring Lacan’s theorisation of the genesis of the subject, J.D. imbricates his discourse of alienation with a thematic of separation. The barred subject, the cut or divided self, makes an appearance obliquely but insistently in the text. J.D. laments the scission of the self that takes place as a result of the separation from the m/other, identifying the other of the unconscious with the absent God: ‘I will never know the whole of me ... the other me, the other in me, the atheist God...the god (of my) unconscious’ (216–217, 263). At times the text weeps with nostalgia for a time before the cut of language, a time before the plenitude of self and m/other was ruptured, a time before ‘the little cask of [h]is body was ruptured by circumcision’ (239). This link between separation from the mother and circumcision is made explicit by J.D.’s reference to ‘the infinite separation...the closest cruelty which was not that of my mother, but the distance she enjoined on me from my own skin thus torn off’ (227). From here he fantasises of a Lacanian devouring mother who circumcises with her teeth. The jaws of Lacan’s crocodile snap shut, and she takes with her ‘the crown of bleeding skin ... the sign of exultant alliance’ (218). In J.D.’s fantasy the mother subsumes into herself the *objet a*, the talisman, the trace of the originary unity. In his phantasmatic re-circumcision the separation from the mother is seemingly complete; not even the *objet a* remains to remind J.D. of the (im)possibility of plenitude. In preparation for his mother’s death he aspires to a separation that will be final. His project in ‘Circumfession’ was to ‘let her go or let her down, ... burying her under the word or weeping her in literature’ (262). Writing is here aligned with mortality, which is figured not as a taking of life but as the gift of death. As a lasting cultural artefact the text remains, forever inscribed with her presence. Encrypted in writing, she is ‘saved’ from the immortality and eternal unrest associated with absence (264).

'LOOKING ... ACROSS THE CUT ...'

The haunting presence of the barred subject within 'Circumfession' throws into sharp relief the fact that the very structure of autobiographical writing itself performs an internal rupture. J.D. describes the narrative of his notebooks as 'a writing without interruption that has been looking for itself forever, looking for me across the cut' (201). It is my contention that autobio(thanato-hetero)graphical writing is the most profoundly alienating form of writing, performing over and over again the division of self in the separation of the self-who-writes from the self-written-about. Across the divide of *écriture* the two selves search for one another and for a unity that can never be regained without the erasure of one, for it is in the act of writing itself that the Other is created.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ All biblical references are to the Revised Standard Version.
- ² Hebraic circumcision may thus have something in common with the kind of scarification described by Alphonso Lingis, who writes of the bodily inscription practiced by scarifying and tattooing cultures that '[t]hey use their own flesh as so much material at hand for – what? We hardly know how to characterize it ... What we are dealing with is inscription ... not ... on clay tablets, bark or papyrus, but in flesh and blood, ... here the signs count: they hurt'. (Lingis 1983: 22–23). I am also reminded here of Nietzsche, who knew, as the Patriarchs did, that 'if something is to stay in the memory it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory ... Man could never do without blood, torture and sacrifices when he felt the need to create a memory for himself' (Nietzsche 1989: 61).
- ³ The alliterative phrase 'catastrophic cleavage' is Mark C. Taylor's (1987: 88).
- ⁴ In order to distinguish between the author of the text and the author *in* the text I refer to the written persona as J.D. and the writing persona as Derrida.
- ⁵ Circumcision is, of course, also intimately linked to hospitality in the figure of Abraham whose openness towards the messengers of the Lord led to the birth of Isaac and the forging of the covenant (Gen. 18).
- ⁶ All subsequent references are to 'Circumfession' and will hereafter appear in parentheses in the body of the essay.

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