

To Yes-laugh Derrida's Molly

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*For a very long time, the question of the yes has mobilized or traversed everything
I have been trying to think, write, teach, or read.
Jacques Derrida.¹*

The most famous *yes* in the history of literature takes an ambiguous verbal form: 'and yes I said yes I will Yes.' Although not a closure, the final *yes* of James Joyce's *Ulysses* is a capitalized word, necessarily followed by what seems to be a definitive full stop. Little can be said after it, or at least little worthwhile. Molly's *yes* reverberates as *Ulysses* ends, but it does not seem to call for a continuation. A certain arrogance is at stake: *Ulysses* has said it all, and it has found the perfect way to end. And yet, it is clear that *yes* cannot be an ending in any strict sense; *yes* calls for confirmation and repetition. The *yes* at the end of *Ulysses* puts the critic in a double bind: Does one go on, writing? Or is *yes* an invitation to inhabit the space of its echo, beyond any criticism? After all, what is there to say in the wake of *yes*, since *yes* already says it, in its perfect simplicity?

More to the point, what is there to say about Molly's *yes* today? One can always invoke the excuse of an invitation and the pretext of a special issue. Can a special issue on *yes* be complete without a touch of Molly's *yes*? As the asking of these questions is bound to announce, there is, however, another excuse, an outstanding call. In 1984 Jacques Derrida was invited to give the opening address at the Ninth International James Joyce Symposium in Frankfurt. In the essay he subsequently wrote on the basis of his address, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce' [*Ulysse gramophone: Oui-dire de Joyce*], Derrida confesses having been amused by the invitation. An outsider, he is to speak in front of 450 Joyce scholars, 'the most intimidating assembly in the world'.² They are experts in Joyce, experts in *Ulysses*; a few, perhaps, experts in Molly's *yes*. Joyce anticipated the scene. He too was amused, and mocked the experts in advance, the industry they would create. But Joyce played the game nonetheless. Derrida does, too. It is as if the only way to do justice to the *yes* at the end of *Ulysses* is to inhabit its aporia and pick up the round robin Joyce began – laughing. Laughter is crucial here, because Derrida worries that the experts, as experts, are *agelasts* (non-laughers). In 'Two Words for Joyce', Derrida's other talk on Joyce, given in 1982 at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, he feels the need to warn that, if Joyce too is an expert of sorts, 'I am not sure I like Joyce . . . Except when he laughs – and you will tell me that he is always laughing'.³

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It is a concern Derrida shares with Nietzsche, familiar both with *yes* and laughter, and with the risks of expertise. Nietzsche's specter accompanies Derrida's reading of Joyce and the Joycean scene of criticism, and will accompany us here.

What, then, does Derrida tell the experts? Is there something that the experts do not know? In this particular case, has anyone, expert or not, ever been able to say anything new about *Ulysses*? Is there something *Ulysses* does not know? Derrida gives the experts his 'two words' on *yes* (his 'two cents', as they say in English). It is an explicit provocation; some of the experts have spent their careers pondering Molly's *yes*. Derrida goes about it judiciously, counting the hundreds of *yeses* in *Ulysses*, sketching a taxonomy of *yes*, going as far as to imagine a computer program that would catalogue them (a digital humanities project *avant la lettre*), all while retracing the convoluted itinerary of his own thought in the narrative that has programmed it. But Derrida's judiciousness and discipline goes hand in hand with a necessary radical openness to the text of *Ulysses*: 'I threw myself in the water [*je me suis jeté à l'eau*], as we say in French, and I decided to open myself, together with you, to a chance encounter'.⁴

To begin with, the chance encounter materializes itself in a title that, Derrida declares, 'crossed my mind with a kind of irresistible brevity, the authority of a telegraphic order'⁵: *oui-dire de Joyce*. What Derrida's title proposes, with the authority of a telegraphic order that can only be that of a title, is that Joyce's *yes* (*oui*) comes by way of *oui* (hearsay). At the same time-as-it must be read aloud and heard (phoned), the capitalized *yes* at the end of *Ulysses*, like the homonymy *oui/oui*, must be read as a written mark (gramma): *grammophoned*. How does *Ulysses* call us to read/hear its *yes*?

Yes, yes, but which *yes* are we talking about? There is a large spectrum of resonances in *yes*, before we even encounter the intricate universe of *Ulysses*' *yeses*. A cursory review would pass through the *yes* of acknowledgement; the *yes* of acquiescence; the *yes* of subscription; the questioning *yes*; the suspicious *yes*; the irritated *yes*; the impatient *yes*; the pensive *yes*; the reassuring *yes*; the *yes* of surrender; the *yes* of concession; the *yes* of triumph; the promising *yes*; the *yes* of 'yes, but...'; the *yes* of surprise; the reparative *yes*; the *yes* of *jouissance*. Let us not forget some of the most remarkable dramatizations of *yes*: the *yes* of ideological interpellation ('Hey, you there! *Yes?*'); the *yes* of the military scene (*Yes, sir!*); the *yes* of racial hierarchy (Ralph Ellison's *yassuh, yassuh, yassuh*); the *yes* of the marriage ceremony ('*Yes, I do*'). At the other end of the spectrum, there is the revolutionary, eventual *yes*.

Pencil in hand, reading *Ulysses* in English and French in a number of place-specific contexts, Derrida circles its *yeses*.⁶ He decides there are ten modalities. Some of them are familiar (the *yes* of the question form, the *yes* of obedience, the *yes* of politeness), but others are surprising, *Ulysses*-specific. Derrida proposes the latter are variations on rhythms of breathing: the *yes* of 'rhythmic breathing in the form of monologic self-approbation', the *yes* of the 'passionate breathing of desire'; the *yes* of 'calculatedly and precisely determined breathing'.⁷ Knowing that no taxonomy can exhaust the spectrum of *Ulysses*' *yeses*, Derrida pauses to emphasize that one of the first things to recognize about *yes* is that there is an explicit *yes* (with its variants – *aye, yea*), and an implicit, tacit, nonvocalized *yes*. Derrida is reading through the explicit *yeses*

in *Ulysses*, trying to decipher nuances in them, interested in the 'question what happens when the word *yes* is written, quoted, repeated, archived, recorded, gramophoned, or is the subject of translation or transfer'.⁸ But all the time Derrida is acutely aware that in these *yeses* and above them there are resonances of another *yes* that haunts *Ulysses* as a whole: 'a rumor circulating, circumnavigating via the ear's labyrinth, that which we know only by hearsay [*ce qu'on connaît seulement par oui-dire, hearsay*]'.⁹ This is the *yes* he is ultimately after, a *yes* one hears circulating, moving in labyrinthine circles, a rumor at the noisy intersection of languages. A refashioned perceptive apparatus is needed in order to read the breathing of this *yes* in the fabric of *Ulysses*, *yes*-eyes that double as *yes*-ears.

Is there, however, a 'primal scene' of *yes*, beyond its spectrum of tonalities, and beyond the distinction between the explicit and the haunting *yes*? Derrida reminds us that the most basic thing we can say about this odd word is that it is an answer. 'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow' is the first sentence of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Although it opens the novel, *yes* is an answer to something that comes before it; it is the very mark of the novel's beginning in *medias res*. Any *yes* involves a minimalist narrative scene, on which *yes* comes as an answer to a call, the presence of an 'it' of sorts. At its most basic, *yes* is an answer to an other. (We will have to return to the suggestion that there might be a tint of the mother – Mrs. Ramsey – in *yes*.) Derrida emphasizes that this does not mean that *yes* is a function of dialogue. There is no reason to assume that Mrs. Ramsey responds to something young James, the other protagonist on this scene, has said. 'Yes, of course, if it's fine tomorrow' can come 'out of the blue', but it remains an answer, whether to James's explicit or implicit call, Mrs. Ramsey herself, or another other. *Yes* stands in need of an other that comes before it, an ambiguous, undetermined structural necessity. It is to this other – not necessarily a somebody or a something – that one responds, 'Yes, of course'. Molly's *yes* at the beginning of 'Penelope' is likewise an answer caught in *medias res*, which is why to call 'Penelope' a monologue is most inappropriate. 'Yes because he never did a thing like that before'¹⁰ is the beginning of a long and convoluted answer; categories like monologue or dialogue cannot do it justice.

Derrida foregrounds the technology in *Ulysses*, and especially the telephones: the simplest answer is the *yes* one says when answering the phone. 'Yes?' This *yes* is not a message, although it automatically communicates something: 'I am here; you can hear me'. *Yes* comes as a response to a call that does not yet have a caller (technologies of caller ID notwithstanding). One answers the phone and, before one knows who is calling and why, one says *yes*. 'The telephone whirred inside'¹¹ is the sentence that anticipates the telephonic *yes* in 'Aeolus'. A whirl is a vibratory onomatopoeic sound made, the *OED* informs us, by grasshoppers, locusts, or the wheels of a carriage. And yet Bloom automatically says *yes* to this call: '-Yes... *Evening Telegraph* here, Mr. Bloom phones from the inner office. Is the boss...? Yes, *Telegraph*...' ¹² After the fact, we know there is always someone at the other end of the line, but Bloom says *yes* to the call itself, its whirring sound.

If the task of a *yes* modeled on the telephonic *yes* is not to say, but rather to *do*, does this mean that *yes* is a performative? J. L. Austin's conditions for performativity are not met by *yes*. A performative must be a sentence, and *yes* is not a sentence.

A performative needs an 'I' equipped with the authority to perform the act, and we have not established that *yes* is in need of a subject. A performative also requires a place-determined context within which the 'seriousness' of this 'I' is recognized.¹³ Derrida agrees that *yes* is not a performative in a strict sense, but proposes a meta-performative dimension for it: *yes* has 'pre-performative force'.¹⁴ With the help of the telephone, Derrida argues that *yes* in fact implies both an 'I' (an 'I' that affirms itself and signs any *yes*); and a sentence: 'I am here; I am saying *yes*; there is a line of communication between us; we can talk now; *yes*'. *Yes* condenses what Roman Jakobson called the phatic function: it establishes the very possibility of 'contact' ('Yes... *Evening Telegraph* here... Yes, *Telegraph*'). *Yes* is a necessary beginning, a quasi 'speech act' needed for all communication and all performative language: 'In short, *yes* would be transcendental adverbiality, the ineffaceable supplement to any verb: in the beginning was the adverb, *yes*, still very close to the inarticulate cry, a preconceptual vocalization... *yes* is the transcendental condition of all performative dimensions'.¹⁵

Yes in fact slides between adverbiality and non-predicative verbiality. An adverb, *yes* is also a minimalist and singular intransitive verb, *to yes*. It becomes important at this point to punctuate the fact that *yes* is not in a binary opposition with *no*. It is clear that *no* too is an answer, but it carries meaning, that of negativity, whereas there is *yes* before any affirmation, before the very possibility of either negativity or affirmation. Other *yeses* (*yeses* opposed to *nos*) follow the phatic, telephonic *yes* and carry traces of it within them.

Nietzsche helps Derrida bridge the gap between this singular *yes* and the archive of vocalized *yeses* in *Ulysses*. Derrida finds in *Zarathustra* the 'light, airy, dancing, solar *yes, yes* ... a *yes* of reaffirmation, of promise, of oath, a *yes* to eternal recurrence'.¹⁶ Nietzsche teaches Derrida that *yes* carries repetition (*yes, yes*) within itself. The eternal return is a function of what Derrida calls the '*yes technique*'.¹⁷ At stake in Derrida's reading of Joyce is the need for a practice of listening for *yes, yes* – the interval of the repetition, the minimal, temporal lull we mark with a comma. What can a comma do?

Once on this path, as Derrida stretches his Nietzschean ear, he hears a surprising resonance in *Ulysses*. Is it possible that the experts have missed something, a resonance emerging in the space of the repetition of *yes*? Derrida proposes a name for the vibrating tone he begins to hear: *yes-laugh* [*oui-rire*]. A hyphenated *yes*; and a hyphenated laugh. If, as Derrida suggests elsewhere, a hyphen performs a pirouetting movement, what is the logic of hyphenation in the case of the *oui-rire*?¹⁸ What kind of spin does the hyphen put on both *yes* and laughter? But the question is not yet complete, since for Nietzsche the airy, dancing, solar *yes* of reaffirmation, of *yes, yes*, 'finds its chance with a certain kind of woman [*chez une certaine femme*']'.¹⁹ Derrida adds to Nietzsche another intertext: 'In the same way, in Blanchot's *La folie du jour*, the quasi-narrator attributes the power to say *yes* to women, to the beauty of women, beautiful insofar as they say *yes*'.²⁰ Our question, then: What, if anything, do *yes* and laughter share, and what, if anything, do both *yes* and laughter share with what in the tradition to which Nietzsche and Blanchot belong is called 'woman'?

This is the scene Derrida is surprised to find himself mapping in the wake of the hospitality offered by the Joyce experts: *yes*-laughter-woman.

It is a telephonic accident that leads Derrida to *yes*-laughter: 'across the telephonic lapsus that made me say or that caused to be heard (*ouï dire*) ("hearing"), it is "ouï rire" ("yes-laughter") that forced its way through [*se frayait un passage*], the consonantal difference between *dire* and *rire*, that is, *d* and *r* (which are, moreover, the only consonants in my name)'.²¹ A case of miscommunication on the phone, a minimal lapsus of the phatic function, with important consequences for Derrida: he hears himself in the minimal difference between *ouï-dire* and *ouï-rire*.²² In the wake of this felicitous telephonic accident, Derrida discovers two premises for the affinity of *yes* and laughter: 'A *yes* never comes alone, and we never say this word alone. Nor do we laugh alone, as Freud says'.²³ If *yes* calls for repetition and countersignature and thus a minimalist community, so does laughter: 'There is never a single laugh in laughter', Jean-Luc Nancy, one of Derrida's most loyal interlocutors, writes.²⁴ Second, Derrida asks, 'And that which laughs, how does it laugh? Does it laugh? [*Et cela qui rit, comment cela rit-il? Rit-il?*] For there is more than one modality, more than one tonality of laughter just as there is a whole gamut, a polygamy in the game and the gamble of the *yes*'.²⁵ Like *yes*, laughter knows an infinite spectrum of tonalities. Even a quick survey of 'laughs with a word' – for there certainly are laughs without a word – would go through the giggle and the cackle, the guffaw and the chortle, the titter and the chuckle; the horse laugh and the dog laugh; the sardonic and the hysteric laugh... Both *yes* and laughter call for a radical affective opening to tone. But there is more. If what we are struggling to hear in *Ulysses* is a *yes* without a word, laughter in fact is such a *yes* (in this sense, *yes*-laughter is strongly tautological, a *yes-yes*). Despite a long tradition that associates laughter with negativity, laughter gives Derrida a way into the *ouï* of *ouï*, the *yes* one hears without it being possible to point to a word *yes*.

Derrida nods to the experts; they too have thought about laughter:

Everything has doubtless already been said on laughter in Joyce, on parody, satire, derision, humor, irony, raillery. And on his Homeric laughter and his Rabelaisian laughter. It remains perhaps to think of laughter, as, precisely, a remains [*reste*]. What does laughter want to say? What does laughter want? [*Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire, le rire? Qu'est-ce que ça veut rire?*]²⁶

Is there something left once we sift the Joycean text through the dredging machine of the experts' 'theories of laughter'? Is laughter, perhaps, what remains? It is Derrida's most Nietzschean point. For Nietzsche not only worked hard to rescue laughter from longstanding charges of negativity (Hobbesean jubilation, in particular), but, in the section of *Zarathustra* titled 'The Seven Seals (or: The Yes and Amen Song)', he irrevocably linked laughter to *yes*: 'say Yes and laugh Yes [*ja! sagen, ja! lachen*]'.²⁷

With Nietzsche, Derrida distinguishes between two kinds of laughs. One is reactive, negative: 'the cynicism of a rictus, of sarcasm, and of derision: *brood of mockers*'.²⁸ But Derrida knows that 'the essence of laughter' is not its negativity. He had made

this point strongly in his reading of Bataille. In 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism Without Reserve', Derrida distinguishes between a minor, reactive laugh and a major, sovereign laugh.²⁹ This second, major laugh haunts the derisive laugh, and is sovereign because it rings *yes* beyond negativity or affirmation. If one listens carefully to *Ulysses*, with the ear of the non-expert, one potentially reaches a point where, 'I hear this vibration as the very music of *Ulysses*'.³⁰

Music might not be the most precise reference here, for the rumor or current of *yes*-laughter does not need to be musicalized. What one hears by hearsay is a noise that cannot be easily translated into music. Indeed, in Derrida's somewhat hesitant reading, *oui-rire* becomes, 'a dominant affect, a *Stimmung* or a *pathos*, a tone which retraverses all the others yet which does not participate in the series of the others since it *re-marks* all of them, adds itself to them without allowing itself to be added in or totalized'.³¹ If *oui-rire* is this supplementary tone, music and musicologists have little to teach us about it. Nietzsche explored the promise of music himself, but ended up struggling to hear a 'laughing gale [*der lachende Sturm*]'.³² This is a laughter 'in the air', a laughter one breathes: 'Then laughter surrounded me [*Da geschah ein Lachen um mich*]'.³³

How does one attune one's ear to this *Stimmung* without falling into what the new critics called 'the affective fallacy'? Can we, perhaps, invent some new technological device, a hearing aid, a variation on Dziga Vertov's kino-eye that doubles as an ear? What is clear is that the computer Derrida imagines cannot hear tone; and thus it cannot be a stand-in for 'the ear of the other' needed to countersign the text of *Ulysses*.

Ultimately, Derrida knows he is in search of Joyce in *Ulysses*, and concludes that, 'laughter bursts out in the event of signature itself. And there is no signature without *yes*'.³⁴ But he has already established that the signature of *Ulysses* is Molly's final *yes*. Does this mean that Derrida hears Joyce make the statement, '*Molly Bloom, c'est moi*'? Not exactly, since the two signatures remain distinct, even as they call on each other and contaminate their imprint. But if what we are left with in the wake of *Ulysses* is a laughing *Stimmung*, we are also left, following Derrida's nose, with an odor, a perfume, Molly's perfume, which also sticks to Joyce. Hence the variation on the question of signature: 'Can one sign with a perfume?'³⁵ This odiferous *Stimmung* is where Derrida locates Joyce in *Ulysses*. Addressing the experts directly, Derrida posits this is the trace of an author one 'feels', but does not really know.³⁶ *Que de oui-dire* (except by hearsay), Derrida suggests, taking the argument back to Molly, in the same way one hears rumors about certain women.

Derrida is uncertain about the relation between *yes* and woman: 'The *yes* would be that of woman – and not just that of the mother, the flesh, the earth [...] This is not false, it is even the truth of a certain truth, but it is not all, and it is not so simple'.³⁷ Things are never simple when it comes to woman. Derrida emphasizes that the pre-performative *yes* is preontological and therefore pre-sexual difference. He revisits the 'primal scene' of *yes* in its Heideggerian configuration, and puts a telephonic twist on Heidegger. 'Bloom is at the telephone'³⁸ offers a way into 'being for the telephone'.³⁹ *Dasein* is 'da' only by virtue of having been called (Avital Ronell's *Telephone Book* starts here). In answering the ontological call, it says *yes*, an archaic 'first breath of *yes*

[*le premier souffle du oui*].⁴⁰ But this scene, Heidegger insisted, does not know sexual difference. Or does it?

It is clear that Molly would not be Molly without her *yeses*. *Yes* is the first and last word of her speech; she is framed by two *yeses*; and she 'remembers herself through [*à travers*] these *yeses*'.⁴¹ And Molly's being a woman is not incidental to *yes*. We would not have the same signature *yes* if Molly were a man. More than any other of its female characters, Molly figures woman in *Ulysses*, even if in an ambivalent relation to the tradition *Ulysses* strives to encapsulate with encyclopedic ambition. If Nietzsche helps clarify the affinities between *yes* and laughter; what happens when one triangulates the *yes*-laugh to ask whether woman too is constitutive of the scene of *yes*?

Derrida circled back to *Ulysses* throughout his writing, and it is perhaps no accident that he returned to this question in one of the last texts he published, to reveal something that was arguably already there in 'Ulysses Gramophone' and 'Two Words for Joyce'. In *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*, in the company of a good friend, Derrida revisits Descartes' *Meditations*. It is the paradigmatic modern 'primal scene'. Derrida quotes Nancy: 'The incommensurable extension of thinking is the opening of the mouth'.⁴² At the very beginning, before any beginning, there is the opening of a mouth. If *Dasein* is 'thrown', Nancy proposes the mouth is the 'opening in and through which *I* is indeed properly thrown'.⁴³ Performing the quasi-permixtio of soul and body, the Cartesian pineal gland is in fact the mouth beginning to open. Derrida reminds Nancy that this is not a self-opening strictly speaking, since it is an opening to an other. In this, Derrida reminds Nancy of the mother: 'If it is the mother, in any case, who opens the bordering edges as well as the lips of a mouth first described as an opening [*ouverture*], then this happens before any figure – not before any identification, but before any "identification" with a face. [...] The mouth is *at the same time* place and nonplace, it is the locus of a dislocation, the gaping place [*le lieu béant*] of the "quasi-permixtio" between soul and the body, which is to say the incommensurable extension between them and common to both, since the mouth – any mouth, before any orality – opens an opening'.⁴⁴ Before any 'I', before any *cogito*, there is the opening of a mouth. The first 'I' is *yessed* into being on the threshold of a mouth that, Derrida now suggests, is a maternal structure – not a figure or a face, certainly not 'woman', the mother here is the gendered name of the first opening.

Let us not make too much of 'woman', Derrida warns. The dangers are obvious. He is aware of the *yes* 'often bending [*pliant*] the woman to her master'.⁴⁵ But Derrida is himself tempted by Blanchot's fantasy of a beautiful woman, 'beautiful insofar as she says *yes*'. This is woman saying *yes* to the scene of seduction, on the threshold of the philosophico-aesthetic program to which she lends her 'beauty' (the fact that Molly is an anti-beauty – an anti-Gerty MacDowell – does not change the argument). Woman, as *yes*-woman, cannot but say *yes*. Indeed, even if she says *no*, she is often heard saying the *yes* of 'perhaps' or 'later'. Half a century of feminism has struggled to curb the possible violence of this scene, such that '*no* means *no*' can be heard.

Nor do we in fact want to make too much of Molly's final *yes*. It is, after all, the *yes* of marriage, as Molly remembers Bloom's marriage proposal and her *yes*.

the day I got him to propose to me *yes* first I gave him the bit of seedcake out of my mouth and it was leapyear like now *yes* 16 years ago my God after that long kiss I near lost my breath *yes* he said I was a flower of the mountain *yes* so we are flowers all a womans body *yes* that was one true thing he said in his life and the sun shines for you today *yes* that was why I liked him because I saw he understood or felt what a woman is and I knew I could always get round him and I gave him all the pleasure I could leading him on till he asked me to say *yes* [...] how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again *yes* and then he asked me would I *yes* to say *yes* my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him *yes* and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume *yes* and his heart was going like mad and *yes* I said *yes* I will *Yes*.⁴⁶

The scene returns both Molly and Bloom to the conjugal bed, after a day of wandering.⁴⁷ Molly's body, which until this point in the novel performs the disorder associated with mechanical reproduction and its aural 'infidelity', is now the site of a nostalgic return to marital bliss, the only 'authenticity' that can assuage the threat of urban dissipation.⁴⁸ Molly's *yes* is that of reassurance: you can always come back to me, my body (my *yes*) is a safe home.⁴⁹ Bloom recovers and gathers himself in light of this *yes* that he in fact anticipates: 'Be near her ample bedwarmed flesh. Yes, yes'.⁵⁰

But if Molly's explicit *yes* at the end of *Ulysses* rings with such resonances, things, indeed, are not so simple. Derrida's impatience with 1980s feminist 'chatter' over *Ulysses* is by now part of the scene we are mapping. It is important to emphasize that the premise for this impatience is the fact that Derrida believes deconstruction and feminism to be twin projects. In his 1989 interview with Derek Attridge, he made sure to emphasize that the two 'belong to the same configuration and participate in the same movement, the same motivation'.⁵¹ They only differ when it comes to strategies deployed toward this motivation. Describing the majority of readings devoted to Molly, Derrida talks about a 'somniaambulistic carelessness'.⁵² Derrida's remarks target the feminist institution, the feminists among the experts in Frankfurt. As if playing a Tristram Shandy-inspired game, Derrida suggests that, once he or she joined the ranks of the experts, the feminist, the ally, might have fallen asleep while reading. Derrida finds unlaughing expertise in sexual difference to be even more insidious than that of the traditional Joyceans. Hence his impatience, often bordering on irritation, with those who attach *yes* to Molly too snugly, 'without making them [Molly's *yeses*] resonate with all the *yeses* that prepare the way for them, correspond to them, and keep them hanging on at the other end of the line throughout the whole book'.⁵³

Importantly for Derrida, Hélène Cixous, his other major interlocutor, also heard the *yes* of *Ulysses*, and heard it in the context of a meditation on laughter, thus providing us with the woman-laughter side of our equation. Cixous writes: 'We have no womanly reason to pledge allegiance to the negative. The feminine (as the poets suspected [*soupçonnèrent*]) affirms: 'And yes', says Molly, carrying *Ulysses* off beyond any book and toward the new writing; "I said yes, I will Yes"'.⁵⁴ Cixous locates here

the very possibility of 'the new writing', *écriture féminine*. For her too this is a light *yes*, barely there, an echo or a current, carrying resonances of flight, dance, and laughter. Cixous steals (*voler*) from Nietzsche, with a relay through Derrida.⁵⁵ Taking on the risks of navigating the space between woman and feminism, Cixous cannibalizes both Nietzsche and Joyce, in order to better equip herself with feminine *yes*-laughter ears. At stake for her is the practice of listening for echoes of *yes*-laughter in the fissures of an important figure of woman, Medusa. In his book on Cixous, Derrida perhaps too easily positions her against 'the feminist institution in all its forms, wherever, in the name of *woman*, a regime [*pouvoir*] sets up its machinery for appropriation, inspection and capitalization ... without reading, without translating the enchanting chant of letter and language...'⁵⁶

What, then, of *Stimmung* here? Let us remember briefly an amazing passage in Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. The narrative voice struggles to describe the difference she perceives in the sound of a luncheon before and after the war:

Nothing was changed; nothing was different save only – here I listened with all my ears not entirely to what was being said, but to the murmur or current behind it. Yes, that was it – the change was there. Before the war at a luncheon party like this people would have said precisely the same things but they would have sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves. Could one set that humming noise to words? Perhaps with the help of the poets one could.⁵⁷

It is a thought necessarily marked by a '*yes*, this is it'. On the next page, the same narrator bursts out laughing at the thought, apparently dismissing it. And yet she returns to it, because the 'feeling' that there is something important in this intuition persists. One can hear something above and beyond the words. What would it mean to put this 'humming noise' to words – 'with the help of the poets'? What kind of literature would that yield?

Derrida does not tell us that to French ears, *oui-dire* is gramphoned as a proper name, the name of a character in Rabelais' *Pantagruel* (Book 5, Chapter 29). *Oui-dire* is a blind, paralyzed monstrous king, with a permanently open mouth, seven tongues split in seven parts, speaking at the same time in different languages. If this mouth is the monstrous source of the noisy rumor we call 'hearsay', this is Babel, a reminder of the multiplicity of languages and the challenge of translation. For how can one translate this noise into one language, always English, to be precise? The question has been at the heart of Derrida's encounter with *Finnegans Wake*: 'One of Joyce's great bursts of laughter resounds through this challenge: just try to count the words and the languages I consume! [...] the experts have counted about forty'.⁵⁸ But *Oui-dire* has more than one open mouth. His body is a series of permanently open orifices – ears, instead of Argus's eyes. This body is a huge, reverberating tympanum, a cyborgian hearing device. *Oui-dire*'s ears put a promising twist on his blindness (ears can double as eyes);

and his paralysis (hearsay travels). The monstrosity of this open body has clear feminine dimensions, which is why hearsay is woman's business, gossip.

This, too, is a risky route. One would only have to think of Heidegger's words on 'idle talk' or Derrida's own formulation vis-à-vis 'chattering about sexual difference...'⁵⁹ Can hearsay be saved from this tradition and harnessed in the service of the 'new literature'? Perhaps with the help of Woolf one can. But Derrida insists a certain Joyce is also of help here. In the 1982 'Two Words for Joyce', Derrida holds on to a passage in *Finnegans Wake*:

Loud, heap miseries upon us yet entwine our arts with laughters low!
Ha he hi ho hu.
Mummum.⁶⁰

Derrida writes: "The final "Mummum," maternal syllable right near the end, could, if one so wished, be made to resound with the feminine 'yes' in the last line of *Ulysses*..."⁶¹ If *yes* is something one hears circulating, moving in circles, a rumor; conversely, what one hears by hearsay is the rumor of a *yes*. In *Finnegans Wake*, Loud-Lord's expiating articulation is that of a god who dies laughing (a well-known Nietzschean motif), resounding close to the murmuring of the mother (Mum-mum). Ha he hi ho hu is a Babelized sound, an attempt to transcribe the untranscribable sound of laughter in a multiplicity of languages. It combines the onomatopoeic h-sounds of laughter with all the vowels (a e i o u). At the mercy of the 'yes-technique', one hears here the repetition of *ha ha, he he, hi hi, ho ho*...

In the 1984 'Ulysses Gramophone' Derrida would be distancing himself from what two years before, in 'Two Words for Joyce', he identified as the maternal overtones of *yes*. And yet he included the unrevised 'Two Words for Joyce' in the 1987 *Ulysse gramophone: Deux mots pour Joyce*. In the short preface to the two essays, he presented them both as interventions inherently connected to two singularly dated occasions. Derrida's essays on Joyce bear witness to the fact that in the intellectual configuration of the encounter between feminism and deconstruction in the 1980s, *yes* was the site of struggle over woman, the beginning of sexual difference, and the future perfect of literary difference. Derrida's reading of Joyce proposes that the difference literature makes hangs in a barely perceptible nuance, the hyphen of *oui-rire*. Joyce tells Derrida about the challenge to 'entwine our arts with laughters'. Beyond any 'theory of laughter' (comedy, humor, irony, etc), to bring laughter to literature: 'A certain quality of laughter would supply something like the affect (but this word itself remains to be determined) to this beyond of calculation, and of all calculable literature'.⁶² This affect presents us with a chance to read *Ulysses* as a space-producing mechanism for *yes, yes*. In the repetition of *yes*, *Ulysses* effectively rewrites myth as gossip, albeit not 'mere gossip'. This is a *Ulysses* signed by a Joyce who is always laughing, having learnt a Nietzschean lesson: 'the artist reaches the peak of his greatness only when he has learned to see himself and his art beneath him – when he is able to laugh at himself [*wenn er über sich zu lachen weiss*]'.⁶³ This is the *Ulysses* Derrida countersigns with his *yes* and his laugh. This is the Joyce he 'likes', a Joyce laughing both at his own encyclopedic ambitions and those of the Joyce machine he started.

Some twenty five years later, we can ask: What did the experts do with Derrida's essay? Did they hear its *yes*? In Derridean terms, did they one day receive an unaddressed postcard? Did they counter-sign it? Did they ever overcome Derrida's warning at the beginning of his 1984 lecture that, 'In fact you are not receiving me [*vous ne m'entendez*] loud and clear at all'.⁶⁴ In 1992, Attridge wrote that, 'what must have seemed to most of its first audience a haphazard trajectory becomes, with greater familiarity, an intricately plotted itinerary...'⁶⁵ One wonders if familiarity is indeed needed to read with Derrida and encounter his *yes*. Is it the job of the Derrida expert, the Derrida machine (the 250 participants, including myself, in the 'Derrida Today' conference this year), to hear Derrida's *yes*? Or is the outsider equipped with better *yes*-ears? Of course, one could always argue that the experts had heard Derrida's *yes* before it was uttered, before Derrida's phatic first words ('*Oui, oui, vous m'entendez bien, ce sont des mots français*'). They had issued an invitation, a call for Derrida to speak on *Joyce*. Derrida stands on the hospitable shoulders of the Joyce experts. The 'perverse challenge'⁶⁶ he suspected in the invitation was a call. After all, the Joyce machine is already part of the fabric of *Ulysses*, and there can be a differential *yes*-laugh only at the interstices of the machine.

Notes

¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p.287.

² Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.279.

³ Jacques Derrida, 'Two Words for Joyce', in *Poststructuralist Joyce: Essays from the French*, ed. Derek Attridge and Daniel Ferrer (London: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.146.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.258.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.267.

⁶ Derrida counts 222 *yeses*. He adds a note to correct his initial count: his friend Noel Riley Fitch counted 354. The Hans Walter Gabner edition revealed 359. Derrida elaborates on the question of number in relation to *yes* in "A number of yes (Nombre de oui)", in *Deconstruction: A Reader*, ed. Martin McQuillan (New York: Routledge, 2000).

⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.307.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.266.

⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.267.

¹⁰ References to *Ulysses* are to James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1984), 18.1. This is the 'Critical and Synoptic Edition' prepared by Hans Walter Gabler and released at the Frankfurt symposium in 1984.

¹¹ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 7.384.

¹² James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 7.411-12.

¹³ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), p.9.

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.298.

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', pp.297-298.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.287.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.276.

¹⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (*Épérons: Le Styles de Nietzsche*, trans. Barbara Harlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.287.

²⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.287.

²¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.291.

²² On Derrida's relation to *yes*, see - in addition to the motto to this essay - Judith Butler's meditation on Derrida's last interview. Judith Butler, 'On Never Having Learned How to Live,' in *differences* 16 (2005), pp.27-34.

²³ 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.288. Freud famously described the scene of the joke as necessarily involving a tripartite participation. See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York & London: Norton, 1960), p.224.

²⁴ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Laughter Presence', in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p.379.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.289.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.291.

²⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: The Modern Library, 1995), p.228.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.293.

- ²⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), p.256.
- ³⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.308.
- ³¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', pp.291-292.
- ³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.295.
- ³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.147.
- ³⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.295.
- ³⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.297.
- ³⁶ It is Derrida's gloss on the author function: 'I do indeed say "my feeling": that - major - affect which, beyond all our analyses, evaluations, interpretations, controls the scene of our relationship with whoever writes' ('Two Words', 146).
- ³⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.287.
- ³⁸ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 7.671.
- ³⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.273.
- ⁴⁰ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.305.
- ⁴¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.300.
- ⁴² Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Unum quid', 161; quoted in Jacques Derrida, *On Touching - Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), p.25.
- ⁴³ Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Unum quid', 162-3; Derrida, *On Touching*, p.27.
- ⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *On Touching*, p.28.
- ⁴⁵ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.275.
- ⁴⁶ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 18.1573-1581; 1604-1609, (my emphasis).
- ⁴⁷ Hélène Cixous draws attention to the fact that, by the time we reach Molly's final *yes*, *Ulysses* will have taken us through the rituals of life, birth and death: 'And all is so complete, the living man is so closely enchained that some time passes before we realize this curious absence, absence not of the married state, but of the ceremony. The conjugal state is, in the prime sense of the word, almost the natural state: one is in it'. Hélène Cixous, *The Exile of James Joyce*, trans. Sally A. J. Purcell (New York: David Lewis, 1972), p.57.
- ⁴⁸ See Ewa Ziarek, 'The Female Body, Technology, and Memory in "Penelope"', in *Molly Blooms: A Polylogue on "Penelope" and Cultural Studies*, ed. Richard Pearce (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).
- ⁴⁹ Joyce's mapping of 'Penelope' is well known: 'Its four cardinal points being the female breasts, arse, womb and ... cunt expressed by the words *because, bottom [...] woman, yes*'. James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Viking Press, 1957-1966), vol. 1, p.170. As part of the intertextuality of *yes* here, one would have to include the famous postcard Joyce received from Nora, with only one word on it: *yes*.
- ⁵⁰ James Joyce, *Ulysses*, 4.238-39.
- ⁵¹ Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Acts of Literature*, p.58. See also 'Women in the Beehive: A Seminar with Jacques Derrida', the transcript of Derrida's 1984 seminar at Brown University, in *differences* 16 (2005), pp.139-157.
- ⁵² Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.288.
- ⁵³ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.288.
- ⁵⁴ Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs* 1, no. 4, 1976, pp.875-893, p.884. I thank Steven Meyer for pointing to me the eloquent work done by Cixous' interpolation of a comma here. 'I said yes, I will Yes' (translating '*j'ai dit oui, je veux oui*') is ambiguously productive; a more straightforward punctuation would have this segment read: 'and yes[,] I said[,] yes[,] I will[,] Yes.'
- ⁵⁵ Derrida distinguishes between three configurations of 'woman' in Nietzsche. In the third instance, 'woman is recognized and affirmed as an affirmative power, a dissimulatrix, an artist, a dionysiac. And no longer is it man who affirms her. She affirms herself, in and of herself, in man'. Jacques Derrida, *Spurs*, p.97.
- ⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say...* trans. Laurent Milesi and Stefan Herbrechter (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006), p.140.
- ⁵⁷ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 1991), p.11.
- ⁵⁸ Jacques Derrida, 'Two Words', p.145.
- ⁵⁹ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.295.
- ⁶⁰ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p.259.
- ⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, 'Two Words', p.157.
- ⁶² Jacques Derrida, 'Two Words', p.158.
- ⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956), p.198.
- ⁶⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.275.
- ⁶⁵ Derek Attridge, *Acts of Literature*, p.253.
- ⁶⁶ Jacques Derrida, 'Ulysses Gramophone', p.279.

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