

# Thoughts on Différance: Tympan

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## I. Tympan

A tympan can have many iterations/uses, but in all of them it acts as a *skin*: It is a sheet of paper/cloth used in printmaking upon which the plate first makes an impression before it reaches its final surface on which the image is to be placed. It is a metal sheet upon which *constellations* are engraved, allowing travellers to find their way by distant sources of light. But here for Derrida, it is the skin of a drum, which the philosopher must *beat* in order for it to resonate with its chosen notes (the act of beating being a violent act also seems to be of some importance).

Each of these instances of the tympan serve a purpose in common: They each serve as a membrane, a medium, a middle. It is something that is exterior to both plate and paper, stars and travellers, signifier and signified. Derrida's choice of the drum is also important for it is specifically something that one *hears* rather than sees, and the focus on hearing forms a large part of this section. The philosopher bangs his hammer on the drum (tympan), and the ear captures the sounds, rolls them up in its biological mechanisms and send them into a labyrinth never to find its way out. It is the ear which Derrida takes issue with, that its mechanisms cause ones words to be lost and dissipated in a maze of misnomers, false meanings and wrong turns. Derrida mentions that the tympan itself acts as a "middle ear" as it rolls up the words on its surface and leads them into a labyrinth that do not reach the intended listener (but a *trace* will?) It is perhaps for this reason that Derrida prefers to privilege the text: That which can hold meaning, but still envelop the difference (or *différance*)

One can also think of language as a tympan, this exterior skin that mediates between one and other: Though a speaker and a listener may speak the same language, and can seemingly communicate rather easily, one must not neglect that they are speaking a language, and that it is never entirely innocent, and neither does it belong or *originate* with one person (if it did, it would be useless as a communication tool). This tympan has its own mechanisms; its own "internal hammer" that regulates, tempers, and alters the noise it makes, so a meaning can become completely lost in the contact with the skin. To "do philosophy" through this skin, through a regulatory skin/body, is a problem for Derrida. If we are attempting to do philosophy, and to cross a threshold or limit, how do we do so when we are limited by the mechanisms of the text/language/medium (tympan)? The tympan keeps one and the other balanced and regulated, so some movement is being stifled, and some meaning is being lost, how is one to unbalance these forces and subsequently acknowledge *différance*?

## II. Punctured skins

Can one do philosophy with a punctured skin? Can one get philosophy to travel and work without being subject to regulation, balancing... **censorship** of the tympan and its own internal mechanisms? Such a travelling would hit no notes, vibrate no airwaves, penetrate no eardrum, and would have no **resonance**.

Such a definition (as a non-definition) would perhaps start to capture something of *différance*, by acknowledging its possibility of existing when the “middle ear” doesn’t filter it out or disperse it in a maze. (**resonance** and *différance* are likened to each other in the text on “*différance*”, not just because of the –ance suffix, also in the way they operate. This however, leads to the same problem of how we are to get a resonance sans the skin of language)

Writing this non-definition as a relation according to Derrida is always going to have it fall under the “philosophical banner of the logos” (p. xiv). Derrida’s “solution” to this is to **write** this relationship as a non-relationship “about which it would be demonstrated simultaneously or *obliquely* on the philosophical surface of the discourse” (p.xiv). This is a tough little sentence to get around, but it seems to focus on being able to write (*not speak*) a non-relationship that can reveal itself through the text, without direct reference, which would cause this non-definition to be lost all together without realising it.

(As an imaginative side-note, I figured maybe emulating Derrida’s crossing out, and doing so to the relational sign in Heidegger’s  $A = A$ , but does that have the same impact or even operate at all as Derrida’s crossing out of words?)

### III. Figures of the oblique and simultaneous doubling

Derrida highlights one of the main threads of this book being the “figure of the oblique” (p. xiv). An oblique angle in mathematics is an angle which is not a right angle or a multiple of a right angle, which means it won’t fit neatly into a Cartesian grid: Its x and y axis, or in other words its two **dimensions**. That which is oblique seems to be of an excess of some kind, spilling out of its dimensions. Derrida equates the oblique with simultaneity, and a **doubling**. Such a doubling is not a replication or duplication, it is more akin to a “fold” (see IV below), upon which the text doubles up its meanings and positions. Such a doubling is evident in the text placed in the “margin” of the Tympan, and also in the constant word play throughout. What happens in a doubling is that the oblique is never vanquished, but it does change and move back and forward, and a doubling never gets rid of that excess to fit perfectly back into a simple one and other, x and y relationship, something is always contracting or expanding outside of the observable dimensions of the text.

#### IV. The fold(s)

Imagine a flat two-dimensional surface like a sheet of paper (imagine it further as analogous to the “surface of the philosophical discourse” to which Derrida refers), if we fold this paper not symmetrically or in a striated fashion, and instead obliquely, we can fold our surface into a number of shapes, the surface (philosophical discourse) can even start to overlap or **double** up. If we follow such a technique, we can eventually arrive at an envelope; creating a strange interior/exterior out of our two-dimensional surface.

As we can do so with a sheet of paper, Derrida seems to be pushing to do the same thing with the text (literally “pushing the envelope”): To be able to obliquely fold it, overlap it, construct a space in which *différance* can inhabit without it being written onto the surface and subject to the “inner ear” which will no doubt remove all trace of it. The use of the envelope and to turn text into one is an analogue Derrida uses to acknowledge *différance*: Never to write it, or turn it into a concept, but to use the text to be able to create a space where *différance* can start to be acknowledged without being revealed (and lost) entirely.

#### V. The inexhaustible reserve and notions of excess

“...beyond the philosophical text there is not a blank, virgin, empty margin, but another text, a weave of differences of forces without any present centre of reference (everything – “history”, “politics”, “economy”, “sexuality” etc. said not to be written in books” (p. xxiii)

With regards to this quote, first of all I think it is important to think about this “beyond” not as a metaphysical one, but more a dimensional one: As a beyond that exists simultaneously and in the same space, but perhaps working off an **oblique axis** that can’t be expressed, seen, felt or sensed in this lower dimension which we (and language) are positioned. Such a way of thinking starts to **open up** *différance* and position it not as an irrelevant force acting eternally out of reach, but something that penetrates everything one does, sees etc. which seems to start touching on *différance*. The obliqueness is not something that is a wasteful excess, or a sidelined margin, it is an “inexhaustible reserve”, and with no “inner ear” to keep the two apart, the margins are always seeping into the discourse, able to cross that threshold between body and margin. What seems to be at stake now is how do these two entities of “body” and “margin” hold themselves together and maintain coherence when the boundaries between them are interrupted, penetrated without regulation: How can there even be a margin anymore?

Such a reserve generates a notion of **excess**, something more than what was prescribed to the system (or text in this case). Yet this constant play of forces is always at work within the body; it never stays as excess, the excess itself exceeds its borders, bringing itself into the interiority of the text. The excess starts to generate an **undecidability** within the text: The margin augments the body, yet it also completes it. In thinking about the nature of the text in this way, the undecidability that never resolves itself within the interiority of the text allows it to remain open; avoiding a collapse into a singularity that characterises a closed body. The excess allows **the fold** to be able to overlap and create an opening that never offers a full resolution, so can never fold itself into an infinite

regress or singularity, which is what would occur if the fold were one that was balanced, symmetrical and controlled by the regulating skin of the tympanic membrane.

### **Bibliography**

Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*, translated by Alan Bass. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982.