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Derrida and the exemplarity of literature

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Abstract
Jacques Derrida's scattered remarks on the ambiguous role examples play in the passage between the universal and the singular revolve around an often-neglected point: any attempt to theorise exemplarity will itself be subject to the law it seeks to account for. This oversight limits scholarship on the subject, but may be amended by returning to the loci classici on exemplarity in Derrida’s Glas, La vérité en peinture, Passions, and elsewhere. Moreover, in three texts published in the 1980s: La loi du genre, Préjugés and Psyché, Derrida emphasises how literature is particularly given to ‘remark’ its own status as literature and as such provides a privileged example of the problem of exemplarity. Another example in which exemplarity is in general singularly implicated is deconstruction itself.

Keywords
deconstruction, exemplarity, Francis Ponge, Franz Kafka, G. W. F. Hegel, Glas, invention, Jacques Derrida, literature, Maurice Blanchot, poetry, Roman Jakobson, self-reference, translation

1 | THIS, FOR EXAMPLE

Of all linguistic forms, poetry, according to Roman Jakobson, would be the least translatable. Not merely an example of something untranslatable, but exemplarily untranslatable. Whereas language in its ‘cognitive function’ (one wonders whether this includes philosophy) would of necessity be translatable:

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All cognitive experience and its classification is conveyable in any existing language [...]. In its cognitive function, language is minimally dependent on the grammatical pattern because the definition of our experience stands in complementary relation to metalinguistic operations—the cognitive level of language not only admits but directly requires recoding interpretation, i.e. translation. Any assumption of ineffable or untranslatable cognitive data would be a contradiction in terms. But in jest, in dreams, in magic, briefly, in what one would call everyday verbal mythology and in poetry above all, the grammatical categories carry a high semantic import. In these conditions, the question of translation becomes much more entangled and controversial.

(Jakobson, 1959, 128–130; my emphasis)

Yet admitting that language ‘in its cognitive function’ is even ‘minimally dependent’ on its text (its ‘grammatical pattern’ and ‘categories’) spells trouble for this cognitive function, in so far as ‘minimally’ does not mean not at all. Even the slightest dependence of this sort would also make the question of translation ‘entangled and controversial’ (on the model of poetry) in all cognition.

Jakobson’s statement is but one example of the rather classic notion that poetry makes for the best example of something untranslatable. Poetry resists translation by definition, that is, essentially. It is an essential example:

In poetry, verbal equations become a constructive principle of the text. Syntactic and morphological categories, roots, and affixes, phonemes and their components (distinctive features)—in short, any constituents of the verbal code—are confronted, juxtaposed, brought into contiguous relation according to the principle of similarity and contrast and carry their own autonomous signification. Phonemic similarity is sensed as semantic relationship. The pun, [...] paronomasia, reigns over poetic art, and whether its rule is absolute or limited, poetry is by definition untranslatable. Only creative transposition is possible.

(Jakobson, 1959, 130–131; my emphases)

Poetry is an example which one might, to repeat an old pun, set aside (para) and point to (deiknumi) as a para-digm: an exemplary example. Here, ‘paronomasia’ reigns: the rule of that which does not fall under the rule, a ‘naming’ (onomazein) that falls ‘beside’ (again, para) the thing it is supposed to name, a law of ‘verbal equations’ or a ‘principle of similarity and contrast’ disturbs the law of semantic equivalence, that is to say, the translatability that cognition ‘requires’. Paronomasia is a category for which the law is to fall beside the law: law extending beyond law. It is a category in which distinct categories (syntactic, morphological, etc.) are confused, resulting in a (phonemically or semantically?) ‘sensed’ relationship between the phonemic and semantic, blurring the distinction between the two senses of ‘sense’. As such, it is an example of a category which raises the question of what a category, and an example, is.

Poetry is not only exemplary in questions of translation (and not only according to Jakobson). It might even be said to be exemplarily exemplary. One could also ask, for instance: Is it an example of literature? One among the many genres of literature? Poetry certainly falls within the purview of departments of comparative literature, of Literaturwissenschaft, and so on. But literature might also, inversely, be said to be but one example of poetry, or (for the problem is not only how to translate poetry, but also how to translate ‘poetry’) of Dichtung. Even, as per Heidegger’s …dichterisch wohnet der Mensch...., a bad example:


(Heidegger, 2000, 191; my emphasis; see also Heidegger, 2002, 139 ff.)
We might ask whether such a ‘Fall’ implies that poetry indeed falls under literature (poetry has become but one literary genre among others) or whether literature, despite all, still falls under poetry (literature in general as but a corrupted version, a weak imitation, a bad example of poetry proper).³

In other words, we might wonder whether poetry is just an example of literature (at least, of the historical institution thus named) or whether it is exemplary of literature (such that literature is guided by, strives to be and hence in essence is poetry). This perhaps cannot be decided.

If so, it would be a first example of a law stating that with any exemplary example, a certain irreducible ambiguity befalls the hierarchy of example and category (or class, concept, genre, etc.). A further question is what then to make of the fact that this law of exemplarity must also affect the very concept of law (in so far as it is structured by the dualism example-law), so that, as a law of the law, it would be a law of itself.

The tradition for thinking exemplarity is vast. According to the two introductions to Kritik der Urteilskraft (Kant, 1957, 24 ff., 87 ff.), which is often, for better or worse, taken to be paradigmatic of this tradition, bestim- mende Urteilskraft contrasts with reflektierende Urteilskraft. While the former subsumes a thing under a concept, the latter reflects upon a given example to establish an unknown law. The example is taken as exemplary of the law to be established. I shall not here follow Kant in his subsequent attempt to formulate a Prinzip der Reflexion,⁴ but simply dwell upon what is at stake in any distinction of this sort.

Any example, even a bad one, to be an example at all, must be able to function as exemplary. Some, apparently, better than others. For ‘exemplary’ can also mean the good, even the best example, the most representative.⁵ The exemplary example x₁ would thus be exemplary of the concept X because it, among all x, is the most X. One would, however, be hard pressed to provide a criterion for what is to be deemed best. It cannot be the concept, for if that was given, there would be no need for reflective judgement. One might of course, lacking knowledge of the concept, resort to methods of induction, phenomenological Wesenserschauung or any other method involving comparison of examples. But if an example is exemplary because it is not one example ‘among others’ (an expression that recurs throughout the texts of Derrida, and which might each time mark a deconstructive potential), comparison with other examples will not be of any use in determining what makes this example exemplary. For what, if not a concept, could provide the grounds for comparison? Lacking these, an exemplary example is incomparable.

Yet if it is to any extent irreplaceable (and how could it be exemplary, the best example, if it wasn’t?), must it not therefore be absolutely irreplaceable? If there can be recourse neither to the concept (which is not given) nor to other examples (for which there are no grounds for comparison), the exemplary would be an example of nothing but itself, subject to nothing but its own law. It would be the only example possible. No other could be given.

‘The only possible example’ is, however, a strange expression. Is it nonsensical or just a bit odd to say: ‘There is only one person here: me, for example’? If this is unclear, perhaps it is due to an inherent ambiguity in precisely what it is a singular example exemplifies. One can formalise this as an antinomy, such that the law of exemplarity would consist of two contradictory laws with equal legal force. Derrida writes in Passions:

Bien sûr, quand je dis cet exemple-ci, je dis déjà plus et autre chose, je dis quelque chose qui déborde le tode ti, le ceci de l’exemple. L’exemple même, en tant que tel, déborde sa singularité autant que son identité. C’est pourquoi il n’y a pas d’exemple alors même qu’il n’y a que cela [...]. L’exemplarité de l’exemple n’est évidemment jamais l’exemplarité de l’exemple. A ce très vieux jeu d’enfant dans lequel se prennent tous les discours, philosophiques ou non, qui ont jamais pu intéresser les déconstruc- tions, nous n’aurons jamais la certitude de mettre fin, même par la fiction performative qui consiste à dire, en relançant le jeu, ‘prenons cet exemple-ci, justement.’

(Derrida, 1993b, 42–43)

In other words, ‘the example as such overflows its singularity’, for it would not be an example without subsumption under a concept, ‘as well as its identity’, for the example is never just the particular, never subsumed entirely under its category, never completely identified by its positive characteristics. And ‘this is why there
are no examples’ entirely subsumable under their concept, ‘although there really are not anything but examples’, for even the absolutely singular this is not sheltered from (the very possibility of) mediation. ‘The exemplarity of the example’ thus names two laws at once, the antinomy which tears it asunder, such that it will never be identical to itself: it will ‘evidently never be the exemplarity of the example’. This would be the case even for a singular example (‘Take just this example’).

Undoubtedly we must try to account for and reckon with this double overflowing which governs ‘every discourse that could ever stir the interest of deconstructions’, as does a recent commentator explicating this passage:

Derrida is suggesting that a singular example exemplifies more than it was supposed to exemplify. An example of X always exemplifies something beyond X. For instance, an example of a dog can exemplify the colour black.

(Mácha, 2022a, 70)

This is indeed correct, even if, as I should like to suggest, there may be more to Derrida's thinking here than this ‘old children's game’ which plays on how the example oscillates between the particular and the singular. This, I take it, is what is indicated by the abyssal deixis (para-deixis, if you will) of Derrida's final line ‘Take just this example’. This becomes apparent when one includes the immediate context of the passage in question which Mácha passes over in silence. Here, Derrida seeks to give an example of the problem of responsibility he is addressing in Passions, a response to his critics, which means that an example is ready to hand: ‘Prenons un exemple, qu'il vaille ou non pour la loi. Quel exemple? Celui-ci’ (Derrida, 1993b, 42).

It seems that a slightly different 'old children's game' is being played here than the one identified by Mácha, or perhaps a singular variant of it, though one more unsettling. In the performance of the self-reflective judgement ‘Which example? This one’, an abyss opens that is still more open than the open-ended list of things that a given dog can be taken to exemplify besides ‘dogness’. This abyssal opening plays on the possibility that any example may be taken to refer to itself as an example (of an example), such that one of the many things an example may exemplify will always be exemplarity as such. As in the case at hand, where the example Derrida gives (‘This one’) immediately moves from exemplifying responsibility to exemplifying exemplarity itself.

As such, any example may be said already to be remarking upon itself as example before any reader comes upon the scene (l'exemplarité - remarquable et remarquante', Derrida, 1996b, 49). And by an additional fold, it may remark upon the fact that it is remarking upon itself, read itself reading, thematise its auto-thematisation, interpret its auto-interpretation, translate its auto-translation. But Derrida’s wager, as we shall see, is that such tautological repetition might break open the very idea of an autos from within, entailing what he elsewhere, above all in La double séance, calls ‘dissemination’ beyond ‘polysemy’:

Telle écriture qui ne renvoie qu'à elle-même nous reporte à la fois, indéfiniment et systématiquement, à une autre écriture. A la fois: c'est ce dont il faut rendre compte.

(Derrida, 1972b, 229)

2 | BEISPIEL IN GLAS

An inherent ambiguity characterises the singular example, rendering it structurally unstable and liable to turn into its opposite: the exemplary is singular, irreplaceable, exemplifying nothing but itself, but precisely this essential trait characterises anything exemplary. With respect to its absolute irreplaceableness, the singular example is absolutely replaceable.

For instance, in so far as my death is absolutely irreplaceable (Heidegger, 2018, 240), any death may exemplify irreplaceability, singularity, and so on, just as well as any other, as Derrida notes in Apories:
Et si la mort nomme [...] l’irremplaçable même de la singularité absolue (personne ne peut mourir à ma place ou à la place de l’autre), tous les exemples du monde peuvent justement illustrer cette singularité. La mort de chacun, de tous ceux qui peuvent dire ‘ma mort’ est irremplaçable. ‘Ma vie’ aussi. Tout autre est tout autre.8 D'où une première complication exemplaire de l'exemplarité. Rien n'est plus substituable et rien ne l'est moins que le syntagme 'ma mort'. Il s'agit toujours d'un hapax, d'un hapax legomenon, mais de ce qui ne se dit qu'une fois chaque fois, indéfiniment une seule fois.

(Derrida, 1996a, 49)

Derrida generalises this to apply not only to 'my death' or 'my life', but to anything I call 'mine' (or we call 'ours'); ‘C'est aussi vrai pour tout ce qui engage la forme grammaticale d'une première personne’ (p. 49). In Demeure, one thus finds an analogous example in the act of witnessing,9 which precisely always takes place, implicitly at least, in the first person:

[L’exemplarité nomme un concept essentiel à la problématique du témoignage. Un témoin et un témoignage doivent être toujours exemplaires. [...] ]Je suis seul à avoir vu cette chose unique [...] il faut me croire parce que je suis irremplaçable. [...] L’exemple n’est pas substituable; mais en même temps [...] cette irremplaçabilité doit être exemplaire, c'est-à-dire remplaçable. L’irremplaçable doit se laisser remplacer sur place. [...] Le singulier doit être universalisable, c’est la condition testimoniale.

(Derrida, 1998, 47–48)

This complicity would characterise any self-proclamation of exemplarity, above all those claiming to be exemplary not only of something universal but of universality as such (be it philosophical, religious or political), in other words, exemplary of exemplarity itself.10

It is not by coincidence if this slipping of the example between the universal, particular and the singular is reminiscent of that other old children’s game played in the chapter on Die sinnliche Gewissheit which opens Hegel’s Phänomenologie des Geistes. In the attempt to express the sensed tree or house in its irreplaceable singularity (this house, as seen by me, here, now), this very singularity is irreparably lost in utter replaceability. The I that sees a tree or a house is entirely ‘gleichgültig gegen das, was noch beiherspielt, gegen das Haus, den Baum’ (Hegel, 1970, 86–87). I might mean (meinen) this singular thing (Einzeln), but as soon as it finds expression and is put into words (as soon as I bear witness to it), meine Meinung is lost in die Allgemeinung, as it were:

Ich ist nur allgemeines, wie Jetzt, Hier oder Dieses überhaupt; ich meine wohl einen einzelnen Ich, aber so wenig ich das, was ich bei Jetzt, Hier meine, sagen kann, sowenig bei Ich. Indem ich sage: dieses Hier, Jetzt oder ein Einzelnes, sage ich: alle diese, alle Hier, Jetzt, Einzelne; ebenso, indem ich sage: Ich, dieser einzelne Ich, sage ich überhaupt: alle Ich; jeder ist das, was ich sage: Ich, dieser einzelne Ich.

(p. 87)

The impossibility of saying what one means, the aporia of exemplarity, is what gets the Phänomenologie going. But if this aporia is at the origin of dialectics, the question is whether it will ever pass beyond it—a question I shall here leave suspended, merely noting that Warminksi (1987, 178) argues no, precisely in so far as ‘the example of the example’ cannot be dialectically digested.11

Das Beispiel is that which noch beiherspielt. Hegel's pun seems to emphasise how the example here plays an entirely inessential role in relation to the essence (Warminksi, 1987, 83). In Glas (1974), Derrida reads another instance of Beiherspielen in Hegel's later chapter on Das Lichtwesen, which repeats the one on sense certainty and anticipates Die absolute Wissen—the analogous structure of these three chapters on immediacy allowing for the
passage between them, motivating the focus in Glas on this seemingly marginal chapter.\textsuperscript{12} Das Lichtwesen is here expounded as:

Un jeu pur sans essence, un jeu qui joue sans limite, encore qu'il soit déjà destiné à travailler au service de l'essence et du sens. Mais en tant que tel [...] ce jeu ne travaille pas encore, il n'a pas encore d'horizon onto-théo-téléologique [...]. Le mot lui-même (Beiherspielen) joue l'exemple (Beispiel) à côté de l'essence. Ici l'exemple pur joue tellement à côté de l'essence, il se tient tellement à l'écart de l'essence qu'il n'a pas d'essence: exemple pur, sans essence, sans loi. Donc sans exemple, comme Dieu dont Hegel dit qu'on ne peut en faire un exemple mais parce qu'il se confond, lui, avec l'essence pure, elle aussi sans exemple.

(Derrida, 1974, 266a)

Derrida’s example, Hegel’s pun, ‘the word itself (Beiherspielen),’ ‘plays at being the example’ of an example which falls infinitely far beside the essence it is supposed to exemplify: that of an example. Derrida here not so much opposes Hegel’s conception of exemplarity as he takes the text at its word, testifies to what he reads: faithfully, albeit beyond recognition. It is in being entirely supplementary, inessential, that the ‘pure example’ is indistinguishable from (Hegel’s) God, ‘pure essence’: both being examples of nothing but themselves.

It would hardly be inessential to the problem at hand if one were to ask oneself, or Jakobson, to what extent these untranslatable puns (beiherspielt, meinen, etc.)\textsuperscript{13} make Hegel a philosopher or a poet, his text philosophy or poetry (especially since one precisely tends to dismiss Hegel either as the philosopher par excellence or as the worst of sophists who lets philosophy dissolve into mere poetry).

It would not be sufficient to claim that these puns are merely inessential supplements that could be separated out from that which is in truth philosophical in Hegel’s text, for determining the status of the philosophically inessential—the example, for example, and in general the supplement—is not simple, and its possibility is precisely what is in question here. And would dialectics in fact be possible without harnessing the spekulativer Geist of the German language (Hegel, 1969, 20), that is, without playing on its inherent ambiguities (puns), of which Aufhebung is not just the paradigm, but also the name of that which is accomplished by such puns?

The question concerns not only explicit puns but must be extended to the equivocal nature of so-called natural language in general. Even when there is not even a hint of intention to be found in the equivocality of a text, the possibility of it to be read as punning or to be read punningly remains. Such a reading would reveal allgemeinte puns exceeding anything gemeint by the author. As does Glas by reading the signature of a proper noun (‘Hegel’, ‘Genet’) as a common noun (aigle, genêt) and vice versa (Derrida, 1974, 7a, 51b et passim).

A classical question: How do literature and philosophy relate? What is the relation between philosophy and literature? How do each of them tell the story of how they relate, that is, relate their relation? They might, for example, relate their relation to relating, telling the myth that with philosophy, the story is over, which philosophy, at least, is wont to do: The story of how it, to become philosophy proper, stopped telling stories (Derrida, 1993a, 39 ff.; 2021a, 180). Philosophy’s autobiography relates its relation to literature (and myth, fiction, poetry, etc.) as a break, such that the story of how philosophy began is the story of how the story ended. It would be a bad example of philosophy that continued telling stories, or so the story goes. Which does not mean that philosophy simply began with a myth, either, as literature, for its part, might be tempted to claim. That would be no less of a myth: the myth of the myth.

Or one might think that the relation between philosophy and literature is marked by the symmetrically inverse manners in which they relate their relation to examples. They would both tell the old story (beginning to sound like a fairy tale) of how philosophy is inevitably related to the concept and how for it the example is inessential, whereas the inverse would be the case for literature.

The antinomies of exemplarity would be precisely what allows for this inversion,\textsuperscript{14} which both structures and is deconstructed by a text such as Glas. I say ‘a text such as’ knowing well that this presumably will be the case for any text, and that Glas is incomparable, singular, one of a kind, an exemplary and inimitable example of Derrida’s
writing, not to say of deconstruction. I certainly cannot here do justice to the way in which it directly and obliquely treats of exemplarity. That would at least require following the analysis of how the Trinity functions as exemplary both in and of Hegel’s dialectics (Derrida, 1974, 38a–40a), of why the relation between brother and sister is an ‘example unique dans le système’ (p. 170a), of how the flower is the poetic object and rhetorical figure par excellence (p. 21b), of how the word tombe gathers in it significations of the grave and the fall, a pseudo- or quasi-translation of the German Fall and Latin casus (p. 8b), which is then again involved in puns throughout on cas, classe, glas, and so on (puns which the reader must pardon me for repeating, imitating, miming, if only to see what remains, if anything, of puns that have long since been worn out).

Nonetheless, very schematically: in the left column one finds Derrida tracing Hegel’s use of examples, determined as inessential (beiherspielend), but which by their very status as pure supplements are essential for the essence they were supposed merely to exemplify.15 On the other hand, in the right column, on literature, exemplified by Genet, one finds Derrida interrogating the inverse ambition for the absolutely singular (for instance, in the signature of a poet), which, however, in this very gesture must appeal to the universality it tries to free itself of16.

Par exemple (l’unicité de l’exemple se détruit d’elle-même, élabore aussitôt la puissance d’un organe généralisateur), au moment même où nous prétendrions y ressaisir, dans un texte déterminé, le travail d’un idiome, relié à une chaîne de noms propres et de configurations empirico-signifiantes singulières, glas nomme aussi la classification, c’est-à-dire l’inscription dans des réseaux de généralités entrelacées à l’infini, dans des généalogies d’une structure telle que les croisements, les accouplements, les aiguillages, les détours, les embranchements ne relèvent jamais simplement d’une loi sémantique ou d’une loi formelle. Pas d’idiome absolu, pas de signature. L’effet d’idiome ou de signature ne fait que relancer—retentir—le glas.

(Gerrida, 1974, 169b)17

Glas thus not only tolls the bell for the intact concept without need of supplementation, but also for the safe and sound singularity, sheltered from all ‘classification’ (precisely the term Jakobson equated with translatability). The example inevitably complicates the desire for the singular and the desire for the universal, rendering them complicit.

In the previously mentioned article, Mácha also comments upon this passage from Glas, intending to show that it describes an ‘other law’, namely ‘the law that regulates the series of examples, or to be more precise, their accidental qualities. This law must be different from (the law of) the general concept’. He glosses the passage thus:

An example—precisely by being an example—moves (or elaborates) towards the general concept or law ([…] this usually happens by way of an inductive generalisation or an eidetic reduction). This is to say that the example, in producing a series, moves—by ‘the power of a generalizing organ’—towards the exemplarity of the example, i.e. towards an exemplar/paradigm/model. This movement, however, is not straightforward (like inductive generalisation); it is full of crossings, couplings and detours which defy any ‘semantic or formal law.’

(Mácha, 2022a, 71)

And concludes:

We can restate our problem using this terminological apparatus: the other law may override the (law of the) general concept. An emerging other law can be taken to be the main focus of the series of examples. […] They may divert the course of the series elsewhere, to a new concept […]. What was previously accidental (a mistake, an anomaly) becomes part of the essence of a new concept.

(p. 71)
The term ‘other law’, however, is to the best of my knowledge not part of the ‘terminological apparatus’ of Glás.\textsuperscript{18} It is more likely inspired by passages such as the following in Derrida’s \textit{La vérité en peinture}, pertaining to the Kant’s reflective judgement:

L’opération réfléchissante que nous venons de laisser se faire écrit sur le cadre \ldots\: \textit{loi générale} qui n’est plus une loi mécanique ou téléologique de la nature, de l’accord ou de l’harmonie des facultés (etc.), mais une certain dislocation répétée, une détérioration réglée, irrépressible, qui fait craquer le cadre en général, l’abîme en coin dans ses angles et ses articulations, retourne sa limite interne en limite externe, tient compte de son épaisseur, nous fait voir le tableau du côté de la toile ou du bois, etc.

(Derrida, 1978, 85–86; my emphasis)

The question, however, remains whether even such a ‘general law’ of ‘repeated dislocation’ and ‘regulated deterioration’ may simply, as Mácha writes, ‘override (the law of) the general concept’ in favour of ‘new concept’. According to another passage in \textit{La vérité en peinture}, the general law of the ‘parergonal movement’ which cracks open the frame constitutes not so much a ‘contrary order’ as a ‘gap’:

Elles [les exemples] peuvent alors renverser, déséquilibrer, incliner le mouvement naturel en mouvement parergonal, détourner la nécessité du \textit{Mutterwitz: non pas un ordre contraire mais un écart aléatoire} qui peut faire perdre d’un coup la tête, une roulette russe \ldots

(p. 92; my emphasis)

Derrida’s ‘other law’ is, at best, a law of lawlessness, which hardly would turn the ‘previously accidental’ into ‘the essence of a new concept’.

It seems that one must trace the concept of an ‘other law’ of exemplarity back from Mácha’s article (Mácha, 2022a, 79, nn. 19, 21), not so much to Derrida, but to Roller (2015), who writes that ‘Derrida contends that serial exempla have a dual allegiance, both to “the law” under which they are expressly marshalled (the classical category) and to an “other law” that emerges from their piecewise interrelationships (accounting for non-classical behavior)’ (Roller, 2015, 82) and that ‘[i]n Derridean terms, an “other law” emerging from the exempla themselves—revealed in the first exemplum, and reiterated in the second—threatens to overturn altogether “the law” ensconced in the framing argument’ (p. 89).

I do not wish to deny that all series of examples will be characterised by such an openness, which in fact seems to be a rather classic problem of induction (but then why all this effort on Derrida’s part to pose a well-known problem, and in such a roundabout way?). I simply note that, here too, the concept of an ‘other law’ (a ‘Derridean term’ according to Roller) does not seem to stem from Derrida, but rather (as Roller’s references show, Roller, 2015, 90) appears to have been introduced by Harvey (1992). This genealogy is problematic for Mácha’s and Roller’s invocation of a Derridean ‘other’ law in two ways.

First, Harvey explicitly criticises Derrida for not being able to think exemplarity beyond the law:

Derrida notably does not question this passage—this relation of relatability—between the general and the particular, between the example and the Exemplar. He himself uses it in his effort to show not that this passage is problematic, but that the passage is always already double. The example leads us both towards its \textit{law}, via reason and the dialectic, and also towards its ‘other law’, via \textit{différence} and the trace. But \textit{that} this passage is problematic, is not a ready translation or translatable, is not raised by Derrida.

(Harvey, 1992, 198)
And concludes:

What is at stake for us here is again the frame of analysis that organizes Derrida’s ‘own’ reading of examples—a simple doubling of the metaphysical foreclosure—which at most and in every case shows us that examples obey more than one law at the same time. [...] Far from opening up a new articulation of exemplarity, Derrida’s analysis reaffirms the most strictly confined notion of exemplarity that metaphysics has always assumed: an example is nothing more than a particular instance or case of a more general law. The only issue here would be which law?

(pp. 200–201)

In other words, the supposedly Derridean schema of the ‘law’ and the ‘other law’ which forms the basis for Mácha’s and Roller’s arguments would according to Harvey precisely be insufficient to think exemplarity.

Secondly, while I cannot here do justice to Harvey’s (1992, 2002) erudite yet strangely reluctant reading of Derrida, I would nevertheless suggest that her construction of the dichotomy of ‘law’ and ‘other law’ does not quite capture the gist of Derrida’s remarks on exemplarity. When Derrida speaks of the parergonal movement (and even différance, Derrida, 1972a, 16) as a ‘general law’, this is perhaps best understood ‘in Derridean terms’ as a paleonymic use of ‘law’, the point of which is to mark that something about the law is precisely not lawful (not simply ‘another law’, not simply another example of a law). As far as I can tell, Derrida is not so much interested in an ‘other law’ as in ‘the law of the law’, that is, in instances of deconstruction where the law ‘remarks’ and thereby subverts itself.39

The authors in question could perhaps have profited by taking as their paradigmatic point of departure the fact that the logic of exemplarity is necessarily at work in their own texts on this logic.20 Lacking this, they are perilously close to covering over the abyss just when it opens before them. Even the law stating that any series of examples can always exemplify an ‘other law’ would itself, as law (even if it is not one law among others), be subject to this law: to itself. The abyss of a law of the law would neither entail complete closure nor complete openness, nor would it quite constitute an ‘other law in opposition to a first, classical one. This complicates Harvey’s claim that Derrida is unable to think exemplarity beyond the law, since he in fact seems to be pointing to an ‘inner’ beyond, as it were, of any law. This would, however, neither be simply to remain within the schema example-law nor simply to go beyond it: perhaps it would be its deconstruction.

If the reading I am suggesting might seem somewhat obscure, this would (regardless of any amendable limitations of my presentation, of which there are undoubtedly a few) stem from the fact that I see Derrida working, beyond the old children’s game of one law and another (the logic of which is clear as day), towards destabilising the concept of exemplarity itself to a point where it is no longer entirely clear what it in fact could mean. This could be the first step in a deconstruction of the structure of exemplarity, whereupon, as we shall see, exemplarity might have the chance to take a different turn and let itself be reinvented.

3 | REMARKABLE EXAMPLES OF LITERATURE

One could have given other examples of the paradoxes of exemplarity: ‘Man kann von einem Ding nicht aussagen, es sei 1 m lang, noch, es sei nicht 1 m lang, und das ist das Urmeter in Paris’ (Wittgenstein, 2009, 29), to which Wittgenstein adds that this is not due to any special property of the stick itself, but rather due to its role as paradigm in a language game.

Or one might have examined how examples function across disciplines (in logic, ethics, religion, law, pedagogy, medicine, psychoanalysis, etc.), or within each of these (for example, in philosophy: in Plato, Aristotle, Kant, etc.), or in a single signature (for example, Kant’s, with its changing determinations of exemplarity in each of the Critiques: Gängelwagen, Vorbild, etc.).
Would that have produced a series of examples of the same law of exemplary? Would one have been able, for example, to relate Lacan’s (1966, 386) statement that psychoanalysis only progresses ‘du particulier au particulier’ to Agambens’s (2008, 20) emphasis on the paradigmatic value of this Aristotelean formula (hos meros pros meros) for thinking the paradigm?

Before comparing all available cases and trying to determine whether they all fall under one law, one might well ask whether the law of exemplarity could indeed be one. For if everything exemplary is incomparable, would it not thereby also, in a singular manner, be exemplary of its own exemplarity? Reapplying our previous line of argument, what would be the grounds for comparison in determining whether its exemplarity is the same as that of another? Thus, it seems one must admit the necessary possibility of exemplarities: that exemplarity itself might each time be different.

In what follows, I will restrict myself to how, in the work of Derrida, literature provides a privileged example for thinking the structure of exemplarity: Literature is exemplary not only in bringing out this structure in a particularly lucid manner, or in showing that it applies not only to literature, but to any text—even any ‘trace’ (Derrida, 1993b, 90)—but also to break open this structure by turning it, in a certain manner, against itself.

To this end, I will privilege three readings of Maurice Blanchot, Franz Kafka, and Francis Ponge published by Derrida in the mid-1980’s (Derrida, 1985, 1986, 1987d).²¹ Space and time only allow for tracing what in these rich texts pertains directly to our question: how the law, in literature, is exemplarily remarked, as is the dualism example–law, in so far as literature constitutes a singular chance for a text to relate (to) its own legal status (as literature); to relate its belonging to the genre (if it is a genre) of literature.

First example: in *La loi du genre*, Derrida notes that this is the case in Blanchot’s *La folie du jour*, a story (récit) which in its first, but subsequently replaced, title (Un récit?) and final words (‘Un récit? Non, pas de récit, plus jamais’) relates its own impossible status as a story, ‘playing at’ being an example of a story:

De façon très singulière, le récit […] fait de l’impossibilité du récit son thème, son thème ou son contenu impossible, à la fois inaccessible, indéterminable, interminable et intarissable; et il fait du mot ‘récit’ son titre sans titre, la mention sans mention de son genre. Ce texte […] semble donc fait, entre autres choses, pour se jouer de toutes les catégories tranquilles de la théorie et de l’histoire des genres, pour inquiéter leurs assurances taxinomiques, la distribution de leurs classes et les appellations contrôlables de leurs nomenclatures classiques.

(Derrida, 1986, 261–262)

Genre trouble. *La folie du jour* plays with all possible categories of which it could be an example. Generalising, Derrida formulates ‘la loi de débordement, de participation sans appartenance’ (p. 262), which does not pertain to any specific genre so much as to what he (hesitantly: ‘peut-être’) calls ‘le champ sans limites d’une textualité générale’ (p. 262). Here, too, classification is in question: What defines all classes as classes (and Derrida has just been discussing an attempt by Gérard Genette to make a rigorous distinction between classes such as genre, type, mode, and form) ‘est justement la récurrence identifiable d’un trait commun auquel on devrait reconnaître l’appartenance à la classe’ (p. 262). But trouble immediately arises in so far as any such class trait may always be more or less explicitly remarked upon in that which it classifies: a story such as *La folie du jour*, for example, may itself remark upon the specific trait that makes a story an example of a story. The distinguishing mark of any text will always be ‘remarkable’:

En tant que marque, un tel trait distinctif est toujours a priori remarquable. Il est toujours possible qu’un ensemble, j’appellerai cela un texte, pour des raisons essentielles et qu’il soit écrit ou oral, remarque en lui-même ce trait distinctif. Cela peut se produire dans des textes qui ne se donnent pas à un moment donné pour littéraires ou poétiques. […] Cela ne les constitue pas ipso facto
Is literature exemplarily remarkable? Such ‘remarks’ may occur in any text, writes Derrida, and hence are not the sole privilege of literature. As such, there is nothing literary about them. But whenever they occur, and they might occur anywhere, it ‘situates the possibility of any text to become literature’. The ‘remark’, if nothing else, constitutes an essential mark of literature: ‘cette remarque est absolument nécessaire et constitutive dans ce qu’on appelle l’art, la poésie ou la littérature’ (p. 263).22

Yet, in remarking upon its own exemplarity, literature withdraws from the genre of which it is an example and comes to encompass, paradoxically, the class to which it belongs, in so far as ‘la re-marque d’appartenance n’appartient pas’:

Et cela non pas à cause d’un débordement de richesse ou de productivité libre, anarchique et inclassable, mais à cause du trait de participation lui-même, de l’effet de code et de la marque générique. En se marquant de genre, un texte s’en démarque. Si la remarque d’appartenance appartient sans appartenir, participe sans appartenir, la mention de genre ne fait pas simplement part du corpus.

(Derrida, 1986, 264)

Second example: in Préjugés—Devant la loi, Derrida notes how Kafka’s Vor dem Gesetz remarks its status as literature. Derrida emphasises that literature is an institution and that any example of literature will be subject to the laws of this institution. But in so far as literature is characterised by having no essence—other than permitting one ‘de tout dire, et selon toutes les figures’ (Derrida & Attridge, 2009, 256), which of course is not exactly a definition—its relationship to the laws governing it as a genre is unique: having no essence, literature is nothing outside these laws. It appears fully naked before the law. Literature means nothing outside the specific history of its institution and the laws that govern it, that is, ‘de propriété des œuvres, de l’identité des corpus, de la valeur des signatures, de la différence entre créer, produire et reproduire, etc.’ (p. 133). And again, precisely by its being before the law in an exemplary manner, literature in general, and Vor dem Gesetz in particular, exemplifies how not only literature but any text, to be the kind of text it is, must stand before the law that confers upon it its status. And that it may state this. But in so doing, in remarking what marks it as literature, it retreats from this very trait:

le texte de Kafka dit peut-être, aussi, l’être-devant-la-loi de tout texte. Il le dit par ellipse, l’avançant et le retirant à la fois. Il n’appartient pas seulement à la littérature d’une époque en tant qu’il est lui-même devant la loi (qu’il dit), devant un certain type de loi. Il désigne aussi obliquement la littérature, il parle de lui-même comme d’un effet littéraire. Par où il déborde la littérature dont il parle.

(Derrida, 1985, 133)

Literature is not only exemplary of all texts in so far as it stands entirely exposed before the law, but also in so far as it is able to remark its purely legal status in an exemplary manner, as does, for example, Vor dem Gesetz. This ‘oblique’ remark is at once the beginning of literature (as we have seen, it situates the ‘possibility of becoming literature of any text’) and the end of literature. It belongs to literature most of all, for literature may, among all genres, exemplarily remark its being subject to the law; but in so far as literature remarks its being literature, it is no longer simply literature, that is, fully subsumable under the law of which it speaks:
le texte de Kafka dit tout cela de la littérature, l’ellipse puissante qu’il nous livre n’appartient pas totalement à la littérature. Le lieu depuis lequel il nous parle des lois de la littérature, de la loi sans laquelle aucune spécificité littéraire ne prendrait figure ou consistance, ce lieu ne peut être simple-ment intérieur à la littérature.

(p. 132)

By remarking its status as literature, literature overflows literature. Its overflowing its essence is essential:

Mais n’y a-t-il pas lieu, pour toute littérature, de déborder la littérature? Que serait une littéra-ture qui ne serait que ce qu’elle est, littérature? Elle ne serait plus elle-même si elle était elle-même.

(p. 133)

Literature constitutes a counterexample to itself: it will only be literature by not being literature. The very laws that frame literature enable it to formulate, within this frame, statements of the law, to speak in the name of the law (even if only in the form of fiction), that is, ‘de produire performativement les énoncés de la loi, de la loi que peut être la littérature et non seulement de la loi à laquelle elle s’assujettit. Alors elle fait la loi, elle surgit en ce lieu où la loi se fait’ (p. 134). This space within literature for statements of the law, however fictitious they may be, means that literature will always occupy ‘une place ouverte à une sorte de juridicité subversive’:

Mais, dans ces conditions déterminées, elle peut user du pouvoir légiférant de la performativité linguistique pour tourner les lois existantes dont elle tient pourtant ses garanties et ses conditions de surgissement. Cela grâce à l’équivoque référentielle de certaines structures linguistiques. Dans ces conditions, la littérature peut jouer la loi, la répéter en la détournant ou en la contournant. […] Dans l’instant insaisissable où elle joue la loi, une littérature passe la littérature

(p. 134)²³

This ‘referential equivoque’ (or pun?) that allows literature to ‘play the law’ and thereby exceed itself, means that it will be on both sides of the law, Vor dem Gesetz in both senses of vor: prior to the law, which would constitute a transcen-dental position, if it was not necessarily complicated by the other sense, that of being subjected in front of the law: ‘Elle se trouve des deux côtés de la ligne qui sépare la loi du hors-la-loi; elle divise l’être-devant-la-loi’ (p. 134). Whatever happens, if anything, in this divided place, would no longer just be literature.

What happens in such a literary event? Is the tautological fold of literature upon itself nothing but empty words, an idle cog in the linguistic machinery? Perhaps.²⁴ There can be no guarantee that it is not. Derrida insists, however, that whatever happens in this self-reflexive fold will not be of the order of self-transparency.²⁵ As is the case of Vor dem Gesetz::

Le récit ‘Devant la loi’ [in concluding with the words of the Türhüter: ‘Ich gehe jetzt und schließe ihn’] ne raconterait ou ne décrirait que lui-même en tant que texte. Il ne ferait que cela ou ferait aussi cela. Non pas dans une réflexion spéculaire assurée de quelque transparence sui-référentielle […] mais dans l’illisibilité du texte, si l’on veut bien entendre par là l’impossibilité où nous sommes aussi d’accéder à son propre sens, au contenu peut-être inconstant qu’il garde jalousement en réserve. Le texte se garde, comme la loi. Il ne parle que de lui-même, mais alors de sa non-identité à soi. Il n’arrive ni ne laisse arriver à lui-même. Il est la loi, fait la loi et laisse le lecteur devant la loi.

(Derrida, 1985, 128; my emphasis)
In remarking upon itself, upon its literary form (in this case, its ending), the text retreats from any attempt to master it, interpret it, read it. The fold holds a secret. In presenting nothing but itself—except perhaps ‘une différence interminable jusqu’à la mort’ (p. 128)—the text places the reader immediately before itself while nevertheless remaining ‘rigoureusement intangible’ (p. 128), guarding its secret (‘like the law’ in Kafka’s story). Literature keeps a secret by saying it all: ‘Il y a dans la littérature, dans le secret exemplaire de la littérature, une chance de tout dire sans toucher au secret’ (Derrida, 1993b, 67). The secret is hidden on the surface, as it were, it is the singular form of the text, which

se présente et se performe comme une sorte d’identité personnelle ayant droit au respect absolu. Si quelqu’un y changeait un mot, y altérait une phrase, un juge pourrait toujours dire qu’il y a eu transgression, violence, infidélité. Une mauvaise traduction sera toujours appelée à comparaître devant la version dite originale. (Derrida, 1985, 129)

The singular text, exemplifying nothing but itself, lays down a merciless law according to which translation will be judged bad for changing even the slightest thing. Since no translation leaves the original intact, any translation will be criminal when thus judged by its faithfulness to the untouchable original. The only absolutely faithful translation would be an identical copy of the original, following its example in a literal repetition, which can hardly be called translation.

And yet, something might let itself be invented in this secretive fold. Perhaps even invention itself.

Third example: Near the end of Psyché—Invention de l’autre, a reading of Francis Ponge's poem Fable and a treatise on invention, Derrida formalises the argument which his reading has until then been building towards. He qualifies the ‘classical’ (metaphysical, onto-theological) concept of invention as being governed by a ‘logique du supplément d’invention’ (Derrida, 1987d, 58), according to which invention amounts to nothing other than discovering a possibility which was always already there (say, in the mind of God). An invention can only ever appear as the inessential supplement to an idea which already existed, an explication of what was already implicitly present. Invention as essentially inessential.

This would not be one concept or conception of invention among others, but the concept of invention as such. Although one may find a variety of concepts of invention in the philosophical tradition—Derrida himself draws out the differences between the conceptions found in Cicero, Descartes, the Port-Royal Logic, Leibniz, Kant and Schelling—the notion of supplementarity governs these and in fact every possible concept of invention, such that one will find it at work ‘dans toute philosophie de l’invention […], toutes les programmatiques de l’invention, dans la juridiction implicite ou explicite qui évalue et qui statue aujourd’hui chaque fois qu’on parle d’invention’ (Derrida, 1987d, 58).

As such, this is not a concept one can oppose. It might, however, be said to be at odds with itself. For invention cannot just be a discovery of what was already there, but must also, according to its very concept (divided as it is against itself), be inventive, precisely. In the terminology of Speech Act Theory, it is split between being ‘constative’ (as mere discovery) and ‘performative’ (as production) (Derrida, 1987d, 23)—apparent in the ambiguity of the French invention having both these significations (as does in fact the English ‘invention’, p. 16). The concept proves to be aporetic and invention impossible if its implications are followed faithfully to their logical conclusion—in its dialogue (if not dialectic) with itself:

L’invention ne serait conforme à son concept, au trait dominant de son concept et de son mot que dans la mesure où, paradoxalement, l’invention n’invente rien […]. Il faudrait donc dire que la seule invention possible serait l’invention de l’impossible. Mais une invention de l’impossible est impossible, dirait l’autre. Certes, mais c’est la seule possible: une invention doit s’annoncer comme invention de ce qui ne paraissait pas possible.

(p. 59)
Invention is according to its own concept impossible. But its inherent breakdown, its self-destruction as its essence and ownmost possibility, rather than foreclosing all invention, precisely calls for invention: To be possible, invention must each time negotiate its own impossibility and invent itself anew.

This is where Derrida’s interest in Ponge’s Fable lies, and particularly its abyssal first line (‘Par le mot par commence donc ce texte’), whose implications the greater part of the essay is dedicated to developing:

C’est dans cette paradoxe qu’est engagée une déconstruction. C’est de l’invention du même et du possible, de l’invention toujours possible que nous sommes fatigués. Ce n’est pas contre elle, mais au-delà d’elle que nous cherchons à ré-inventer l’invention même, une autre invention, ou plutôt une invention de l’autre qui viendrait, à travers l’économie du même, voire en la mimant ou en la répétant (‘Par le mot par...’) donner lieu de l’autre, laisser venir l’autre.

(Derrida, 1987d, 59–60)

Earlier in the essay, Derrida notes that Fable is exemplary in at least two ways. First, exemplary of how every invention in fact hinges upon the ‘co-implication’ of it as ‘constative’ discovery and ‘performative’ production: ‘Il performe en constatant, en effectuant le constat—et rien d’autre. Rapport à soi très singulier, réflexion qui produit le soi de l’auto-réflexion en produisant l’événement par le geste même qui le raconte’ (p. 24). Secondly, Fable is exemplary of how language always must but never can speak of itself, how it is metalinguistic from the beginning, yet without any object language except itself, preceding itself as an example of itself:

Sa première ligne ne parle que d’elle-même, elle est immédiatement métalinguistique mais c’est un métalangage sans surplomb, un métalangage inévitable et impossible puisqu’il n’y a pas de langage avant lui; il n’y a pas d’objet antérieur, extérieur ou inférieur pour ce métalangage. [...] La propriété du langage, de toujours pouvoir sans pouvoir parler de lui-même, est ainsi démontrée en acte et selon un paradigme.

(p. 24)

Pointing beside (para) itself to itself, speaking beyond (meta) itself of itself as its own paradigm, as productive discovery or constative performance, the first line of Fable exemplarily enacts what Derrida emphatically names an ‘Invention de l’autre dans le même’:

La deuxième occurrence du mot ‘par’ dont la typographie même rappelle qu’il cite la première occurrence, l’incipit absolu de la fable, institue une répétition ou une réflexivité originaire qui, tout en divisant l’acte inaugural, à la fois événement inventif et relation ou archive d’invention, lui permet aussi de se déployer pour ne rien dire que le même, lui-même, invention déhiscente et reployée du même, à l’instant où il a lieu. [...] Mais le premier ‘par’, cité par le second, appartient en vérité à la même phrase que lui, c’est-à-dire à celle qui constate l’opération ou l’événement—qui pourtant n’ont pas lieu que par la citation descriptive et nulle part ailleurs, ni avant elle. [...] Ce que cite la phrase, ce n’est rien d’autre, de ‘par’ en ‘par’, qu’elle-même en train de se citer [...]. L’événement inventif, c’est la citation et le récit.

(Derrida, 1987d, 23)

Of the two examples of the word par, the second, quoting the first, would not have been par had it not been for the first, but inversely, the first word would not have been par if not for its role in the syntax of the entire locution which allows the second to refer to the first—and while the two examples of par thus refer to each other, the entire sentence refers but to itself, remarking constatively upon what it itself performs. The abyssal references and endless deferral of the origin in this ‘original repetition’, which exemplifies the fiction involved in any beginning, is nothing short of ‘fabulous’.
What we saw to be the essence of literature: to exceed itself, to be other than literature, is also the case in Fable which, saying more than it says, invents something which, however fabulous it may be, cannot simply be ‘patented’ and filed under ‘Fables’. Its ‘fabulous complication’ or ‘fabulous repetition’ harbours the chance for an ‘other invention’, even ‘une ré-invention de l’invention’ (p. 43) for which it would be paradigmatic. It abides by all conventional rules that have hitherto been invented, but in so doing produces the aforementioned ‘novelty of the event’

en tournant ces règles dans le respect de ces règles mêmes afin de laisser l’autre venir ou s’annoncer dans l’ouverture de cette déhiscence. C’est peut-être ce qu’on appelle la déconstruction. La performance de la Fable respecte des règles mais selon un geste étrange, que d’autres jugeraient pervers alors qu’il se rend fidèlement et lucidement aux conditions mêmes de sa propre poétique. Ce geste consiste à défier et à exhiber la structure précaire de ces règles: tout en les respectant et par la marque de respect qu’il invente.

By deploying nothing but the possible, Fable engenders an impossible possibility beyond the possible by respectfully obeying the law with the utmost rigour. This impossible invention, ‘par-delà la performance et la psyché du “Par le mot par…”‘(p. 60), would not be performing anything but a perturbation of the very ‘conditions du performatif et de ce qui le distingue paisiblement de constatif’ (pp. 60–61). In general, ‘l’initiative ou l’inventivité déconstructrice ne peuvent consister qu’à ouvrir, déclôturer, déstabiliser des structures de forclusion pour laisser venir le passage à l’autre’ (p. 60).

Is this how the first line of Fable, as an exemplary invention, reinvents exemplarity, opening the concept from within, to such an extent that one can no longer be entirely certain of what counts as an example? For example: Does Fable begin par exemple? (An untranslatable pun, for ‘for’ is not par, without which Fable could not have been invented.) The story, whichever way you tell it, would be ‘l’énigme—autrement dit, comme l’indique le mot d’énigme, le récit—qui travaille la logique de l’exemple’ (Derrida, 1986, 256).

The ‘invention of the other’ (and Derrida reminds us that ‘l’autre n’est pas le nouveau’, Derrida, 1987d, 61), would thereby remain

ouverte à l’autre et par lui, par elle travaillé, travaillant à ne pas se laisser enfermer ou dominer par cette économie du même en sa totalité, celle qui assure à la fois la puissance irréfutable et la fermeture du concept classique d’invention, sa politique, sa techno-science et ses institutions. Celles-ci ne sont pas à rejeter, à critiquer ou à combattre, loin de là. D’autant moins que le cercle économique de l’invention n’est qu’un mouvement pour se réapproprier cela même qui le met en mouvement, la différence de l’autre.

The ‘invention of the same’ is itself set in motion by the other to which it cannot therefore be opposed: It presupposes this other, which, however, for its part presupposes the ‘same’ and its ‘economy’, since it is only within it that the other could be received.

Hence the invention of the other may always appear as nothing but a mere mirroring of the same, a tautology stating only what was already possible (‘Cela arrive-t-il jamais? De cet événement on n’est jamais sûr’,
If this is 'what is called deconstruction', it seems that 'la logique du mimeisthai est indéconstructible ou plutôt déconstructible comme la déconstruction "elle-même"' (Derrida & Attridge, 2009, 275). Let us end by noting that the logic of exemplarity might therefore also be at work in the classical question (Derrida, 1972a, 13). Undecidable, no doubt, of whether deconstruction itself is a class, that is to say, whether the interminable series of 'supplement', 'hymen', 'différance', 'parergon', and so on are examples of this one thing: deconstruction (which might perhaps be felt to have exhausted itself, worn itself out for quite some time now), or whether they are all exemplary, singularly remarkable examples, constituting a series whose closure is still held in abeyance, each time announcing a re-invention of deconstruction (above all when it comes to the deconstruction of 'invention', which, however, they all must be). If deconstruction itself remarks itself, takes itself as an example, might it too not thereby exceed itself, retreat from itself, hold a secret even secret to itself?

Il reste à penser ce qui se passe aujourd'hui, dans notre monde et dans la 'modernité', au moment où la déconstruction devient un motif, avec son mot, ses thèmes privilégiés, sa stratégie mobile etc. Je n'ai pas de réponse simple et formalisable à cette question. Tous mes essais sont des essais qui s'expliquent avec cette formidable question.

(Derrida, 1987b, 391; cf. also Derrida, 2011, 115)

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ENDNOTES

1. A favourite of Agamben's (1990, 8; 1995, 27), whose further methodological developments in Che cos'è un paradigma? (Agamben, 2008) we cannot however treat here. On the architectural connotations of 'paradigm', that is, as blueprint for a building (the imagined, even fictional image, the fantasy or image of the real building, that is, a copy of that of which it is the origin), Derrida aphoristically notes 'Paradeigma signifie “plan d'architecte”, par exemple. Mais paradeigma, c'est aussi l'exemple. Il reste à savoir ce qui arrive quand on parle d'un paradigme architectural pour d'autres espaces, d'autres techniques, arts, écritures. Le paradigme comme paradigme pour tout paradigme. Du jeu de mots en architecture— et si le Witz y est possible' (Derrida, 1987a, 510). Derrida also notes that when it comes to 'des recherches appelées par commodité performatives', 'Il ne suffit pas ici de dire que l'architecture en est un des meilleurs paradigmes. Le mot même et le concept de paradigme ont une valeur exemplairement architecturale' (p. 515).

2. See, for instance, Derrida's Béliers, a kind of eulogy to and dialogue with Gadamer around Paul Celan's poem Grosse, glühende Wölbung: 'Le poème n'est pas seulement le meilleur exemple de l'intraduisible, il donne son lieu le plus propre, le moins impropre à l'épreuve de la traduction. Le poème situe sans doute le seul lieu propice à l'expérience de la langue, à savoir d'un idiome qui à la fois défie pour toujours la traduction et donc en appelle à une traduction sommée de faire l'impossible, de rendre l'impossible possible lors d'un événement inouï' (Derrida, 2003a, 7). We find yet another example (but the series would be endless) in another paradigmatic text on translation, Benjamin's Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers, a preface to his translation of Baudelaire's poems and an attempt think translation in general with poetry as the guiding example. Interestingly, Benjamin raises the question in a manner reminiscent of Jakobson's focus on communication and 'creative transposition' quoted above: 'Was aber außer der Mitteilung in einer Dichtung steht [...], gilt er nicht allgemein als das Unfaßbare, Geheimnisvolle, "Dichterische"? Das der Übersetzer nur wiedergeben kann, indem er–auch dichtet?' (Benjamin, 1972, 9). Contrary to Jakobson, however, Benjamin immediately goes on to consider the extent to which poetry might therefore be exemplarily traducible (übersetzbar), even essentially so, in so far as 'es seinem Wesen nach Übersetzung zulasse und demnach [...] auch verlange' (p. 10). An example perhaps of how, as Derrida notes in Des tours de Babel, once '[n]ous touchons [...] à la limite de la traduction', we will find that '[l]'intraduisible pur et le traducible pur y passent l'un dans l'autre' (Derrida, 1987f, 223).

3. In fact, for Heidegger the 'Fall' occurs whenever anything falls under the category of literature, that is, becomes a literary object, be it poetry, thought ('das Denken ging in die Literatur ein', Heidegger, 2002, 20), or even language itself: 'Die Philologie macht die Literatur der Nationen und Völker zum Gegenstand des Erklärens und Auslegens. [...] Die Sprache spricht jedoch, ohne daß sie zur Literatur wird und vollends unabhängig davon, ob die Literatur ihrerseits...
in die Gegenständigkeit gelangt, der die Feststellungen einer Literaturwissenschaft entsprechen' (Heidegger, 2000, 58).

4 One Kant Dictionary summarises the attempt at locating such a principle: 'The judgment proceeds reflectively, either by means of comparing and combining concepts with each other according to the "universal but at the same time undefined principle of a purposive, systematic ordering of nature"—the "technic of nature"—or by comparison and combination with the harmonious play of the cognitive powers [...]. The former yields reflective teleological judgment, the latter reflective aesthetic judgments. The analytic and dialectic of these judgments form the two major sections of the Critique of Judgment' (Caygill, 1995, 353). But Derrida, as we shall see, will rather be getting at a 'loi générale qui n'est plus une loi mécanique ou téléologique de la nature, de l'accord ou de l'harmonie des facultés (etc.), mais une certain dislocation répétée, une détérioration réglée, irrépressible, qui fait craquer le cadre en général' (Derrida, 1978, 85), which, even if it does not render the Kantian project invalid, since it rather makes it possible, nevertheless would exceed it, and precisely in a manner that is pertinent to our problem. See also the short discussion of the distinction between reflective and determinate judgement in La vérité en peinture (pp. 59–60), the text of which is based on an unpublished 1973–1974 seminar entitled L'art (Kant). The question of exemplarity as it arises in Kritik der praktischen Vernunft is discussed extensively in Derrida's seminar from 1980–1981, also unpublished, on Le respect (where we find the first version what was published as Préjugés—Devant la loi, which will be discussed below). I hope to be able to return to this material on another occasion.

5 See, for instance, Derrida (1993c, 110): 'Encore le paradoxe de l'exemple: le n'importe quel que (exemple quelconque: échantillon) doit aussi donner le bon exemple'. Cf. also (pp. 43, 90, 95–97) for a 'logic of exemplarism'. Derrida associates the methodological appeal to the 'best example' with Aristotle, cf. Derrida (1996b, 26–27).

6 The author in question has subsequently published a book-length study in which he expands upon the argument (Mácha, 2022b). This came out only after the present article was finished, too late for me to properly engage with it, but the argument is, as far as I can tell, by and large the same.

7 See Bennington (2000) for what perhaps cannot be an explication nor a compte rendu of this theme. See also the discussion of the 'exemplarité de re-marque' in Monolingualisme de l'autre, where it is emphasised that 'c'est comme une pensée de l'unique, justement, et non du pluriel, comme on l'a trop souvent cru, qu'une pensée de la dissémination s’est présentée naguère en une pensée pliante du pli - et pliée au pli' (Derrida, 1996b 49).

8 Cf. above all Derrida (1999, 114 ff.). While this phrase is often taken to emphasise the absolute alterity of every other ('every other is completely other'), its ambiguity seems to me to emphasise just as much that absolute alterity will be so radically irreplaceable as to thereby be, in fact, entirely replaceable. This reversibility or 'exemplary complication of exemplarity' would be in line with what I am elaborating here. It entails that any ethical relation to the other must be a negotiation or 'economy' between self and other, that only 'la moindre violence' may avoid 'la pire violence' which absolute respect for the absolutely other might in fact amount to, cf. Derrida (1967, 172).

9 I cannot here do justice to how Derrida 'appeals' to a literary 'example', namely Blanchot's L'instant de ma mort, in order to 'mettre à l'épreuve cette exemplarité de l'instance' (Derrida, 1998, 50). Cf. also an analogous passage in Le monolingualisme de l'autre (Derrida, 1996b, 40 ff.).

10 This would allow one to question the presuppositions that, for example and despite the all too obvious differences, Fichte's nationalistic equation of Germany and philosophy (Derrida, 1992) and proclamations of chosenness in Jewish thinkers might have in common (Derrida, 2003b; cf. also Hollandar, 2008), asking whether exemplarity does not here provide the schema or point of passage between the singular and the universal, which alone allows for the (never entirely successful) translation of the one into the other. This seems to be the general approach in Derrida's four years of seminars on Nationalité et nationalisme philosophiques from 1984–1988, which begins with Fichte and ends with the Deutschjudentum of Cohen and others; 'la “psyché” judéo-allemande, à savoir la logique de certains phénomènes de spécularité troublante' (Derrida, 1994, 72). Analogously, the self-proCLAIMed exemplarity of Europe oscillates between it being just an example and being exemplary of the universal, with a further complication in so far as Europe itself questions exemplarity, as analysed in L’autre cap (Derrida, 1991). See Naas's (1992, xv ff.) introduction to the English translation, which traces Derrida's engagement with the paradox of exemplarity as far back as to his 1953 dissertation on Husserl.

11 Such a claim, however, presupposes that we are certain of what dialectics is, as well as what deconstruction is, and of how the two differ. I for one believe this to be more uncertain than ever, even beyond Derrida's own recognition of their 'proximité presque absolue'. The elaboration of their relation, 'qui demeure d'une certaine manière interminable', 'pour une grande part reste devant nous' (Derrida, 1972c, 59–60).

12 See Critchley (1999, 19) for a sketch of how Glas might be read in this manner. For yet other examples of Beiherspielen in Hegel's writings, see Mácha (2020).
The etymology of Beispiel (−spiel is in fact -spel, that is, a saying, a tale, a narrative, a spell) makes it even more untranslatable, as it were. Concerning the translatability of this word, Mácha (2020, 229–230) notes: ‘The distinction between Wesen [...] and Beispiel makes sense only if Beispiel expresses something inessential, possibly in addition to its usual meaning of instance. The word Beispiel acquires in itself a certain dialectical opposition between an instance of essence and a play of something inessential. The challenge for a translator is to preserve this dialectical tension.’ Thus, Hegel’s pun on Beispiel comes to mark its own exemplarity as well as its own translatability: at the same time translatable and untranslatable, replaceable and irreplaceable, mere example and exemplary. Note also what is at stake in the wordplay on mein/Meinung in so far as ‘meaning’ is thereby grafted onto the series: I, me, mine, property, the proper, giving and taking, etc. For is not the aporia of sense certainty that I cannot give an example of what I mean, precisely because it is most properly proper to me, exemplarily mine? See also the final words of Passions: ‘C’est de cela, c’est pour cela, que la littérature (entre autres choses) est “exemplaire”: elle est, elle dit, elle fait toujours autre chose, autre chose qu’elle-même, elle-même qui d’ailleurs n’est que cela, autre chose qu’elle-même. Par exemple ou par excellence: de la philosophie’ (Derrida, 1993b, 91).


At least not as obviously referring to a law of exemplarity, but instead to the reading of Analogously to the predicament that is later named ‘auto-immunity’, cf. Derrida (1995, §37 et passim).


In Mácha (2022b, 40, n. 16), that is, the subsequent book version of the article discussed here, a footnote has been appended, noting with due diligence that ‘The notion of an other law is disputed in Derrida scholarship’. It is not quite clear, however, what the dispute amounts to: while Mácha correctly notes that it is Harvey herself who disputes the notion against Derrida, he does not note that she is only able to do so by first (erroneously, as far as I can tell) imputing it to him. Thus, rather than clarifying anything in relation to the original article, the appended footnote in fact only makes it even more baffling that one would nonetheless want to retain the notion ‘la autre loi’ [sic] (p. 3), especially if one insists that one is doing so against Harvey but with Roller—who precisely has it from Harvey! It is perhaps telling that Mácha somewhat dismissively calls this an ‘exegetical issue’: patient exegesis of Derrida’s texts seems to be precisely what the articles in question are lacking.

Rather than treating it as something of an afterthought in a concluding chapter (Mácha, 2022b, 145 ff.). Thus, one question Mácha apparently never gets around to posing is why Derrida, or the late Wittgenstein, for that matter, upon whom Mácha also draws, found it necessary to write as they did. Why are Glas, La vérité en peinture and Philosophische Untersuchungen so different from a no doubt rich and important, but stylistically quite ‘typical’ treatise such as Mácha’s own? Might not their ‘form’ (bordering on formlessness) have been necessitated by their ‘content’?

For the sake of simplicity, I here bracket the previous question of whether poetry (’Ponge’) is a genre of literature or vice versa. While it would add a further complication to the analysis, this question would only confirm it, rather than render it invalid. See also Derrida (1987d, 26).

To return to Passions, where Derrida also does not exactly give a definition of literature, but rather, in the final note of the text, points to what literature owes to the structural ambiguity of exemplarity: ‘Quelque chose de la littérature aura commencé quand il n’aura pas été possible de décider si, quand je parle de quelque chose, je parle de quelque chose (de la chose même, celle-ci, pour elle-même) ou si je donne un exemple, un exemple de quelque chose ou un exemple du fait que je peux parler de quelque chose, de la possibilité de parler en général de quelque chose en général, ou encore d’écrire cette parole, etc.’ (Derrida, 1993b, 89). It will always be possible, when writing ‘I’, for example, to claim that one
is not writing 'un texte "autobiographique" mais un texte sur l'autobiographie dont ce texte-ci est un exemple. Personne ne pourra sérieusement me contredire si je dis (ou sous-entends, etc.) que je n'écris pas sur moi mais sur "moi", sur un moi quelconque ou sur le moi en général, en proposant un exemple: je ne suis qu'un exemple ou je suis exemplaire. [...] Et je donne un exemple d'example’ (pp. 89–90). Once again, literature constitutes for Derrida a privileged example of the abyssal structure of exemplarity: ‘C'est parce que la littérature peut tout le temps jouer économiquement, elliptiquement, ironiquement, de ces marques et non-marques, et donc de l'exemplarité de tout ce qu'elle dit ou fait, que sa lecture est [...] une interprétation sans fin’ (p. 90). And again, in that it is but an example: ‘la littérature est seulement exemplaire en cela de ce qui arrive partout, chaque fois qu'il y a de la trace’ (p. 90).

23 In an interview, Derrida describes literature as ‘une institution qui consiste à transgresser et à transformer, donc à produire sa loi constitutionnelle’, or more precisely, literature allows the production of something by which ‘la possibilité même d'une constitution fondamentale est, au moins par "fiction", contestée, menacée, déconstruite, présentée dans sa précarité même’ (Derrida & Attridge, 2009, 290). Precisely because literature is of a piece with 'la production juridico-politique des fondements institutionnels [...]’, à un certain point elle peut aussi les excéder, les interroger, les "fictionnaliser": en vue de rien, bien sûr, ou de presque rien’ (p. 290).

24 One could imagine it being dismissed, for example, along the lines of Wittgenstein's refusal of a "second order" philosophy (not to say of metalanguage in general), which, however, seems a little too sure of being able shelter the 'first order' from the 'second', whereas Derrida, as we shall see, precisely complicates the two, which thus cannot really be counted either as one or two: ‘Man könnte meinen: wenn die Philosophie vom Gebrauch des Wortes "Philosophie" redet, so müsste es eine Philosophie zweiter Ordnung geben. Aber es ist eben nicht so; sondern der Fall entspricht dem der Rechtschreibelehre, die es auch mit dem Wort "Rechtschreiblehre" zu tun hat, aber dann nicht eine solche zweiter Ordnung ist’ (Wittgenstein, 2009, 54).

25 Similarly, commenting on Freud's Jenseits des Lustprinzips, Derrida notes (referring the reader to the notion developed in La loi du genre of a 'double invagination chiasmatique des bords', Derrida, 1986, 272; cf. also 1987e, 81; 2019b, 206): ‘Que se passe-t-il quand des actes ou des performances [...] font partie des objets qu'ils désignent? Quand ils peuvent se donner en exemple de cela même dont ils parlent ou écrivent? On n'y gagne certainement pas une transparence auto-réflexive, au contraire. Le compte n'est plus possible, ni le compte rendu, et les bords de l'ensemble ne sont alors ni fermés ni ouverts’ (Derrida, 2014, 401). One consequence of this is that any text, even if only minimally, may thereby prescribe its own reading. Any responsible reading would have to take into account the fact that the text read itself thus imposes a reading protocol on anyone who would approach it. In the case at hand, it would stage a 'scene of writing' which both the psychoanalytic proponents and opponents of Freud's theory of the death drive have been oblivious to and have failed to analyse, resulting in antinomic dissention within the psychoanalytic community (Derrida, 2014, 387; 2019b, 340–341).

26 This would be an alternative account of texts 'becoming literature' (if not a translation of the previous one, in so far as the remarkable is that which would perpetually guard its secret), cf. La littérature en secret, a slight revision of the fourth lecture of the seminar Le parjure et le pardon I (Derrida, 2019a), published as the second part of Donner la mort: 'L'absence de contexte pleinement déterminant prédispose cette phrase au secret et à la fois, conjointement, selon la conjonction qui nous importe ici, à son devenir-littéraire: peut devenir une chose littéraire tout texte confié à l'espace public, relativement lisible ou intelligible, mais dont le contenu, le sens, le référent, le signataire et le destinataire ne sont pas des réalités pleinement déterminables, des réalités à la fois non-fictives ou pures de toute fiction [...]'. The lector however sent venir la littérature par la voie secrète de ce secret, un secret à la fois gardé et exposé [...]. Il pressent la littérature’ (Derrida, 1999, 173–175). Literature would be 'le lieu de tous ces secrets sans secret, de toutes ces cryptes sans profondeur’ (p. 206). As such, it cannot but beg forgiveness: 'Point de littérature qui ne demande, dès son premier mot, pardon. Au commencement, il y eut le pardon. Pour rien. Pour ne rien vouloir dire’ (pp. 208–209).

27 The first line of Ponge's poem returns towards the end of the metonymically entitled collection of essays which Psyché—Invention de l'autre opens, in Nombre de oui, concerning a 'quasi-transcendental yes' as it were at the origin of any utterance. Derrida notes that the 'quasi' here 'accorderait l'événementalité originale de l'événement au récit fabuleux ou à la fable inscrite dans le oumi comme origine de toute parole (fari)' (Derrida, 1987c, 643), echoing how both the 'allegory of truth' and 'truth of allegory' staged by Fable sont des inventions fabuleuses, entendez par là inventions de langage (fari ou phanai, c'est parler, affirmer), comme inventions du même et de l'autre, de soi-même comme de l'autre' (Derrida, 1987d, 19). Regarding this 'yes' with which it is as if everything begins, 'Il est de part en part cette fable qui, quasiment avant l'acte et avant le logos, reste quasiment au commencement: "Par le mot par commencement donc ce texte..."' (Derrida, 1987c, 648).

28 Although it resembles Gödel's formally undecidable propositions (cf. Derrida, 1972b, 248–249), this other invention might in fact be something slightly different, namely 'l'aléa d'une rencontre qui non seulement ne soit plus calculable
Derrida's later seminars on Hospitality expand upon this aporetic logic. Without a home in which to receive the guest, without house rules or laws of hospitality, in short, without conditions, the unconditional reception of the other would be impossible, since there would be no home (oikos) in which to offer hospitality and no host to open its doors: 'Si je suis ouvert à tout arrivant sans condition, je vais détruire l'hospitalité elle-même [...] Donc, il faut des limites [...] C'est pourquoi entre l"hospitalité inconditionelle" et l"hospitalité conditionelle", il n'y a pas de simple opposition, ce ne sont pas deux termes, il y a une implication étrange de l'une dans l'autre, une co-implication' (Derrida, 2021b, 182). Hence, hospitality, being impossible, must each time be negotiated anew: reinvented—like invention itself.

One can read this as a possible response (another, the first, Derrida's own, is found in Passions) to Harvey's strange dissatisfaction with Derrida on exemplarity: 'Despite the metaphors of liberation, opening, cracking, deterioration, Derrida's analysis reinstates and reaffirms precisely the problems of the metaphysical determination of exemplarity as such. Examples for him do nothing more than exhibit other laws. He opens no new territory here, but rather multiplies the traditional univocal territory that metaphysics claims for itself. That we have many laws, or at least two here revealed in and through examples, does little to open the space to any other vision of exemplarity other than either the lawless or lawful. Both options simply determine exemplarity via the law and thus, ultimately, with indifference' (Harvey, 1992, 205). Evidently, if anything, it will always, on the reading I have been suggesting, be possible to dismiss Derrida's 'analysis' for its lack of 'evidence': 'It is ironically Derrida's own analysis that, far from affirming this "chance" event which would destabilize by its illegality, instead reaffirms the (albeit hidden) lawfulness of the seemingly lawless examples. That this hidden other law de-stabilizes the official, thematized "ergonized" law is Derrida's further contention, yet there is little evidence for this' (pp. 205–206).

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