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Translating, Repeating, Naming: Foucault, Derrida and The Genealogy of Morals

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Two cautions or warnings (at least) must be heeded in the attempt to do justice to Nietzsche’s project of a genealogy of morals in the text that bears that name. While the *Genealogy* is often regarded as the most straightforward and continuous of Nietzsche’s books, he tells us in *Ecce Homo* that its three essays are “perhaps uncannier than anything else written so far in regard to expression, intention, and the art of surprise.” If we should think ourselves successful in penetrating to these uncanny secrets and saying what Nietzsche’s text means, once and for all, we would then have to read again its lapidary although parenthetical injunction that “only that which has no history can be defined.” For since the work of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer, Jürgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Gilles Deleuze, genealogy has become a polemical word. When Nietzsche published the *Genealogy* in 1887, the main uses of the term arguably had to do with the ascertaining of actual family lineages to determine rights to titles, honors, and inheritances, as in the venerable *Almanach of Gotha*, and a careless librarian today might classify the book among those many middle-class popularizations which might all go under the title “Tracing Your Family Tree for Fun and Profit.” But Foucault characterizes his *History of Sexuality* as a genealogy of the
modern self, and Derrida describes a large part of his intellectual project as "repeating the genealogy of morals"; Nietzsche's practice and example are invoked in both cases.

How, then, might we proceed to assess the significance of Nietzsche's "genealogy" in relation both to its mundane cousins and to those who have been drawing on his inheritance? I propose only a partial, critical, and bifocal effort in that direction, consisting in a reading of a few paradigmatic readings of Nietzschean genealogy. Let me begin with the interpretation of Jürgen Habermas, who assimilates Nietzsche's project to the aristocratic attempt to demonstrate the superiority of the most ancient and archaic. According to Habermas, Nietzsche's rejection of all rational and critical criteria for assessing values leaves him no other option:

Once the critical sense of saying "No" is suspended and the procedure of negation is rendered impotent, Nietzsche goes back to the very dimension of the myth of origins that permits a distinction which affects all other dimensions: What is older is earlier in the generational chain and nearer to the origin. The more primordial is considered the more worthy of honor, the preferable, the more unspoiled, the purer: It is deemed better. Derivation and descent serve as the criteria of rank, in both the social and the logical senses.

In this manner, Nietzsche bases his critique of morality on genealogy. He traces the moral appraisal of value, which assigns a person or a mode of action a place within a rank ordering based on criteria of validity, back to the descent and hence to the social rank of the one making the moral judgment.2

This may be the genealogical scheme of values of the Almanach of Gotha, but it is not Nietzsche's. Despite his frequent bursts of admiration for the "blond beasts" (lions) of early cultures, Nietzsche's narrative never returns us to a point at which one single, pure form of morality obtains. Contrary both to the efforts of theological ethics and to the hypotheses of the English utilitarian historians of morality, The Genealogy of Morals insists that there is no single origin but only opposition and diversity no matter how far back we go. There are, always already, at least two languages of morality, the aristocratic language of "good and bad" and the slavish language of "good and evil." Where a Platonist would focus on the fact that "good" appears in both discourses and would search for its common meaning, Nietzsche notes that it is only the word shared by the two languages. One says "good"
and happily designates its satisfaction with itself; the other reactively designates those who speak in such a way as “evil” and who define themselves as the opposites of the evil ones. Even within the aristocratic group, Nietzsche observes, there are again at least two varieties of the moral code “good and bad” which can be distinguished as the knightly and the priestly. Not myth, as Habermas would have it, but something much more like the structural linguistics or anthropology which the twentieth century has seen brought to bear on the inquiry into myth is at work here.

While Habermas seems to suppose that the rejection of the progressive and teleological enlightenment conception of history must entail a nostalgic valorization of the archaic, Michel Foucault’s reading of Nietzsche and his own development of the genealogical project are vigorously committed to avoiding the temptations of both nostalgia and progress. Genealogy is the articulation of differences, of affiliations that never reduce to a system or totality and of the transformations of power/knowledge in their unplanned and unpredictable concatenations. Foucault’s later writings, especially *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality*, frequently acknowledge their indebtedness to Nietzsche with respect to all of these themes. Foucault would perhaps see his own distinctive contribution as the extension of the genealogical approach to the constitution of the human sciences and their associated disciplines and practices. In tracing out the “capillary” forms of power in these fields, Foucault exhibits that taste for the documentary, gray page of the legal text which, as Nietzsche indicates in his “preface” to the *Genealogy*, is the laborious side of the outrageous attempt to raise the question of the value of morality. These works might be called translations of the *Genealogy* into the worlds of the prison and surveillance, psychiatry and biopower. Foucault’s commentators (for example, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow) have assured us that these translations of the Nietzschean genealogy are clarified and to some extent grounded in his essay of 1971, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” which is both textual commentary on Nietzsche’s book, the *Genealogy*, and a thematicization of the principles that govern Foucault’s later studies. I will direct some attention to this essay in order to suggest what is partial, specific, and limited in Foucault’s appropriation of Nietzschean genealogy. Let me immediately register the qualification that I take the Foucauldian translations to be significant and deserving of the attention and even the imitations that they have generated.

You may recall that Foucault distinguishes two words, *Ursprung* and *Herkunft*, which play important roles in Nietzsche’s text. To be
concerned with Ursprung, or origin, is to be a philosophical historian who would trace morality—or any other subject matter—back to an original principle that can be clarified and recuperated. The genealogist will, however, be concerned with the complex web of ancestry and affiliations that are called Herkunft, those alliances that form part of actual family trees, with all their gaps, incestuous transgressions, and odd combinations. (Incidentally, Wittgenstein’s conception of “family resemblances” may stand in a certain Viennese line of Nietzsche’s descent⁴). Here, Foucault tells us, the genealogist comes into his own: “Where the soul pretends unification or the self fabricates a coherent identity, the genealogist sets out to study the beginning—numberless beginnings whose faint traces and hints of color are readily seen by an historical eye.”⁵

I want to concentrate on that decisive moment in Foucault’s construction of the genealogical Nietzsche that appears in his reading of the distinction between Ursprung and Herkunft as determining the difference between the philosophical historian and the genealogist. Two possible points of view, two research programs, two types of inquirers are designated by the choice between these two words and concepts. If Nietzsche were to be misconstrued as one with a nostalgia for origins and an obsession with first principles, then his praise, in the Genealogy, of “the blond beast” and the “artistic violence” of “noble races” would support something like the mysticism of racial purity for which the Nazis attempted to claim his authority. But Foucault tells us that the very beginning of Nietzsche’s text, its “Preface,” rules out such a reading: “One of the most significant texts with respect to the use of all these terms and to the variations in the use of Ursprung is the preface to the Genealogy. At the beginning of the text, its objective is defined as an examination of the origin of moral preconceptions and the term used is Herkunft. Then, Nietzsche proceeds by retracing his personal involvement with this question.”⁶ The point of that narrative, Foucault says, is to establish that even Nietzsche’s analyses of morality ten years earlier operated within the orbit of Herkunfts-hypothesen rather than the quest for origins.

Now isn’t it just a bit odd that Foucault wants to determine the nature of this Nietzschean text by attending to its beginning, as if one could expect the beginning to be transparent? What that beginning announces, so it seems, are the fundamental concepts of the genealogist and, even, the birth of the genealogist, his vocation toward a certain kind of scientific work. What will not be in question in Foucault’s reading of the Genealogy, henceforth, is the identity and voice of the genealogist. But this search for a clear line, for a master speaker
in Nietzsche’s text, must give us some pause, first, because it apparently exempts this text from the very same genealogical, or differentiating, imperative that it finds in the text; and, second, because it does not completely read or translate everything that is to be found in the preface. In fact, Foucault starts not at the beginning of Nietzsche’s beginning but with the second numbered paragraph of the “Preface.” At the very beginning of the preface, that is, in its first lines, Nietzsche writes: “We are unknown to ourselves, we men of knowledge—and with good reason. We have never sought ourselves—how could it happen that we should ever find ourselves?”

Might this not serve as a warning that the voice of the text, Nietzsche’s voice, is not to be identified simply as that of the genealogist who understands his business? Perhaps it is a warning that no single voice animates the Genealogy and that this text must itself be read dialogically, as what Foucault calls in another context a “concerted carnival.” For shortly after the apparent confession of ignorance comes the bold sweep of the narrative to which Foucault directs our attention, the narrative in which Nietzsche explains the steps leading to his vocation. Yet these claims of dedication and discovery acquire an Oedipal tone in this context, suggesting a certain pride and self-assurance. This is a tragic voice. And it is not the only voice of the text, which alternates among a series of historical and fictional voices—those of the Oedipal scientist, the tragic dramatist, the buffoon of world history, the witnesses (both real and imaginary) whom Nietzsche summons to testify about the manufacture of ideals—and doubtless there are others.

We might have begun reading the Genealogy at its subtitle, “Eine Streitschrift” (a polemical text), which seems to tell us to what genre the book belongs. We might read this agon or polemos as directed not only toward others, like the philosophical historian, who are on the outside of the text; we should also read the battle, the dialogue the prosopopoia and exchange that goes on within the text itself. If we were to pursue this internal differentiation of voices within Nietzsche’s text further, we might begin by recognizing the stylistic affinities (in Nietzsche’s strong sense of style) between this text and some of Dostoyevsky’s, especially the latter’s Notes from Underground, which Nietzsche read and remarked upon in the months preceding the writing of the Genealogy. These affinities go beyond thematic concerns with such oppositions as the man of ressentiment and the normal man or the claim that consciousness is an illness (aproducive, pregnant illness will be Nietzsche’s restatement of the latter). We would also have to note what Mikhail Bakhtin has called the dialogical
character of the Dostoyevskean text and its polyphonic structure. Despite its external form of monologue, the *Notes* enacts an endless controversy and exchange between the narrator and his others, the “normal” men, with whom he sees himself in dialogue. Dostoyevsky’s normal man speaks for the progress of science and the utopia of the “crystal palace”; in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* the voice who introduces the narrative claims himself to be a scientist of sorts, but his scientific authority is called into question by the articulation of the polemic.

At one point Foucault seems to recognize a certain plurality in Nietzsche’s text, for he notes that Nietzsche’s challenge to origins is confined “to those occasions when he is truly a genealogist” (142), but he does not explain what the other occasions are. From this genealogist *qua* genealogist, Foucault draws a number of principles of reading. Let me cite just two of these principles, with the suggestion that each could be usefully employed in reading the *Genealogy* itself as a pluralized text:

1. To follow the complex course of descent is to maintain passing events in their proper dispersion. (Then why not also the dispersion of voices in the text?)

2. The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of substantiality), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy, as an analysis of descent is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.

Does not the metaphoric of inscription, volume, and imprinting call for an application of this principle to the body of the text and, in particular to the inscribed textual body, the *Genealogy*, which would be the source of this principle? I mean to suggest not that Foucault has completely failed to see this side of the *Genealogy* but that he has tended to localize it, to confine it to the subject matter, assuming that such a subject matter can be isolated, rather than to see it as the actual multiplication of voices in the text. If he had done so, the genealogical studies that seem to be founded on this reading of Nietzsche might have been less in the mold of the new science, art, or discipline of genealogy. For part of the upshot of the pluralization of voices in the *Genealogy* is the calling into question of a number of postures of inquiry, including that of the dedicated genealogist who is, insofar as
he would practice a normal science of genealogy, not very different from the philosophical historian whom Foucault criticizes and even ridicules.

Foucault’s limitation of the pluralizing and differentiating movement in his genealogical projects has consequences that go beyond his reading of the Nietzschean text itself. Let me cite just one example from the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*. This part of Foucault’s history is concerned with the formation of a sexual ethos in fourth-century Greece that would be responsive to the apparent contradiction between contemporary sexual practices and the prevailing norms of responsible citizenship. How can the love of boys not lead to the habituation of a generation of prospective citizens to patterns of submission and passivity that would be incompatible with their designated social roles? In the light of this question, Foucault undertakes a genealogy of the conception of the responsible self or subject that, as he sees it, is formed through the discourses and practices that propose solutions to this dilemma. These formations of power and knowledge he distinguished as: (1) dietetics (prudential advice concerning the use and abuse of pleasure); (2) economics (the principles of the household); (3) erotics (the wise conduct of love affairs); (4) and “true love” (the philosophical transvaluation of the love affair into the mutual pursuit of truth).

The crucial evidence for Foucault’s analysis of this last discursive form comes from Plato, especially from the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. What is at first surprising about Foucault’s reading of these Platonic texts is the degree to which he flattens them out into a form that seems drastically to understate their internal plurality and complexity. In reading these dialogues Foucault simply opposes the false speeches on love to the true speeches (Diotima’s in the *Symposium*, Socrates’ second in the *Phaedrus*). In describing what is going on in the dialogues, Foucault constantly, and more than accidentally, uses various forms of the locutions “Plato says” or “Plato thinks.”12 Plato discovers that the truth of love is the love of the truth, even though Plato never speaks in his own voice in the dialogues. Foucault ignores the fact that Diotima’s speech is distanced from Plato by several degrees: it is reported by Socrates, and the dialogue as a whole is relayed to us through a series of less than completely reliable witnesses. Similarly, in the *Phaedrus*, Socrates’ speech is part of a very complex thematics of love and discourse which raises questions about the self-sufficiency of the literary form in which it is embedded. This assimilation of the Platonic dialogues to the relatively linear development of a new ethics of love is at least as one-dimensional as the reading that would see them as nothing
but preliminary versions of modern discussions of the universal and the particular.

Nietzsche, despite some of his raging against Plato, seems to have had a more genuinely genealogical view of the matter when he distinguished between the Socratic and plebeian theme and its Platonic, aristocratic reworking and sublimation, or when he remarked, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, that the Platonic dialogue was the vessel by which art survived the shipwreck of ancient culture.¹³ As genealogical readers of Plato, Nietzsche’s heirs are Roland Barthes, who reads the same dialogues as “fragments of a lover’s discourse,” or Jacques Derrida, who sees them as the polysemous ingredients of a Platonic pharmocopeia.¹⁴ While some critics (Mark Poster, for example)¹⁵ have suggested that Foucault’s last series exhibits a decline in his powers, I would claim that his reading of Plato is continuous with his way of reading Nietzsche in the founding essay on genealogy. For example, in mapping Greek discourses on love and sex into the four categories—in ascending order—of dietetics, economics, erotics, and true love, Foucault seems to be under the sway of the “Platonic ladder” of the *Symposium* or perhaps of the divided line of the *Republic* itself. When the uncanny dimension of the text of the *Genealogy* is neglected, genealogy itself tends to degenerate into a mere method which circumscribes its subject matter all too neatly. After remarking on the uncanniness of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche added, “Dionysus is, as is known, also the god of darkness.” Could it be that Dionysus lies in wait for the normal genealogist at the heart of the labyrinth into which he has strayed?

Some years before this essay on Nietzsche that marks Foucault’s later program, he and Jacques Derrida had an exchange concerning analogous issues in the reading and translation of Descartes. The questions developed in Foucault’s *Histoire de la folie*, Derrida’s “Cogito and the History of Madness,” and Foucault’s reply, “My Body, This Paper, This Fire” hinge on knowing how many voices are speaking in Descartes’s *First Meditation*.¹⁶ The crux of the dispute is the reading of the passage in which Descrates, or one of the voices of the *Meditations*, briefly entertains the possibility of doubting that he is sitting by the fire, only to elicit the reply that those with such doubts—who imagine that their heads are pumpkins or that they are made of glass—are mad and that he would be equally mad if he took them as a precedent for understanding his own case. For Foucault’s representation of Descartes as juridically excluding the possibility of madness from the rational course of his meditations, it is important that there be
one commanding voice that can be read as emblematic of the “great internment” of the mad in the seventeenth century. For Derrida, in contrast, it is crucial that we see a series of objections and replies within the text itself, so that the *Meditations*, far from excluding any possibility of madness, push this possibility to a hyperbolical extreme through the hypothesis that we are always dreaming or deceived by an evil demon. So the philosopher’s voice would be always already juxtaposed to the voices of unreason, and his project would be one that proceeds whether or not he is mad. (Angloanalytic philosophers may want to take note of the fact that the translation of the *Meditations* by G. E. M. Anscombe and Peter Geach coincides in a general way with Derrida’s reading of the text. Anscombe and Geach pluralize the text’s voices by placing the objections concerning madness and dreaming in quotation marks.)*

There are some resonances of this celebrated dispute concerning the reading of Descartes in the different readings or repetitions that Foucault and Derrida offer of the *Genealogy of Morals*. Unlike Foucault, Derrida does not explicitly devote an essay to the text. Instead he describes at least part of what he is doing in *Of Grammatology* as “repeating the genealogy of morals.” This self-description occurs at the end of the section “The Writing Lesson,” which is devoted to interrogating Claude Lévi-Strauss’s attempt to construct a series of distinctions between naturally good cultures without writing an exploitative Western societies that make use of writing. Moreover, this reference is rather oblique, for Derrida inscribes on his page not the title *The Genealogy of Morals*, in italics, but simply the phrase “genealogy of morals.” On the other hand, there are reasons for taking seriously even such an indirect reference, for the reading of Lévi-Strauss has to do with the proper name and its possibilities of erasure or effacement. Some strategy of writing appears to be at work here in this partial effacement of a title or proper name of a text. Why should Derrida repeat the genealogy (or the *Genealogy*) in his analysis of Lévi-Strauss? In many ways Lévi-Strauss is a contemporary version of the normal scientist who appears in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* as infected by ressentiment, in whom the reaction against the other has turned into a dislike of himself or of a part of himself. As a spokesman for science, Lévi-Strauss is a universalist, a democrat suspicious of the ethnocentrism of the West.

“The critique of ethnocentrism,” Derrida writes, “has most often the sole function of constituting the other as a model of original and natural goodness, of accusing and humiliating oneself, of exhibiting its being-unacceptable in an anti-ethnocentric mirror.” Lévi-Strauss is
one of those scientists, those knowers, who are unknown to themselves. He repeats the gesture of the English moralists (cited by Nietzsche at the beginning of the *Genealogy*) insofar as he believes in an original, natural morality that has been forgotten or effaced but which is capable of retrieval or at least reconstruction through memory. Here the place of historical memory is taken by the experiment of the anthropologist who, by introducing writing to a people previously innocent of it, is able to observe what he takes to be its characteristic sudden infusion of violence and hierarchy into a pacific, face-to-face society. Lévi-Strauss tells this story, or offers this confession, in the chapter of *Tristes Tropiques* called "The Writing Lesson." It is he, the guilty anthropologist, who explains how the leader of the Nambikwara pretended to have learned the European's art of writing in order to manipulate the others in his tribe with the promise of rewards and the mysterious aura of an esoteric code. Derrida's genealogical reading of this Rousseauian historical vignette and confession focuses on the question of language; like the English historians of morality, Lévi-Strauss has taken it to be much simpler and more homogeneous than it actually is.

Let us recall the linguistic analysis, a kind of structural linguistics, of the first essay of Nietzsche's *Genealogy* in order to see the analogous workings of Derrida's genealogy. Those English moralists, Nietzsche says, want to know what good is; like Plato, they suppose that it must have a single meaning. And while Plato sought that meaning through a kind of transcendental memory, the English seek it through a historical reconstruction of original experiences of utility. Yet there is no single language or discourse of the good that could support either project. There are at least two languages of morals, one that differentiates good from bad, another that differentiates good from evil. In the good/bad discourse, the speaker first, and affirmatively, designates himself as good. Only as an afterthought, when his attention is called to it, does he call the others (those who are not his kind) the bad. In the good/evil discourse the starting point is the characterization of the other (the master, the strong, or the noble) as evil, because he is envied, because he is violent or negligent in his dealings with us, the speakers of that language. "Good" is in each case part of a system of differences; it is not at all clear that and how we could translate it from one moral language to the other while preserving its sense. It already partakes of what Derrida calls the "proper name effect" insofar as it both demands and resists translation. Naming oneself and naming the other involve initial acts of violence and separation which are not well served by either Platonic or utilitarian
translations, for these assume incorrectly that there is only one voice, or one discourse, to translate.

Lévi-Strauss would like to think of the Nambikwara, the people without writing, as good in a Rousseauian sense of primal innocence. As such they must have a single language spontaneously and constantly animated by the intimacy of their daily life; their innocence can be read off from the fact that they have no writing, for writing would introduce a hierarchy of scribes and leaders, a differentiation that would disrupt an idyllic condition. One way in which Derrida repeats the genealogy of morals is to show that in Lévi-Strauss’s own narrative we find the evidence of the Nambikwara’s own writing, double coding, violence, and hierarchy which the narrator would like to depict as the property of the West. From Lévi-Strauss’s text itself we learn that the Nambikwara language is spoken differently by men and women, who tend to view each other as distinct species. We also learn that the Nambikwara have secret proper names that must be disguised in most circumstances by substitutes. In this culture revealing the proper name to inappropriate others or at inappropriate times can set off a long chain of reprisals and retaliations. Similarly, Nietzsche had noticed that the spokesmen for an ethics of love often provide evidence of the desire for revenge (he cited Tertullian and Thomas Aquinas on the pleasures of the blessed in the torments that would be visited upon sinners). He also observed the periodic recurrence of epidemics of revenge and scapegoating among our supposedly innocent ancestors. But Lévi-Strauss would have us believe that violence arises among the Nambikwara only through the agency of the scientist who teaches writing or who transgresses the law of the tribe by provoking young girls to confess the secret names of their comrades and parents.

Science, intent on demonstrating these distinctions, will not hesitate to invoke the categorial apparatus of its own culture in order to protect the purity of the other culture that it studies. In arguing that the Nambikwara have no writing, Lévi-Strauss must account for their practice of “drawing lines,” a practice for which they indeed have a word in their language. Lévi-Strauss’s translation is of interest: “They called the act of writing iekariakedjutu, namely ‘drawing lines,’ which had an aesthetic interest for them.”²⁰ But what is aesthetic value or interest? In Nietzsche’s text we find a sketch of the genealogy of “aesthetics” that demonstrates its complicity with the culture of the eighteenth century, exemplified by the Kantian tripartition of knowing, willing, and an aesthetic experience devoid of knowledge and will.²¹ “Aesthetics” is a very recent invention, a concept which is built
on the exclusion of laughter, the festive, and the grotesque (we can now supplement Nietzsche's genealogy with that provided by Bakhtin at the beginning of his *Rabelais and His World*). Derrida asks, concerning Lévi-Strauss's translation and aestheticization of "drawing lines": "Is not ethnocentrism always betrayed by the haste with which it is satisfied by certain translations or certain domestic equivalents?" And—this is Derrida's next question—does not the existence of a double system of names, and a system of marking, indicate that language is, even here, always already multiple and so characterized by the possibility of transgression, aggression, and violence that the guilty anthropologist would like to keep at a distance from these people? In this first repetition what is announced is the discovery of plurality and violence where an idealistic nostalgia had found only peace and unity.

Lévi-Strauss reveals elsewhere in his writing on the Nambikwara that they became adept at producing explanatory diagrams of such cultural matters as their kinship relations that were extremely useful to the party of anthropologists. Should we think of them, like Meno's slave boy, as being brought to discover a primal writing in the soul? Or as having been infected by the violence of the West? Or might we find Derrida to be the more insightful anthropologist here when he observes that "the birth of writing (in the colloquial sense) was nearly everywhere and most often linked to genealogical anxiety"? This last suggestion has the virtue, like Nietzsche's critique of the Kantian-Schopenhauerian aesthetics of pure contemplation, of indicating the ties between art and life. We might also observe that from the time of the Homeric catalogues of heroes to the nineteenth-century Balzacian or Dickensian novel of marriage, property, inheritance and the discovery of unexpected blood relationships, writing—in the colloquial sense—has maintained its link to genealogical anxiety. It has often been observed that there is a certain homology or structural similarity between Hegel's philosophy of the development of absolute spirit and the Bildungsroman that traces the inevitable maturation and self-discovery of a young man thrown into an initially hostile world. But along with the Bildungsroman that typically ends with the hero's marriage and worldly success, such as *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, we also have novels of incest, adultery, disrupted alliances, and unexpected affiliations, such as *Elective Affinities* or the fictions of Novalis, Kleist, Hugo, and Flaubert.

On another level, Derrida repeats the *Genealogy* in its critique or self-critique of science. The uncanniness of the *Genealogy* lies not only in its disruption of nostalgia and hope but in its demonstration of the impossibility of a certain kind of science. Science, when pushed to its
limit, reflects upon itself and recognizes its indebtedness to the morality of ressentiment; the scientist’s dedication to the truth and his willingness to sacrifice himself for the truth are structurally identical with the aseptic negation of one’s self and one’s present life for the sake of God. The scientist’s final truth is one that he will never see, and its pursuit here and now requires the virtues of faith, hope, and charity: faith in the possibility that the truth will be attained, despite our present state of ignorance and error; hope that progress towards the truth will continue; charity as the willingness to abandon whatever is one’s own, one’s own favored hypothesis for example, for the sake of truth as an ultimate goal. “We knowers” who pursue such a truth are unknown to ourselves insofar as we fail to see these genealogical affiliations of our activity with that sacrifice of self. But when science becomes historical and genealogical it will discover these affiliations in a moment of tragic reversal and recognition. Science will become uncanny and undecidable, or, in Nietzsche’s formulation: “The will to truth requires a critique—let us thus define our own task—the value of truth must for once be experimentally called into question.”

Of Grammatology repeats or translates The Genealogy of Morals, then, not by proposing a new science—grammatology in the place of genealogy—but by reconsidering the project of several putative sciences which are shown to be impossible sciences. One of these is anthropology. Insofar as anthropology operates with a distinction between nature and culture, or between Rousseauian innocence and civilized evil, it founders on the impossibility of these distinctions themselves; in the very act of attempting to illustrate and maintain such distinctions, it provides the impetus to question and deconstruct them. But in a larger sense, Of Grammatology is concerned with the impossible science of grammatology, so that we might think of the entire text, and not only the chapter on Lévi-Strauss, as repeating Nietzsche’s Genealogy. Since writing, thought seriously and essentially, is that which escapes presence, totalization, and the ideal of science that is indebted to these concepts, there can be no science of grammatology. But the experience or adventure of attempting to construct a grammatology will disclose the questionability of any science of language that would segregate or compartmentalize writing as well as the problematic project of scientificity itself.

Derrida asks a question of Lévi-Strauss that parallels Nietzsche’s attempt to show that a consistent science must call itself into question: “If it is true, as I in fact believe, that writing cannot be thought of outside the horizon of intersubjective violence, is there anything, even science, that radically escapes it?” (127). To suppose otherwise is to
place one’s trust in “the presumed difference between language and power.” At the end of what is arguably Lévi-Strauss’s most philosophical work, *La pensée sauvage*, there is a very clear demonstration of the naïveté involved in such trust that is reminiscent of the positivist metanarratives of science that Nietzsche attacks through his *Genealogy*. In the rhetorically magnificent but ultimately unpersuasive coda to Lévi-Strauss’s book, the claim is made that we are now witnessing the convergence of the most advanced contemporary science and the timeless patterns of savage or untamed mythical thinking. According to Lévi-Strauss, information theory can offer a universal account of both the codes and messages of “primitive” peoples at one end of the spectrum, based as they are on the holistic, macroscopic, and sensible qualities of the perceived environment, with the general, instrumentalized study of the production and reception of biological and physical “messages” at the other end that reveal themselves only with the help of the abstracting methods of the hypothetico-deductive sciences. With such a convergence, we hear: “The entire process of human knowledge assumes the character of a closed system. And we therefore remain faithful to the inspiration of the savage mind when we recognize that, by an encounter it alone could have foreseen, the scientific spirit in its most modern form will have contributed to legitimate the principles of savage thought and to re-establish it in its rightful place.”

This is utopian positivism. It is positivism because it takes the prevailing models in the sciences to be ultimately valid models. It is utopian because it supposes that we are on the verge of a total integration of various fields of knowledge, a “totalization” at least as extravagant as that practical, historical totalization espoused by the later Sartre, which Lévi-Strauss criticizes in the very same chapter. While rejecting Sartre’s appeal to social and political history as modern myth, Lévi-Strauss seems to revert to the nineteenth-century scientific version of this myth, unconsciously reviving the teleologies of Comte and Spencer. Nietzsche’s genealogy of such science aims at showing that it must founder as soon as its concepts and methods of inquiry are turned back upon itself; at that point it discovers its own genealogy in a morality that its inquiries have rendered suspicious. Derrida, a few years before Foucault’s programmatic essay on Nietzschean genealogy, makes a similar point in suggesting that the human sciences cannot innocently presume the distinction between power and knowledge that fuels the structuralist eschatology.

In this spirit we ought to read one of the multiple voices within the text of Nietzsche’s *Genealogy*, the one at the end of its first essay that calls for a series of prize essays by philologists, historians, and
philosophers on the question: "What light does linguistics and especially the study of etymology, throw on the history of the evolution of the moral concepts?"26 One kind of answer is supplied by Nietzsche's first essay itself, with its analysis of the gut/schlecht moral system and the gut/böse moral system in terms of the social and ethnic differences of the ancient world; Foucault's genealogical study of the constitution of the discourses of psychiatry, punishment, and sexuality can be read as extensions of this linguistic genealogy. But the third essay of Nietzsche's Genealogy may be taken as pushing the question one step further by asking what consequences such investigations have for the sciences that pursue them. Can they remain above the battle or must they, as Nietzsche says, "submit to the law that they themselves have proposed" and, like all great things, "bring about their own destruction through an act of self-overcoming"?27 Similarly, Heideggerean etymology is concerned not with unearthing an obscured presence through a new method of retrieval but with calling into question that very idea of an original presence and those historical sciences that invoke it. Derrida's repetition of the Genealogy of Morals is a repetition of the third essay and of its uncanny ramifications for the inquiry itself. Here we might pause and read Nietzsche's question very slowly: "What light does linguistics and especially the study of etymology, throw on the history of the evolution of the moral concepts?" Why this apparent repetition of "history" and "evolution"? Must we not remember, especially if we are giving the close attention to language which Nietzsche demands and which is the theme of that question, that "history" is a double-barreled word, alternately designating either the subject matter studied or the activity of studying it?

If we read the text Of Grammatology carefully, we are constantly reminded that the de, the preposition, in its title, indicates a question rather than introducing a subject matter. It is not a "toward" in the Kantian sense of a Prolegomena to Any Future Grammatology That Will Come Forward as a Science. One learns in introductory language classes that prepositions are the most difficult words to translate in any language, and so far I have been operating here with conventional translations of the de in De la Grammatologie and Zur in Zur Genealogie der Moral. There has been some controversy among Nietzsche's translators about how this Zur might be rendered in English. Is it "On" in the sense of "concerning" or "about" or is it "toward"? "Toward" has been employed by those who favor a tentative reading of Nietzsche's text as a contribution toward something still in the making. But can one go toward that which can never be reached? Or should the title itself be read parodically? "On" is perhaps better in preserving an
ambiguity with regard to the question of whether a genealogy of morals is possible, that is, whether we ought to take seriously the scientific rhetoric with which Nietzsche, especially in his first essay, attempts to situate his work in relation to historical and philological science. Similarly, there is, in Derrida’s repetition of the genealogy while effacing its title, both a linguistic prudence and respect that hesitates to violate this undecidability and a *mimesis* of that act of the concealment of the proper name which has been identified as the characteristic act of writing. So we might say that there is a motivated absence of the very *name* Nietzsche in this part of the *Grammatology* that repeats the genealogy. Derrida raises the question of how Lévi-Strauss, while acknowledging Marx and Freud as his masters, can write the idyllic scenario in which the anthropologist records his nocturnal observation of the Nambikwara as a nonviolent people of unsurpassed tenderness and intimacy. He can do so, Derrida tells us, only because Rousseau has been substituted for Nietzsche in Lévi-Strauss’s trinity of names (Marx, Rousseau, and Freud rather than Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud).

Here we touch on the question of the genealogy of the text, a philological question inseparable from the genealogy of morals. Genealogy has to do with seeking out the unsuspected ramifications of proper names, whether present or absent. At the very beginning of Derrida’s reading of Lévi-Strauss, he suggests that “the metaphor that would describe the genealogy of a text correctly is still *forbidden.*” One might be tempted to say, for example, that “a text is nothing but a system of roots,” but to do so would be to contradict both the concept of system and the pattern of the roots. To read Lévi-Strauss genealogically is to see the resonances of Rousseau. There is a sense in which what we learn from genealogy is the inevitability of one’s heritage, or Herkunft, and the impossibility of attempting to make an absolute beginning, or Ursprung. Not far removed from such efforts is the common assumption, which Lévi-Strauss makes in regard to Rousseau, that one can determine and circumscribe precisely what use one will make of one’s intellectual roots, ignoring the complexities of their subterranean system. This realization accounts for Nietzsche’s warning that “we are unknown to ourselves” and to his project of situating the many voices of his text in relation to their roots in (for example) science, tragedy, history, and the novel. Derrida’s effort to “repeat” the genealogy of morals arises within this context. It is not a question of whether the writer is consciously or fully aware of the Nietzschean
roots, still less of his being in command of the entire array of a manifold Herkunft. It is more a matter of the rigor and modesty of a confessed repetition and mimesis, one that makes no claims of originality—that is, it makes no claim to restore the presence of an origin—and so would help us to think beyond the constant temptations of hope and nostalgia.