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The post card: from Socrates to Freud and beyond, by Jacques Derrida, Trans. Alan Bass, Chicago, IL, University of Chicago Press, 1987, 557 pp., £28.00 (paperback) ISBN 978-0226143224

Reviewed by Shani Bans

In *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud*, Derrida playfully articulates the complexity and impossibility of locating the self. The 'Envois' section of the book, in particular, is preoccupied with the idea of the postal self. Taking up the first half of *The Post Card*, this section contains a long series of correspondence between Derrida (or the persona of the 'Envois') and his beloved other. This continual exchange in correspondence, Derrida argues, 'our *envois*, our back-and-forths […] from Socrates to Freud', between sender and recipient, can be seen as an exchange of the self: 'I address myself to you, somewhat as if I were sending myself' (p. 168). The self is constructed, Derrida goes on to explain, through reciprocation with the other – or rather, the postal other. Derrida's postal self is trapped in a paradoxical state of absence–presence, in a space where self-affirmation can only occur through self-denial, where self-acceptance must first bypass self-rejection and where 'myself' can only exist in relation to the 'other'. Central to my argument is Derrida's notion of 'the tragedy of destination' – what happens, Derrida asks, if the postal self is misdirected, lost or never arrives?

Before looking at *The Post Card*, it is important to situate Derrida's notion of the postal self – a self constructed through an 'other' – in broader context. In Plato's *Symposium*, Aristophanes explains the origins of the 'other half' as a result of Zeus's punishment, 'man's original body [was] thus cut in two, each half yearned for the other half' (Plato, 1951, p. 59). This idea of the self as a bisected half, made whole by the other, is continued by Marsilio Ficino in his 1474 *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*:

> Each has himself and has the other. Certainly this one has himself, but *in* that one. That one also possesses himself, but in this one […] I have myself through you; if I have myself through you, I have you before and more than I have myself, and I am closer to you than to myself, *since I approach myself in no way other than through you as an intermediary.* (Ficino, 1985, pp. 55–56, emphases added)

The self for Plato and Ficino is constructed through the other. The other becomes the indispensable intermediary upon whom the self is absolutely reliant. To gain self-knowledge, to be close to my self, I must first know you and be close to you. As Charles Taylor explains in *Sources of the Self*, 'one is a self only among other selves … one cannot be a self on one's own. I am a self only in relation to certain interlocutors […] A self exists only within what I call "webs of interlocutions"' (Taylor, 1989, p. 38). For Derrida, these 'webs of interlocutions' run through the post cards,

through correspondence between the self and the beloved other. Yet while Derrida, like Taylor (and Plato and Ficino before him), consents to the idea of gaining the self *through* the other, *The Post Card* illustrates the difficulty – if not the sheer impossibility – of such interlocutors, since the self, like the post card, is constantly misdirected or fails to arrive.

To fully grasp the failure, or rather misdirection, of correspondence we must first understand the function of letters. Quite simply, letters function as connectors between two distant points, as a bridge between sender and receiver. However, in order for correspondence to take place at all, as Derrida puts it, it requires 'the absence of the addressee. One writes in order to communicate something to those who are absent' (Derrida, 1988, p. 7).

This would be successful correspondence of the self: I write to you to send myself to you. You write back and I receive myself back through you. You are the intermediary between my self and my self. In successful correspondence, the postal self is constructed through the reciprocation of the other. Paradoxically, however, in the attempt to bridge the vacancy between sender and recipient and draw the other closer to the self, one increases the distance further – 'Do I write to you', Derrida asks, 'in order to bring you near or in order to distance you?' (1988, p. 78). That is to say, I am writing to make up for my absence, to draw you nearer, to bridge the vacancy between us. Yet in order to do so, you must be indefinitely absent, and with every post card I write to you, I increase the distance between us. Indeed, epistolary discourse is one that is full of distances and time lags between the event and recording, between message transmission and reception and the spatial separation between writer and addressee – what Janet Altman terms 'temporal polyvalence' (Altman, 1982, p. 129).

In a sense, epistolary discourse is caught up in the impossibility of the present. The present of the writer is never the present of his addressee. There is always a distance. The sender/writer's message is always caught in the past tense. The recipient never really receives the message the writer sent. The message has expired by the time it is received. The post card I send you is not the same post card as the one you receive (should you receive it). The postal self is caught up in indefinite absence and temporal polyvalence.

It is this misdirection, miscommunication and postponement, as Derrida labours to explain, that lies at the heart of all correspondence – what he calls 'the tragedy of destination': 'I would like to address myself, in a straight line, directly, without *courier*, only to you, but I do not arrive, and that is the worst of it. A tragedy, my love, of destination' (p. 23; original emphasis).

A post card that arrives at its intended destination results in a union between sender and recipient, writer and reader, self and other. Yet for Derrida, the post card never arrives at its destination – this is the tragedy of destination; the failure of correspondence to arrive. The very process of the postal system requires the post card to deviate from its course. The smallest displacement, distance or difference leads the post card astray, so that it is mishandled, lost, misdirected. Thus, the arrival of the post card is predicated upon the risk of non-arrival. Derrida's postal self is thus caught in a postal paradox. To send myself to you I must accept that I will never arrive, that I am constantly displaced and endlessly differed. Even if the postal self arrives, it is not the same self as the one sent. The self has been altered by the journey of correspondence; through distance, displacement and deferral the

self has been transformed, transfigured and transmuted. In short, the self, like the post card, cannot arrive.

In a desperate attempt to enfold the self within the post card, 'to enclose myself finally in a single place', Derrida thus determines, he must enclose the self 'in a single word, a single name' (p. 28). By enclosing my name, I enclose myself. Yet, once again, Derrida is confronted with a paradox:

> You will never be your name, you never have been, even when, and especially when you have answered to it. The name is made to do without the life of the bearer, and is therefore always somewhat the name of someone dead. One could not live, be there, except by protesting against one's name, by protesting one's non-identity with one's proper name. (p. 39)

By answering your name, by acknowledging that your name signifies you, you are in fact rejecting your self. Thus, only by 'protesting against one's name' – or as Shakespeare's Juliet puts it, by 'doff[ing] thy name, | […] which is no part of thee' (Shakespeare, 2005, pp. 90–91) – can you approach self-affirmation. The ontological problem of the Derridean postal self is, in essence, a problem of paradox. With every attempt to articulate the self, one distances the self further, annihilating the self with each utterance of the name: 'Understand me, when I write, right here, on these innumerable post cards, I annihilate not only what I am saying but also the unique addressee that I constitute, and therefore every possible addressee, and every destination' (p. 31).

Not only does the failure of correspondence deny me myself, but with every word I write, I annihilate the addressee, the 'other', and therefore myself. Thus, 'I can no longer address myself to myself' (p. 112) through you, the intermediary other, because you are indefinitely absent and inconsequentially displaced. In the attempt to articulate the self, one inevitably erases the self. The postal self is caught in endless contradiction. Hence, epistolary language is the language of absence, erasure and obliteration – a language Derrida aptly ties to the language of subjectivity. In its attempt to close the gap and erase the distance, correspondence inevitably frustrates its destination.

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