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Tracing Thought.

The Chiasm of Writing between Derrida and Nishida

1. Introduction

There is not, Jacques Derrida argues, an essence rigorously independent of that which transports it¹. To write is not, simply, to giving material support to thought, inserting a living spiritual content into a passive, dead receptacle. As the French philosopher points out, the distinction between signified and signifier, or, more broadly, between form and matter, spirit and body, is one of the oldest assumptions of Western philosophy. The second element of these conceptual polarities – the signifier, matter, body – is, in most cases, dominated by the first: the distinction becomes dualism. Even the Aristotelian concept of *σύνολον*, in which the two elements converge into unity, assigns a privilege to form: the degree of substantiality and knowability of the *σύνολον* itself is in fact each time decided by its formal component². It is here that we sense the power of the notion of *writing*: in fact, as shown below, writing is capable of disrupting precisely this fundamental structure of metaphysics, establishing the relationship between signified and signifier, form and matter, spirit and body as a *chiasm* – and not as a *σύνολον* – in which each element is produced *together* with the other, without hierarchies.

This is why the deconstruction of metaphysics is carried out by Derrida through a use of writing that does not reduce it to a mere vehicle of signification, but shows that meaning itself acts *as* a signifier. Indeed, as he also shows in his studies on Husserl³, the ideality of meanings is produced in the process of *iteration* of the signifier: the object of intuition, or

¹ J. Derrida, *La mythologie blanche* in *Marges – de la philosophie*, Minuit, Paris 1972 ; tr. by A. Bass, *White Mythology. Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy* in *Margins of Philosophy*, The University of Chicago Press, 1982, p. 229.

² Aristotle, *Metaph.* VII, 3, 1029a1-30; tr. it. a cura di G. Reale, *Metafisica*, Bompiani, Milano 2000.

³ Cfr. J. Derrida, *La voix et le phénomène. Introduction au problème du signe dans la phénoménologie de Husserl*, PUF, Paris 1967.

εἶδος, is nothing outside its own repetition, which writing accomplishes⁴. This irreducible implication of writing and thinking is, as will be shown, also the basis of Nishida's calligraphic practice.

Fostering a dialogue between the two philosophers means, from the point of view of Western metaphysics, incentivizing deconstruction by making it act, as François Jullien indicates, "from outside" (*du dehors*)⁵. If for Derrida, as for Nietzsche before him, it is impossible to escape from metaphysics by continuing to speak its language, nevertheless the impact caused by contact with a linguistic system – the Sino-Japanese one – that is not only based on a completely different grammar, but also developed through a totally different writing system, can contribute to placing oneself on the *margins* of Western philosophy.

If for Derrida writing represents one of the great "removals"⁶ of western thought, which would always privilege the idea of a pure meaning independent of the sign that conveys it, for the Japanese Nishida it is quite natural to find in the practice of calligraphy the spontaneous modulation of a thought, its arising moment. In this sense, by seeking to work at the margins of metaphysical discourse, Derrida unwittingly approaches that "outside" embodied in Japanese philosophical and aesthetic experience. Instead, the operation accomplished by Nishida, which is unprecedented within the Japanese philosophical tradition, is immediately intercultural. His philosophy is the result of a positive contamination between Zen and λόγος, between an exquisitely Eastern meditative experience and the conceptuality of the Western tradition⁷. Nishida's philosophical gesture

⁴ J. Derrida, *Introduction et traduction à L'origine de la géométrie*, PUF, Paris 1962.

⁵ Cfr. F. Jullien, *Entrer dans une pensée ou Des possibles de l'esprit*, Editions Gallimard, Paris, 2012.

⁶ Cfr. J. Derrida, *Freud et la scène de l'écriture* in *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris 1967.

⁷ Nishida's work was the matrix of a new line of research and reflection which was then deepened by numerous of his students and colleagues – starting with Tanabe Hajime and Nishitani Keiji – giving life to a philosophical experience condensed into what has been retrospectively called "Kyoto School". As James Heisig points out, "the first time the designation 'Kyoto school' seems to have appeared in print was in a 1932 newspaper article by Tosaka Jun entitled 'The Philosophy of the Kyoto School'. [...] Exactly who first coined the term Kyoto school or when it gained currency is hard to say. In all likelihood it emerged casually from the rather substantial circle of students and professors that had formed around Nishida during his final years at Kyoto and that had continued with Tanabe. By all accounts it was a mixed group, perhaps two dozen in all, who came together in clusters for informal or semiformal discussions on a wide variety of subjects. It was hardly a "school" in any ordinary sense of the term, but rather the kind of spontaneous academic vitality that so often emerges around great thinkers" (J.W. Heisig, *Philosophers of nothingness*, University of Hawai'i Press, 2001, pp. 3-5). In his dialogue with the western philosophical tradition, which has accompanied him in all the progressive developments of his thought, there are numerous philosophers who were an inspiration for him, among which the names of William James, Henry Bergson, Johann Gottlieb Fichte certainly stand out.

is nourished by both cultural horizons, not, however, in the form of a sterile eclecticism, but as an opportunity for a new impulse of thought and a novel challenge to established traditions. His theoretical operation makes previously heterogeneous concepts work together, seeking to identify, more profoundly than the differences that divide them, the springing *place* that produces every experience of thought.

This effort is condensed into one of the most successful notions in his philosophical *oeuvre*: that of *zettai mu no basho* 絶対無の場所⁸. By this concept, which can be translated as “the place of absolute nothingness”, Nishida does not mean the nothingness that opposes being and would thus be a relative nothingness, but rather that place that precedes this dualism, the background that unfolds being rather than denying it. Absolute nothingness acts as a self-contradictory negation, a negation that elides itself, thus reversing its sign, transforming itself into a purely positive space⁹. Like Plato’s *χώρα*¹⁰, this *place* (*basho* 場所) is the form-

⁸ Jacynthe Tremblay identifies a connection between the development of the “logic of *Basho*” and the peculiar syntax used by Nishida: as she underlines, “Nishida came to compose more philosophical essays in an amalgam of the spoken and written languages because he felt that this approach allowed him to express his thoughts more freely. It was through his struggle with language that he came up with his distinctive philosophical writing style. Indeed, Nishida developed his own syntax by making use of all the linguistic resources at his disposal. He stressed the need to master both the classical Chinese and classical Japanese in order to compose in the spoken style. He also considered it necessary to draw inspiration from translations of Western philosophy and literature in order to enrich the Japanese language and his own mode of expression, given that modern thought in Japan was greatly indebted to European and American culture. These different linguistic elements gave Nishida the freedom to create his own philosophical style. [...] The only way for Nishida to acquire the philosophical language he needed was to create it by using it” (J. Tremblay, *Nishida Kitarō’s Language and Structure of Thought in the “Logic of Basho”* in R. Bouso Garcia, J.W. Heisig, *Frontiers of Japanese Philosophy 6. Confluences and Cross-Currents*, Nagoya 2009, pp. 254-272).

⁹ M. Cestari, *The knowing Body* in “The Eastern Buddhist”, Vol XXXI, No. 2, Kyoto 1998, pp. 179-208. As Cestari notices, here the Buddhist influence is quite strong: “as it is known, Nishida’s concept of Absolute Nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無) comes from a philosophical elaboration of the concept of “void” (Jap. *kū* 空, Skt. *sūnyatā*), as the negation of substantiality [...]. According to this conception, things are ‘void’ (*abhāva* or *muga* 無我) because they are not self-sufficient, emerging from the network of inter-relations of causal chaining (Skt. *pratītyasamutpāda*, Jap. *engi* 縁起) in which things are endlessly changing. It is this unceasing dynamism that makes things as they are, hence the positive – or better, non-negative – meaning of the term”. In Absolute nothingness, “the same negation must negate itself, but not in the sense of double negation in formal logic that is equivalent to affirmation, as the negation of the negation of position”.

¹⁰ Cfr. Plato, *Timaeus*, 48a-53b; tr. it. a cura di G. Reale, *Timeo*, Bompiani, Milano 2017. Cfr. also J. Derrida, *Chōra*, Galilée, Paris 1993. The notion of *χώρα* is one of the sources of the concept of *basho* 場所. However, Nishida also distinguishes between the two concepts: Plato’s concept of *ὑποδοχή*, which in the *Timaeus* is associated with *χώρα*, indicates – Nishida points out – a material principle such as space. The Greek philosophers, he argues, did not understand the very meaning of «nothingness» (K. Nishida, *Basho* 場所

less mirror in which all forms are reflected and received without being distorted¹¹. It is a horizon “that ‘wraps’ (*tsutsumu*) every opposition/relationship as the most inclusive Place”¹².

The concept of *basho* 場所 is thus close to the Derridean idea of *différance* as a movement that remains on the differential edge of the dualisms it produces¹³. Through these notions, Nishida and Derrida both point to that *differential vibration* that precedes and produces linguistic and conceptual differences. For both, as will be shown below, the transit through writing embodies a key junction in this process. In this sense, Derridean thought also seems to have an intercultural and anti-ethnocentric scope¹⁴: *différance* is not only the osmotic margin that acts between *mythos* and *logos* in Western thought, but also the differential margin that jointly makes possible the difference and encounter between East and West.

2. Writing and metaphysics: the revenant of the signifier

According to Derrida, Western metaphysics has made writing an object of removal: a repression which constitutes the origin of philosophy as ἐπιστήμη, and of truth as the unity of λόγος and φωνή¹⁵. An operation that, however, would never definitively succeed: writing always haunts European discourse as the phantasmatic presence of the signifier that no idealism and, in general, no metaphysics can definitively erase. But deconstruction should not be identified with a “psychoanalysis of philosophy”: logo-phonocentrism, this lordship of meaning and voice over sign, is not a philosophical error into which the history of philosophy would be pathologically precipitated, but a necessary and necessarily finite structure¹⁶, an outcome of the interplay between signifier and signi-

in *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū*, Iwanami shoten, Tōkyō 1965, IV, pp. 208-289 (here quoted by K. Nishida, *Luogo*, edited by E. Fongaro, M. Ghilardi, Mimesis, Milan-Udine 2012, pp. 97-98). In his analysis of *Timaeus*, Derrida enhances the mirroring power of Nishida's, defining it as a space that is not already «spatialized,» but is much more the very *process* of spatialization, which is itself *nonspatial*. Derrida's χῶρα is thus even closer to Nishida's *basho* 場所 than Plato's.

¹¹ K. Nishida, *Luogo*, cit., p. 46.

¹² M. Cestari, *The knowing Body*, cit., p. 188.

¹³ R. Elberfeld, *The Middle Voice of Emptiness: Nishida and Nishitani* in B.W. Davis, B. Schroeder, J.M. Wirth (eds.), *Japanese and Continental Philosophy. Conversations with the Kyoto School*, Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 269-285.

¹⁴ As for the Derridian critique of *logocentrism* and *ethnocentrism*, cfr. J. Derrida, *La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines* in *L'écriture et la différence*, cit.

¹⁵ J. Derrida, *La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines*, cit., p. 293.

¹⁶ Ivi, p. 294.

fied in alphabetic writing that Derrida calls *différance*. The use of the latter notion produces a landslide within the metaphysical text: its strength lies not so much in its meaning, for it is not a concept, but in the impact produced by its very signifier.

The substitution of one letter for another – the *a* in place of the *e* – returns the word to its sensible body. This operation plays on the fact that a “marked difference between two apparently vocal notations, between two vowels, remains purely graphic: it is read, or it is written, but it cannot be heard”¹⁷. The irruption of the signifier makes manifest the paradox and impossibility of a word without a body and writing, that is, the paradox of a purely ideal meaning¹⁸. Derrida, on the other hand, uses the word *différance* just like a body, in a non-discursive way¹⁹, forcing the reader to go through the signifier. In this sense, deconstruction is not a theoretical operation but a practice, an exercise that needs to be understood not so much for what it *says* but for what it *does*²⁰. Its result is not the production of a new philosophical theory, but a rupture within thought caused by writing.

Western metaphysics is not simply an option – among many possible – of thought, but first and foremost the outcome of a certain form of writing²¹. This silent intervention of the sign has always been erased by philosophy, through the erasure of the material body of words²² and the reduction of writing to a mere vehicle of a thought already produced before any inscription. Instead, what Derrida intends to bring out is precisely the web of mutual references that binds traces and signs together as in a fabric²³. In

¹⁷ J. Derrida, *Différance in Margins of Philosophy*, cit., p. 3.

¹⁸ Cfr. Ivi, pp. 4-5. According to Derrida, one of the great desires of Western metaphysics would be to find a purely phonetic and totally transparent writing, a writing such as to cancel itself in the movement of its tracing, thus leaving only the meaning, naked and spiritual, immaterial. However, “there is no purely and rigorously phonetic writing. So-called phonetic writing, by all rights and in principle, and not only due to an empirical or technical insufficiency, can function only by admitting into its system nonphonetic ‘signs’ (punctuation, spacing, etc.). [...] If there is no purely phonetic writing, it is that there is no purely phonetic *phōnē*”.

¹⁹ Cfr. J. Derrida, *Penser a ne pas voir. Écrits sur les arts du visible*, Éditions de la Différence, Paris 2013, here quoted from J. Derrida, *Pensare al non vedere*, a cura di A. Cario-lato, Jaca Book, Milano 2016, p. 56.

²⁰ M. Bonazzi, *Il libro e la scrittura. Tra Hegel e Derrida*, Mimesis, Milano 2004, p. 152.

²¹ Cfr. J. Derrida, *Pensare al non vedere*, cit., pp. 87-89. However, it is necessary to specify that Derrida distinguishes *logocentrism* from *phonocentrism*, meaning the latter as a universal phenomenon and therefore common to the various writing practices.

²² Cfr. J. Derrida, *White Mythology in Margins of Philosophy*, cit.

²³ Playing with the Latin etymology of the term *textus*, Derrida exploits the analogy, also used by Roland Barthes, between text and fabric to allude to the plot of traces that spread like signs within a written text. Cfr. R. Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, New York, Hill & Wang, 1977, pp. 146, 148.

this sense, there is no outside-text²⁴, no outside in relation to writing: each event occurs as an inscription, it is always already embedded in a text and in the series of references that compose it.

Différance produces the web of reciprocal cross-references that ceaselessly configures the world in which we live: neither founding nor resting on a metaphysical *Grund*, it shows the posthumous character of any structure that assumes itself to be original. There is no presence, but neither is there absence: the trace has no symbolic value, does not name a transcendence²⁵, and is not even a mere sign. Extraneous from any cause-effect relationship, the trace is without reason, unmotivated; it is an operation and not a state, an active movement and not a given structure. "There is no symbol and sign, but a becoming-sign of the symbol"²⁶. The trace is not simply a sign, because it is a *threshold* open on a network of relations, always exposed to its erasure and ready to be replaced by another trace; but neither is it symbolic, because it does not refer to a transcendence from which its meaning would derive, but always and only to another trace. To attempt to trace *différance* back to an origin is to defer the origin itself. In the French language, the ending in *-ance* remains undecided between active and passive,

announcing or rather recalling something like the middle voice, saying an operation that is not an operation, which cannot be thought of either as passion or as an action of a subject on an object, neither starting from an agent nor starting from a patient, neither starting nor in view of any of these terms.²⁷

This reversibility of active and passive recalls the Greek concepts of φύσις and φαίνεσθαι, indicating the *simultaneity* of revealing and being revealed, of manifesting and being manifested, thus referring to the dimension of nature as spontaneity. Writing writes itself by giving birth to

²⁴ J. Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, Minuit, Paris 1967; tr. by G.C. Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, p. 158.

²⁵ Cfr. J. Derrida, *Comment ne pas parler in Psyché. Invention de l'autre*, Galilée, Paris 1987. In this text, Derrida makes clear how his discourse on *différance* does not intend to take the typical form of negative theology at all: indeed, this would be willing to admit, beyond and before all possible predications, all conceptual categories and oppositions, a hyper-essentiality of God, a being beyond being. This last unnamable term would always guide and precede apophantic discourse, as well as the practices connected to it, such as prayer, celebration. Derrida does not want to deny the importance of apophantic discourse *tout-court*, but to show how his discourse on *différance* cannot be understood as derived from negative theology, since in the latter still acts one of the assumptions that Derridean thought wants to deconstruct: that of a transcendent origin of being and speech.

²⁶ J. Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, cit., p. 47.

²⁷ J. Derrida, *Différance*, cit., p. 9.

new forms, without being caged in premeditated structures. Derrida's books often take unusual forms – in layout, in the articulation of space on the white paper, in punctuation – precisely to let flow a genetic movement that goes far beyond the *book* in which it occurs. Recognizing style not as a mere container, but as an integral part of the content itself, also means abolishing this dualism: thought and writing are the two edges of the same movement. As Blanchot notes, it is necessary to let flow that writing that

through its own slowly liberated force (the aleatory force of absence) seems to devote itself solely to itself as something that remains without identity, and little by little brings forth possibilities that are entirely other: an anonymous, distracted, deferred, and dispersed way of being in relation, by which everything is brought into question – and first of all the idea of God, of the Self, of the Subject, then of Truth and the One, then finally the idea of the Book and the Work so that this writing (understood in its enigmatic rigor), far from having the Book as its goal rather signals its end. [...] In other words, the Book always indicates an order that submits to unity, a system of notions in which are affirmed the primacy of speech over writing, of thought over language, and the promise of a communication that would one day be immediate and transparent.²⁸

3. The rhythm of writing. Nishida as calligrapher

If alphabetic writing systematically removes the presence and importance of the body of words, in Sino-Japanese writing thought is inseparable from the material thickness of the signs in which it is expressed. In China and Japan a single gesture unites writing and thought in an exercise that is at once ethical, theoretical and aesthetic, or rather, in which this distinction ceases to have meaning. Here writing is not simply the support of the meaning it is meant to convey: calligraphic practice is integral to the germination of thought. In the Chinese and Japanese contexts, writing is inseparable from a process of artistic creation that is always embedded as much in the artist's body as in the tools he uses. If in Derrida's case writing acts on thought as signifier, as the material space-temporization of a meaning that does not precede it but is rather its outcome, in Nishida's case the calligraphic exercise acts on thought as an embedded practice that does not distinguish between artistic creation and ethical transformation.

²⁸ M. Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, Gallimard, 1969; tr. by S. Hanson, *The infinite conversation*, University of Minnesota Press, 1992, p. XII.

In the Far Eastern world, writing represents one of the fundamental techniques in the development of human culture. The use of brush and ink has made calligraphy a true art that over the centuries has decisively influenced the development of poetry, painting and philosophy²⁹. While in China and Japan a single tool allows writing and painting, in the European context the differentiation of the tools used by painting and writing led to the separation of these practices, thus opening up different resources for thought. Also of fundamental importance is the fact that Far Eastern artistic practice has been decisively influenced by the experience of Zen Buddhism. It is in the wake of the latter tradition that Nishida develops his art, giving rise to a creative activity that is one with a gesture of thought. It is not simply a matter of reflecting on the outcome of one's practice, once the creation is finished, but of *thinking by writing* and *writing by thinking*, in an indivisible flow. As Nishida points out, the painter's thought does not separate from the brush. Artists think through their technique³⁰.

Calligraphy, Nishida argues in *Sho no bi (The beauty of calligraphy)*,³¹ evokes an inner *rhythm*, like music. This interiority from which emanates the rhythmic force that runs through the artist's body, his wrist, his brush, until it imprints itself as a trace of ink on paper, does not exist before the gesture to which it gives rise, but is produced along with it. The artist's interiority is not the receptacle of a substantial and hegemonic Ego, of a subjectivity that guides creative action by planning its outcomes in advance. Rather, such interiority coincides with what in Buddhist thought is referred to as *Muga* 無我 (not self) and *Mushin* 無心 (not mind). When the self recognizes itself as a moment in a process, allowing itself to be traced by the very sign it traces, the artistic gesture is natural and spontaneous. Reflecting on the conditions that make drawing possible, Derrida himself emphasizes the impermanence of each trait, its "differential inappearance"³².

²⁹ Cfr. R. Elberfeld, *Sprache und Sprachen*, Verlag Karl Alber, Freiburg im Breisgau 2012, pp. 364-366.

³⁰ *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū*, III, p. 388; quoted in M. Ghilardi, *Una logica del vedere*, Mimesis, Milano-Udine 2009, p. 88.

³¹ Cfr. M. Cestari, *The problem of aesthetics in Nishida Kitarō* in "Proceedings of the Association for Japanese Literary Studies", vol. 5: *Hermeneutical Strategies: Methods of Interpretation in the Study of Japanese Literature*, 2004, pp. 175-91. Even the calligrapher Ishikawa Kyuyoh, in his book *Taction: The Drama of the Stylus in Oriental Calligraphy*, tr. by W. Miller, International House of Japan, Tokyo 2011, pp. 92-98, 132-160, emphasizes the musical qualities of calligraphic works: the way different characters combine with each other, the dynamism that a brush stroke can evoke, infuse calligraphy with melodies and different rhythms depending on the speed, regularity, lightness with which the signs are traced.

³² J. Derrida, *Mémoires d'aveugle. L'autoportrait et autres ruines*, Louvre, Réunion des Musées nationaux, Paris 1990 ; tr. by P.-A. Brault and M. Naas, *Memories of the Blind*, the University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 53.

But if Derrida is more interested in emphasizing the deferral between the act of drawing a sign and the sign drawn, Nishida, on the other hand, is interested in the act of drawing itself, in the movement in which artist and work are produced together, in a gesture in which subject and object are not already deferred.

This chiasmatic simultaneity of creative activity and created work refers to that condition which in *An Inquiry into the Good* (*Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究) is defined as *pure experience* (*junsui keiken* 純粹経験), a notion then fully settled in that of *kōiteki chokkan* 行為の直観 (active intuition)³³. With this concept, Nishida indicates the concomitance of intuition and action: acting by becoming what is acted upon, *knowing by becoming* (*narikiru* 成り切る) what is known. The marks traced on the paper are the result of the calligrapher's integral participation in his own act, the visible trace of an immersive experience of the world: it is the idea of a *pure vision*, which Nishida takes from Konrad Fiedler³⁴. In this seeing, there is no fracture between inside and outside: a single expressive movement runs through the painter's non-self and coalesces on paper through brush and ink.

However, the dynamic underlying the artistic gesture in Nishida is incomprehensible without considering a decisive and essential element: the body (*shintai* 身体). As with Fiedler, for Nishida the creative act is produced from a single expressive movement that passes between the bodies involved in the gesture, intertwining them in what Merleau-Ponty calls *intercorporeality*³⁵. The body is not simply the vehicle of an inner activity that precedes it: aesthetic expression is always produced as a participation of bodies and minds. In artistic practice, vision, touch, and hearing are always embodied in one place, prolonged in each other. The calligrapher's gesture is the result of the interplay of forces and resistances

³³ As Cestari also observed, “from a certain perspective, *kōiteki chokkan* can be interpreted as a return to the initial inspiration of Nishidian philosophy, namely, the fundamental idea of *junsui keiken* 純粹経験, or ‘pure experience’, the pivotal concept of Nishida's maiden work, *Zen no kenkyū* 善の研究 [An Inquiry into the Good] (1911). Nevertheless, the two concepts are significantly different in their conceptual frames of reference” (M. Cestari, *The Knowing Body. Nishida's Philosophy of Active Intuition* (*kōiteki chokkan*), cit., p. 180).

³⁴ Konrad Fiedler, a scholar and theorist of German art active in the second half of the 1800s, was a constant point of reference for Nishida. In particular, in the essays collected in *Art and Morality* (*Geijutsu to dōtoku* 芸術と道徳) there are numerous references, explicit and implicit, to the best known and most important work of the German author, *Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit*.

³⁵ Cfr. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Le visible et l'invisible*, Gallimard, 1964. With this concept, to be read alongside those of *chair* and *chiasme*, Merleau-Ponty suggests an idea of reciprocity and reversibility that is no longer conceivable starting from the concept of intersubjectivity, but which is recognized in a reflexivity of the body.

produced by the encounter of the brush with the paper: this reciprocity, which calligrapher Ishikawa Kyuyoh describes as essential to calligraphic practice³⁶, is not limited, however, to the sense of touch alone, but opens up to a touch that occurs with the eyes, while the thickness and succession of strokes convey a rhythm, a melody that can be heard as visible. Derrida also describes this interweaving of optical and haptic regimes underlying experience:

When vision tends no longer to distinguish itself from the seen or the visible, it is *as if the eye touched* the thing itself – or better yet, in the event of this encounter, as if the eye let itself be touched by it. Intuitive vision does not just come into contact, as it is said; it *becomes contact*, and this movement would pertain to its nature. And further, its motion would go – its drive would extend, rather, from the optical (or the scopical) to the haptic.³⁷

However, unlike calligraphy in China and Japan, the tactile dimension does not seem to be a fundamental aspect of alphabetic writing practice. Nishida's decisive emphasis on the role of the body and active intuition in artistic practice should not suggest a devaluation of thought and philosophy. On the contrary, the latter is enlivened and stimulated by the gesture of the calligrapher. Thought, too, not as reflection and posthumous mediation of the world through concepts, but as *activity*, is a form of pure experience: thought and painting are expressions of the same spontaneity, outcomes of the same intuition. Therefore, in his work as a calligrapher and artist, Nishida paints not only poems or sentences, but also individual signs that correspond to some crucial elements of his philosophical reflection³⁸. As he traces the characters that make up *muga* 無我, he realizes them in thought and on paper *together*, in a single movement. Realizing the emptiness of the non-self in a gesture that is at once theoretical, ethical, and aesthetic, the boundaries between these dimensions, which the Western philosophical tradition often wants to keep separate, are blended. In other words, Nishida's philosophical thought is produced together with calligraphic practice. The dualisms between body and thought, practice and theory are thus overcome not only in a theoretical sense, but also in a performative execution that is both artistic and philosophical, where thought is already action and material trace *together*.

³⁶ Cfr. Ishikawa Kyuyoh, *Taction: The Drama of the Stylus in Oriental Calligraphy*, cit., p. 2. In the English translation of his book, whose original title is *Sho: Hissoku no Uchu or Yomitoku* (Chuo Koron Shinsha, Tokyo 2005), Ishikawa uses the term *taction* to convey the idea of this tactile reciprocity at the basis of calligraphy.

³⁷ J. Derrida, *Le toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*, Galilée, Paris 2000; tr. by C. Irizarry, *On Touching – Jean-Luc Nancy*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2005, p. 123.

³⁸ Cfr. R. Elberfeld, *Sprache und Sprachen*, cit., p. 367.

Derrida and Nishida, then, both agree on this crucial point: the material trace of thought, far from being a mere vehicle, is the hyletic concretion in which thought itself is produced and assumes its most highly “spiritual” form. Writing has a chiasmatic nature: like the two axes of the Greek letter χ , thought and body intersect and diverge in the same “place.” But this place, which is precisely their $\chi\acute{\alpha}\sigma\mu\alpha$, is not an already spatialized space, but rather a tensional field, defined by the very movement of the $\chi\acute{\alpha}\zeta\epsilon\upsilon\nu$ (“marking with the letter χ ”).

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Tracing Thought. The Chiasm of Writing between Derrida and Nishida

The purpose of this article is to investigate the plexus between writing and thinking. This goal is pursued through a comparison between the calligraphic practice of Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitarō and Jacques Derrida's conception of *écriture*. Although there are some significant differences between the approaches of the two philosophers, both agree in showing how thought is produced inseparably from the bodies that express it and the written signs that convey it. The aesthetic dimension is thus inseparable from the theoretical, like the two edges of *différance*. The Nishidian notions of *kōiteki chokkan* 行為的直観 (active intuition) and *narikiru* 成り切る (knowing by becoming) will thus be explored through dialogue with Derridean notions of *différance* and *écriture*.

KEYWORDS: Nishida Kitarō, Jacques Derrida, Calligraphy, Intuition, Deconstruction