

Translated by
Thomas Dutoit

*Stanford
University
Press*

*Stanford
California*

APORIAS

DYING—
awaiting (one another at)
the “limits of truth”

MOURIR—
s’attendre aux “limites de
la vérité”

Jacques Derrida

PROBLEM: I choose the word *problem* deliberately for *two* reasons.

1. First, to sacrifice a little bit more to Greek and to the experience of translation: in sum, *problēma* can signify *projection* or *protection*, that which one poses or throws in front of oneself, either as the projection of a project, of a task to accomplish, or as the protection created by a substitute, a prosthesis that we put forth in order to represent, replace, shelter, or dissimulate ourselves, or so as to hide something unavowable—like a shield (*problēma* also means

shield, clothing as barrier or guard-barrier) behind which one guards oneself *in secret* or *in shelter* in case of danger. Every border is *problematic* in these two senses.

2. I keep the word *problem* for another reason: so as to put this word in tension with another Greek word, *aporia*, which I chose a long time ago as a title for this occasion, without really knowing where I was going, except that I knew what was going to be at stake in this word was the “not knowing where to go.” It had to be a matter of [*il devait y aller du*] the nonpassage, or rather from the experience of the nonpassage, the experience of what happens [*se passe*] and is fascinating [*passionne*] in this nonpassage, paralyzing us in this separation in a way that is not necessarily negative: before a door, a threshold, a border, a line, or simply the edge or the approach of the other as such. It should be a matter of [*devrait y aller du*] what, in sum, appears to block our way or to separate us in the very place where *it would no longer be possible to constitute a problem*, a project, or a projection, that is, at the point where the very project or the problematic task becomes impossible and where we are exposed, absolutely without protection, without problem, and without prosthesis, without possible substitution, singularly exposed in our absolute and absolutely naked uniqueness, that is to say, disarmed, delivered to the other, incapable even of sheltering ourselves behind what could still protect the interiority of a secret. There, in sum, in this place of *aporia*, *there is no longer any problem*. Not that, alas or fortunately, the solutions have been given, but because one could no longer even find a problem that would constitute itself and that one would keep in front of oneself, as a presentable object or project, as a protective representative or a prosthetic substitute, as some kind of border still to cross or behind which to protect oneself.

I gave in to the word *aporias*, in the plural, without really knowing where I was going and if something would come to pass, allowing me to pass with it, except that I recalled that, for many years now, the old, worn-out Greek term *aporia*, this tired word of philosophy and of logic, has often imposed itself upon me, and

recently it has done so even more often. Thus, I speak here in memory of this word, as of someone with whom I would have lived a long time, even though in this case one cannot speak of a decision or a contract. It happened in a number of different contexts, but with a formalizable regularity about which I would like to say a few words before attempting to go—further, closer, or elsewhere. I would certainly not want to impose upon you a laborious or self-indulgent return to certain trajectories or impasses of the past. Rather, I would like to situate, from very far away and very high up, in the most abstract way, in a few sentences, and in the form of an index or a long note at the bottom of the page, the places of *aporia* in which I have found myself, let us say, regularly tied up, indeed, paralyzed. I was then trying to move not against or out of the impasse but, in another way, *according to* another thinking of the *aporia*, one perhaps more enduring. It is the obscure way of this “according to the *aporia*” that I will try to determine today. And I hope that the index I just mentioned will help situate my discourse better.

The word “*aporia*” appears in person in Aristotle’s famous text, *Physics IV* (217b), which reconstitutes the *aporia* of time *dia tōn exoterikōn logōn*. Allow me to recall the short text that, twenty-five years ago, I devoted to a note on time in *Being and Time* (“*Ousia and Grammē: Note on a Note from Being and Time*,” in *Margins of Philosophy*): already dealing with Heidegger, as I shall also do today, but in a different way, this short text treated the question of the present, of presence and of the presentation of the present, of time, of being, and above all of nonbeing, more precisely of a certain *impossibility* as nonviability, as nontrack or barred path. It concerns the impossible or the impracticable. (*Diaporeō* is Aristotle’s term here; it means “I’m stuck [*dans l’embarras*], I cannot get out, I’m helpless.”) Therefore, for example—and it is more than just one example among others—it is impossible to determine time both as entity and as nonentity. And with the motif of the nonentity, or of nothingness, the motif of death is never very far away. (Even though Levinas, in a fundamental debate, reproaches Heidegger, as well as an entire tradition, for wrongly thinking death, in its very

essence and in the first place, as annihilation.) The now is and is not what it is. More precisely, it only “scarcely” (*amudrōs*) is what it is. Insofar as it has been, it no longer is. But insofar as it will be, as future to come or as death—which will be my themes today—it is not yet. By insisting upon the fact that “the aporetic is an exoteric”⁶ and that Aristotle, “while acknowledging that this argument clarifies nothing (218a)” “repeats its aporia without deconstructing it” (p. 50), I was then trying to demonstrate, thereby going in the direction of Heidegger, that the philosophical tradition, in particular from Kant to Hegel, only inherited this aporetic: “the Aristotelian aporia is understood, thought, and assimilated into that which is properly *dialectical*. It suffices—and it is necessary—to take things in the other sense and from the other side in order to conclude that the Hegelian dialectic is but the repetition, the paraphrastic reedition of an exoteric aporia, the brilliant formulation of a vulgar paradox” (p. 43). But instead of stopping with a mere confirmation of the Heideggerian diagnosis, which indeed sees in the whole tradition, from Aristotle to Hegel, a hegemony of the vulgar concept of time insofar as it privileges the now (*nun*, *Jetzt*), I oriented this very confirmation toward another suggestion, even while supporting it. Allow me to recall it because I may make a similar, albeit different, gesture today on the subject of death according to Heidegger. The simple question from which I was trying to draw the consequences (and from which one may never finish drawing them) would be this: What if there was no other concept of time than the one that Heidegger calls “vulgar”? What if, consequently, opposing another concept to the “vulgar” concept were itself impracticable, nonviable, and impossible? What if it was the same for death, for a vulgar concept of death? What if the exoteric aporia therefore remained in a certain way irreducible, calling for an endurance, or shall we rather say an *experience* other than that consisting in opposing, from both sides of an indivisible line, an other concept, a nonvulgar concept, to the so-called vulgar concept?

What would such an *experience* be? The word also means passage, traversal, endurance, and rite of passage, but can be a traversal

without line and without indivisible border. Can it ever concern, precisely (in all the domains where the questions of decision and of responsibility that concern the border—ethics, law, politics, etc.—are posed), surpassing an aporia, crossing an oppositional line *or else* apprehending, enduring, and putting, in a different way, the experience of the aporia to a test? And is it an issue here of an *either/or*? Can one speak—and if so, in what sense—of an *experience of the aporia*? An *experience of the aporia as such*? Or vice versa: Is an experience possible that would not be an experience of the aporia?