... make up the different shapes of the “signified” side. Signifiers and concepts are created in a system of differences.

At the level of linguistic sounds, we can substitute the sound /p/ for the sound /b/ in big.

The sounds don’t mean anything in themselves, but we can tell the difference between them. The difference makes possible a different meaning – the concept:

And so on, through other differentiable sounds and concepts:

\begin{itemize}
    \item peg
    \item pen
    \item pan
\end{itemize}

etc.

And for Derrida this is a question of presence...

What happens when big circulates as a spoken word? The sound /b/ has to be spoken. No /p/, it would seem, is present. We will not hear the /p/, a speaker cannot say one at the same time. We might say, it is absent. But on the other hand, /p/ is not simply absent. Big, to be identifiable and meaningful, depends on it, and on all the other sounds from which it differs. Without /p/ and the others, it is lost. So the /p/ is in a way present, though not simply so. It is carried as a trace in the /b/, necessarily present in its necessary absence.
The Trace

What does Derrida mean by “trace”? Neither simply present nor simply absent, the trace is an undecidable. The relay of differences (pig, big, bag, rag, rat, etc) depends upon a structural undecidability, a play of presence and absence at the origin of meaning. Undecidability at the “origin”, between presence and absence.

Whether written or spoken, no element can function without relating to another element which itself is not simply present. Each element is constituted on the basis of the trace in it of the other elements of the system. Nothing in either the elements or the system is anywhere ever simply present or absent.

So Derrida sets the trace across the Saussurean sign – an undecidable presence-absence at the origin of meaning. Language is premised on an interweaving movement between what is there and not there. Language is always an interweaving, a textile.

What is the significance of Derrida’s notion of the trace?

First, it suggests that all language is subject to undecidability. The play of the trace is a kind of deforming, reforming slippage – an inherent instability which language cannot escape.

This applies to philosophical language as well. The vocabulary of metaphysics (being, truth, centre, origin, etc) has to be recognized as a vocabulary. It’s a set of words, and they cannot escape the play of the trace.

Now, if the trace is a constant sliding between presence and absence, those philosophical words cannot establish full, replete presence.

This strikes at the very roots of Western metaphysics, because it’s the claim to full presence which underpins metaphysical concepts and procedures.
Structuralism and Phenomenology: Derrida's Operations

Derrida's writings on structuralism and phenomenology were published in 1967, in three books: Speech and Phenomena, Writing and Difference, and Of Grammatology. These were his first major publications, and they announced his complex assault on metaphysical thinking.

None of these texts offer arguments of the usual kind. They don't simply refute, corroborate, commend or oppose. Rather, Derrida "makes a passage through" the texts of phenomenology and structuralism, searching out their hidden points of instability – the points where undecidability is at work.

In a sense, Derrida does the same thing with phenomenology and structuralism that he does with Plato and others. Reading their texts, he finds undecidables: the pharmakon, the supplement, the trace, etc. And he uses the undecidables to shake up the metaphysical foundations.

This helps to explain why Derrida's writing can seem puzzling, infuriating or exasperating. To embrace the curious logic of this writing, we have to be willing to sign up to it, to subscribe to the task it takes on: the creation of destabilizing movements in metaphysical thinking.

Is this task as important or as necessary as Derrida suggests? Not all his readers have thought so. But to dismiss Derrida's writing as wilfully obscure is too hasty. Understood as a rigorous unsettling of Western metaphysics, even Derrida's most bizarre strategies begin to make sense.

Let's look at two of these strategies: the use of palaeonymics and neologisms. Both exploit undecidability in the bid to undermine metaphysics.
Strategies:
“Writing”

To privilege writing over speech is one thing. But it’s not just a question of thinking the terms in their familiar opposition. Derrida re-conceptualizes writing as an undecidable: the play of presence/absence and radical difference, across speech as well as script. This is the play designated by Derrida’s terms: the trace and the gram (hence grammatology). And by his term writing.

“WRITING” BECOMES A PALAEOYMIC: OLD WORD, NEW USES. IT NO LONGER DESIGNATES SCRIPTING RATHER THAN SPEAKING BUT RATHER THE UNDECIDABLE PLAY IN BOTH. IT INHABITS SPOKEN WORDS, INSCRIBED MARKS...

How can we tell when the word is used in this sense? We can’t. (Unless we add something, e.g., “writing-in-Derrida’s-sense”. But a supplement brings its own undecidability.) Derrida’s palaeonymy is a potentiality in all uses of the word, in his own texts and others.

Derrida also coins neologisms. Différence is one, and it doesn’t mean anything. It’s a coinage which can’t be exchanged.

... ALL OTHER SIGNS.

Différence is not a French word. But it’s related to some words...

the noun

la différence (with an “e”) = the difference

the verb

différer = to differ, and to defer

the verb-adjective

différent = the condition of differing, or of deferring

These offer Derrida’s neologism some possibilities. For instance, the verb différer has a play of both space and time: “things” differ spatially, “putting something off” is temporal.

And the same for the verb-adjective (“the differing shapes”, “the deferring tactic”).

But in French there’s a semantic deficit. There’s no noun-verb. We’d expect one – a word which lets us name the activity of “putting off”, or of differing with someone or something. If différence were a French word, it might be that noun-verb. But it isn’t. Not being that, it can supply the semantic loss and cover all other absences and occlusions of meaning across these related nouns, verbs, etc.
The Four Fields of Différence

With this impossible possibility (différence is [not] a French word), Derrida inserts différence into four fields of concepts and words.

1 Insertion between speech and writing: Différence is pronounced the same as différence. If spoken, différence cannot be heard. But différence can be read. It privileges writing, while inhabiting speech as a possibility.

2 Insertion between nouns and verbs: Différence is neither noun nor verb. It plays between “thing” and “doing”, between entity and action: a foundational opposition of philosophy.

3 Insertion between the sensible and the intelligible: Différence plays across both sides of the Saussurian sign (signifier and signified).

Let’s look more closely at the play of the sensible and the intelligible.

– Différence exceeds the sensible because the sensible needs gaps of time or space which are never fully apprehensible: in speech, pauses and delays between sounds; and in script, non-phonetic signs, spacings on the page, little marks of punctuation, etc. We can see that two graphic marks differ, but we cannot see the difference. Différence encompasses this.

– Différence exceeds the intelligible, because the sensible inhabits the intelligible. As we see from the usual words for conceptualization. Derrida’s examples: Greek théorèin (theory) also means “to look at” or “to see”; French entendement (understanding) is the noun form of entendre, “to hear”.

And finally...

4 Insertion between words and concepts: Différence is neither a word (in French) nor a concept (a signified). It doesn’t exist; it’s not a present-being, a “thing” with essence and existence. It refuses the question, “What is différence?”. Better to write: différencé

Derrida crosses out the verb of being, putting it under erasure (“sous rature”: borrowed from Heidegger). Both there and not there, cancelled but not ejected, present and absent.

Différence doesn’t follow the model of the standard philosophical neologism: a (new) word for a (new) concept. Instead, it sets in play a movement of undecidability.

Différence is actively disruptive. Language, thought and meaning aren’t to be allowed the comfort of their daily routines. If that leaves philosophical language ruined, sick with its own instabilities, what about ordinary language and everyday communication? Can we rely on grounded decidability in the supermarket, the office and the lecture hall?
**DISORDER IN COMMUNICATION**

**Ordinary Language**

To many of his critics, Derrida simply overlooks the fact of successful communication. Ordinary language works. Therefore it's always possible — in principle, and barring accidents — to be clear, say what we mean, and to know what someone is thinking.

1971: the **Sociétés de Philosophie de Langue Française** organize a colloquium. The topic: communication. Derrida delivers a lecture, "Signature, event, context" in spoken words.

He sets up a question...

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**The Assurance of Context**

"Signature, event, context" begins with context. How can a context assure "correct" meanings?

Derrida's lecture had a context — a convention of French-speaking philosophers. Its communications are governed by consensus:

1. There will be linguistic communication.
2. It will be oral.
3. It will obey norms of intelligibility.
4. Agreement could in principle be established. And all this communication will be about language — not shocks and tremors, passageways, conduits, alleys, entrances, exits or conference papers. Nobody will write or mime or photograph; and the topic is not geological, etc. There will be proper communication about proper "communication". And that goes without saying.

Can these proper communications be guaranteed by context, so nobody is in any doubt? Ultimately, can context master the play of différence and provide meaning with a safe haven from undecidability?

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But there are other meanings. It can refer to a communicated movement — the transmission of a force, a tremor or a shock. Or it can mean a spatial passage by way of an opening or a corridor; e.g. a communicating door. In French, it can mean a conference paper ("Signature, event, context" is one of its meanings). "Communication" is **polysemic**: its signifier can relate to many signifieds. These threaten communication. How are they to be dealt with? "They permit themselves to be massively reduced by the limits of what is called CONTEXT." And that, Derrida says, seems to go without saying.
We've been following the two strands of Derrida's proposed "matrix" of inquiry - undecidability, with its disruption of foundational oppositions, and the introduction of disorder into communication.

It leads to thinking and writing of an unfamiliar kind: undoes, undermining, destabilizing, decomposing, desedimenting ... 

- Derrida's texts aren't located "outside" the texts they examine, in a position of attempted mastery or privileged authority. He doesn't simply reject or oppose them. It's more a strategy of inhabiting them, making a destabilizing passage through them, undoing their presuppositions and desedimenting them: stirring up their underlying levels.

- Derrida's texts need their "host" texts. In a sense, they're parasitical. The undecidables need the oppositions they disrupt. Yet the "host" texts already contain the elements which will undo them – Plato has his pharmakon, Austin's his iterating etiologies – even if these are usually overlooked, denied, called to order, or given an eviction notice.

- Undecidability and derailments of communication are always and already at work, in all discourse – in law, politics, education, the military, medicine, etc, as well as in philosophy and theory.

Derrida's task has been to intensify their disruptive play. His strategies and tactics have been given a name: DECONSTRUCTION. But in many ways, Derrida's writing has scarcely needed it ...

**Deconstruction?**

Derrida had used the word in his early writings. It adapted and translated the German *Destruktion* or *Abbau*, terms Heidegger had used in his re-examination of metaphysics. For Derrida, the French word *destruction* was too negative and one-sided. It suggested antagonistic demolition or eradication. In Derrida's uses, *déconstruction* designated a double movement: both disordering, or disarrangement, and also re-arranging.
Deconstruction is ... ?

It’s been a problematic word: In a letter to Toshiko Izutsu*, Japanese Islamologist, Derrida asks: can it be defined? Can it be translated, for instance into Japanese?

[* Letter to a Japanese Friend, 1983]

First: any terms used to translate it – or to define it, by offering it definitive meanings or concepts – are themselves open to deconstructive operations.

Secondly, is there “something” to be defined or translated? Derrida has resisted the suggestion that there is a concept of deconstruction, simply present to the word, outside of the word’s inscription in sentences and phrases determined by the undecidables. There’s no such concept simply to pass over into other words, other languages.

In Derrida’s view this is a problem for translation in general. Translators have to say, and not say, what someone has said.

It’s Not What You Think?

Definitions and translations are always open to the classic metaphysical procedures, especially their ontological move: to determine being as presence. Deconstruction, Derrida suggests, might be better described as a suspicion against thinking “what is the essence of?”.

ALL SENTENCES OF THE TYPE “DECONSTRUCTION IS X” OR “DECONSTRUCTION IS NOT X” A PRIORI MISS THE POINT, WHICH IS TO SAY THAT THEY ARE AT LEAST FALSE. ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL THINGS IN DECONSTRUCTION IS THE DELIMITING OF ONTOLOGY AND ABOVE ALL OF THE THIRD PERSON PRESENT INDICATIVE: S IS P.
To name deconstruction is to call it to order, to harness it to familiar, stable, logocentric notions of what thinking should be. Surely, ultimately, deconstruction must be a mode of analysis or critique; or a method or a project. Derrida has resisted this.

It leads to “deconstructionism”...

Analysis seeks to distinguish simple, undivided elements which can then be treated as originary and explanatory. In its operations on Western metaphysics, deconstruction resists the move towards simple elements or origins.

Critique in the usual sense implies a stance outside its object. Deconstruction insists on movements across and between the metaphysical opposites, inside/outside.

Method, in Derrida’s view, operates by selecting out certain terms of a discourse and using them to name something technical or procedural. He’s identified this especially in deconstruction in the United States, e.g. in aspects of the literary criticism known as Yale Deconstruction.

So as a last resort, can deconstruction be described as a project? Not if it has an outcome staked out in advance, a goal which predetermines its movements. Such a goal would govern foundationally. Deconstruction might clear pathways for its movements, but not knowing entirely where they lead.
Doesn't this place deconstruction, and its adherents, in an impossible position, a "non-place" of contemporary thought?

I'd say that deconstruction loses nothing from admitting that it is impossible, also that those who would rush to delight in that admission lose nothing from having to wait.

For a deconstructive operation, possibility would rather be the danger, the danger of becoming an available set of rule-governed procedures, methods, accessible approaches. The interest of deconstruction, of such force and desire as it may have, is a certain experience of the impossible.

In 1967, Derrida concluded his essay “Structure, Sign and Play” by posing a question between two types of thinking. One dreams of deciphering a truth or origin which escapes play; the other turns away from the origin, and affirms play.

It's a question maybe of choice – or in Derrida's view, of the historical necessity of "relinquishing the dream of full presence"; the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.

It's a question whose conception, formation, gestation and labour we are only catching a glimpse of today. Some will turn their eyes away when faced by the as-yet unnameable which is proclaiming itself, and which can do so – as is necessary when a birth is in the offing – only under the species of the nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant and terrifying form of monstrosity.

Unformed, monstrous, and perhaps unidentifiable, deconstruction has moved virally through fields beyond philosophy and theory. Derrida has advanced its progress in architecture, art, politics and law. And especially, in literature...
WRITING AND LITERATURE

By the 1950s, philosophy and literature in France had new points of contact. The Surrealist poets of the 1930s had addressed philosophical issues. The novels, plays and poetry of Albert Camus (1913-60), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-80) and others explored Existentialist themes. And Paul Valéry (1871-1945), Mallarméan poet and critic, saw philosophy as a practice of writing and therefore as a sub-category of literature. Derrida took a cue from Valéry. It is necessary to study philosophical texts like literary texts. We need to pay attention to their styles, forms, figures of speech – even their titles, layouts, and typography.

But traditionally, the philosophical search for truth has claimed precedence over literature's concern with style.

Literary Texts, Philosophical Texts

Unlike Valéry, Derrida had little interest in simply OVERTURNING the hierarchical claims of philosophy over literature. He looked for ways of destabilizing or DISPLACING the boundaries between them, putting the categories themselves into question.

TheIR'S NO ASSURED ESSENCE OF "LITERATURE" OR "PHILOSOPHY".
THEY'RE UNSTABLE CATEGORIES WITH NO GUARANTEES. IF THEY SEEM
SECURE AND NATURAL, IT'S BECAUSE THEY'RE GOVERNED BY A POWERFUL
CONSENSUS, PREMISED ON FOUNDATIONAL THINKING.

Their boundaries can never be entirely certain. Texts have traits, characteristics which they share with other texts. And a literary text can share some of its traits with philosophical, legal or political texts, etc.

Derrida exploits this. If the categories and boundaries are disturbed, the hierarchy too might begin to lose its grip.
Contamination

So Derrida opens literature and philosophy to a mutual CONTAMINATION. It’s a deconstructive strategy. Certain characteristics of philosophy and literature might remain, but they won’t be allowed an assured, overarching mastery of what is written and how it is read.

What interests me is not strictly called either philosophy or literature. I dream of a writing that would be neither, while still keeping — I’ve no desire to abandon this — the memory of literature and philosophy.

Writing at the Limits

Searching out texts that have “made the limits of our language tremble”, Derrida has turned to avant-garde literature, to the modernist or postmodern writings of Mallarmé, Kafka, Joyce, Ponge, Blanchot and others.

In 1974 he wrote an essay, “Mallarmé”, for the series Tableau de la littérature française. It’s one of Derrida’s many engagements with texts by Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-98), poet and prose writer, modernist and Symbolist.

Mallarmé’s writing has usually been seen as a poetic exploitation of semantic richness — the potential of language for multiple meanings, references and allusions. Derrida reads it instead as a decomposition of linguistic elements, and especially of the word.

What can philosophy gain from its own contamination? Studying literature can reveal something about philosophy’s limits of interpretation. That’s Derrida’s main interest.

He’s pursued it in two ways. He’s written about literary texts, though not producing standard literary criticism. But also, he’s borrowed devices and strategies from literary writing, and put them to use in his destabilization of metaphysics.
Opening Up the Text

What's left of "foundations" for literary criticism? Perhaps THE TEXT. Surely we can be sure that we have texts.

But what is a text? If we're to be certain, a text will need some decidable characteristics. Preferably it will have:

Some edges or boundaries, marking out its inside from its outside, so that it can be treated as a unified "body", with limits. We must know where to stop, where to start.

It should belong to a recognizable genre, assuring us what type of text it is: novel, essay, play, poem, etc.

Derrida opens these up and destabilizes them - not just by writing about them, but by making texts in which they perform differently. *Glas* is perhaps his best-known example...