Chapter Seven
Installing a “New Cosmopolitics”: Derrida and the Writers

Let us hear the shout of the world . . . Let us honor these writers who have strayed so far from their native lands, knowing that they have much to offer and that they aid us in weaving the fabric of our network of tolerance and solidarity. Let us heed this shout emerging from everywhere, from mass graves and places of ethnic genocide, from ethnic cleansing camps, the pitiless wars and wanton massacres.
—Edouard Glissant

If, even now, we could still hope to place the non-place or impossible place of “utopia” within a space of its own or a territory proper to it, what would or could its placement or realization mean? If, despite everything, despite the bitter catastrophes and transgressions of a traumatic century, we still found ourselves willing to hope at all, could or would we want to give that hope a mis-en-scène, a setting or location? Would we still want to try, that is, even today and even if more modestly, to install a utopian promise or demand in the scene, “on the ground,” somewhere, in this or that “theater of operations”? Or would we be more inclined to displace that topos into a zone of unsettled, de-territorialized action: a mobile set of practices, perhaps, or a way or form of thinking and responding? Can the impossible place, the un-place that can’t take its place on the historical stage or in the scheme of things, nevertheless, even now, somehow urge us on, “beyond the place we find ourselves” or what is merely the case, beyond the borders of the status quo and in the direction of an undeconstructible “justice”?—“if,” as Derrida says, “such a thing exists, outside or beyond law” (FL 14). Can we, could we, nonviolently or at least without too much discursive or interpretive violence, “cut to the chase,” cut through or across all of these spatial tropes and metaphors, all of these Derridean inflections, cadences, and resonances, all of this “discrete irony”?

For we have been learning, increasingly over the last dozen years, that Jacques Derrida does dare to hope, that he puts his hope in “enlightenment” and “emancipation,” that he “believes” in justice, as an “infinite responsibility,”

G. Ray, Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory
© Gene Ray 2005
an unconditional hospitality and forgiveness, an impossible pressure on the
work of mourning, on the work-play of receiving a ghastly heritage, and
responding to a world of urgency. Hedgingly, it is true: tentatively, carefully,
vigilantly, with rigorous equivocations and reservations, with copious
deployments of double inverted commas, “under erasure.” But we can read
the signs and can recognize, with a kind of breathless observation and relief, the
unfolding or resolving figure of commitment: the great French critical
theorist has stepped up and drawn his lines. He has marked his “place” after
all. From “there” he makes his stand. He intervenes, movingly, impressively,
with increasing risk and exposure. More and more, and more and more
directly, he takes the measure of the situation and responds to “the matters
of urgency that assail us.” Derrida’s co-foundational role in the International
Parliament of Writers (IPW) and his involvement in its “Cities of Asylum”
network surely constitute one of the most sited and constructive moments
of an admirable and ever-more legible engagement.

* * *

In May 1993, an assassin gunned down Algerian novelist Tahar Djaout in
front of his home in a suburb of Algiers. Alarmed, Christian Salmon and
others involved in the Strasbourg-based *Carrefour des littératures européennes*
responded by issuing an appeal for a new structure to support writers
threatened with violence or censorship.¹ Approximately 300 international
novelists, poets, journalists, and intellectuals signed on to the July 1993
appeal. Organizational discussions took place the following November,
when writers gathered in Strasbourg for the annual meeting of the
*Carrefour*, and the IPW was formally founded in February 1994. The orig-
nal executive board of seven included Salmon, Derrida, Syrian poet
Adonis, South African poet and former militant Breyten Breytenbach,
French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, Franco-Caribbean poet and theorist
Edouard Glissant, and Indian novelist Salman Rushdie. Rushdie, who had
lived under the threat of religious assassination since Ayatollah Ruhollah
Khomeini had issued a *fatwa* against him in 1989, was elected as the
organization’s first president.²

The choice of the term “parliament” to name the new group seems to
have been intended, at least on one level, as an ironic counterpoint to the
European Parliament in Brussels. For the IPW, as Salmon observes, “has no
power, no assembly hall, no registrar,” and, at least to begin with, “no great
financial resources.”³ In its efforts “to invent new ways for writers to inter-
vene in public,”⁴ however, this collective has been energetic and effective. If
its strength lies in its members’ combined “symbolic capital,”—itself
derived from their demonstrated capacity to produce discourse that hits the