After Derrida. Literature, theory and criticism in the 21st century

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After Derrida, a volume of essays brought together by Jean-Michel Rabaté, takes stock of Jacques Derrida's continuing presence in the humanities today. Neither work of homage, nor of historicising contextualisation, nor an introduction to the philosopher's *oeuvre*, nor a critical assessment of one its aspects, the volume stands resolutely on the platform of the present. Hence its Janus-face perspective: the *after* in the title indicates both the leaving behind *and* the pursuit of an object imagined as still ahead. Indeed, each essay might be read as testing the two extreme hypotheses Derrida himself sketched out concerning the future of his work in the last interview he gave before his death in 2004:

> on the one hand, to put it immodestly and with a smile, [I feel] that I haven't yet begun to be read, that though there are certainly many very good readers (a few dozen across the globe, perhaps), when it comes down to it, it's only later that all of that will have a chance of appearing; but on the other hand, and just as strongly, I feel that a fortnight or a month after my death, nothing will remain. Except the works archived in legal deposit libraries. I swear to you, I believe sincerely and simultaneously in both these hypotheses.[1]

Determining the vitality of Derrida's heritage fourteen years later necessarily begins with identifying where he is being read, by whom, and how. That this volume of essays be published in English and that the vast majority of the contributors be scholars of literature says much about the places in which his presence continues to be felt — and where it doesn't: not so much in departments of philosophy, and not so much in France. Derrida's legacy thereby follows the trajectory that was his own during his lifetime: one of national, disciplinary and linguistic erring and of insecure addresses, each displacement bringing with it the risk of immeasurable losses as well as the promise of unforeseeable after-lives.

For if Derrida has taught us anything, it is that presence can only be spectral, and that this spectrality is nowhere more obvious than in the textual medium. To read and to write is to commerce with, and as, phantoms; it is to occupy a fractured present moment, inhabited by the past and the future simultaneously. A concern for the ethical responsibility this places on the reader unites the essays in this volume, as Elizabeth Weber's article outlines particularly clearly: doing justice to phantoms means attending not only to the singularity of the absent writer's address — Derrida's, in this case — but also to the differences that structure the historical, social, political, linguistic and technological conditions of its reception. Only when such differences have been accounted for, Derek Attridge argues, might one assure a text's iterability, that is, its legibility in the present. This concern for legibility is another most welcome feature these essays share.

They all attempt, albeit with varying degrees of success, to eschew the jargon that too often characterises work produced 'after' Derrida, when the temptation of imitation leads to the suppression of the coordinates one's own position in an illusion of fusion, giving rise to pale copies that, at best, add little or nothing and, at worst, do the model a disservice.

Rendering Derrida legible is also the condition for his thought's political potency to be realised. The emphasis contemporary readers place on the political effects of Derrida's work is felt throughout the volume. Ginette Michaud charts the divergent reactions of feminists on both sides of the Atlantic to Derrida's definition of deconstruction in terms of *jouissance*; Jane Goldman's article assesses his contribution to animal rights theory; and Andrea Hurst concludes that the rejection of mastery is the ethical stance deconstruction shares with psychoanalysis. Concern for power differentials are also foregrounded in Vassiliki Kolocotroni's patient exploration of economies of debt, both philosophical and financial in nature, in her contrastive study of the relationship Heidegger and Derrida establish with Greece and its past, and are also highlighted in Jen Hui Bon Hoa's limpid presentation of the stakes of literary canon-making and breaking in comparative literature.

The fields covered by the aforementioned articles give an idea of the volume's range. After an editor's introduction, which includes a comprehensive overview of the critical studies on Derrida's work that have flourished over the last two decades, the essays are organised into three sections. The first, 'Frames', sets Derrida in relation to feminism, Heidegger, Freud, Lacan and De Man. Martin MacQuillan's use of Mark Tansley's paintings as a prism for viewing the Derrida-De Man debate shifts the focus to aesthetics, which becomes central to the second section, 'Focus', where Derrida's practice of literature takes centre stage. This section closes with another transitional article in which Laurent Milesi seeks to uncover covert convergences between Derrida's thought and Alain Badiou's concept of the event. The third section, 'Futures', examines fields of enquiry where Derrida's has been a trailblazer: animal studies, subaltern literary studies, literature and the law, and finally what Maurizio Ferraris calls 'documediality', the study of contemporary technological constructions of humanity. Though one might regret that there is no essay dedicated to Derrida's decisive early engagements with phenomenology, linguistics or structuralism, or that the issue of sovereignty, which determined much of his later work, is only mentioned tangentially, these are minor critiques, especially as a large number of existing studies focus on these questions.

Unsurprisingly, given the disciplinary background of the contributors, the strongest essays are those that directly address the status of literature and the role of the literary critic. Derek Attridge gets the ball rolling by distinguishing Derrida's deconstruction of philosophical texts from his approach to literature, which, Attridge claims, Derrida does *not* seek to deconstruct. This proposition may seem surprising when applied to a thinker who was vigilant about the way the structure of the sign and the inevitably metaphorical nature of language *prevent* the establishment of any clear distinction between literary and philosophical texts, undercutting attempts to essentialize either domain. But when the

term 'philosophical' in Derrida's discourse is aligned with the 'metaphysical,' then the realm of the literary is expanded and such a distinction does indeed become operative. This also helps clarify Derrida's critique of 'philosophical' literary criticism, that is, criticism that tends towards univocal interpretation of texts. The epistemological potential of literature, Derrida argues, lies elsewhere: what characterises a literary text is its capacity to condense many meanings into equivocal signs which, in turn, allow meanings to proliferate.[2] Literature's epistemological claim is therefore more limited than that of metaphysics, which pursues unequivocal truths that might be expressed in univocal signs. But precisely because its claim is lesser, its generative potential is greater.

Derrida's practice of literary critique, as represented by the essays in this volume, avoids three common excesses: the reification of 'theory' into a category that thinks *on* rather than *through* texts (a practice with which Derrida's name has, unfortunately, too often been associated); the reification of the literary work into a discrete object to be held at a safe distance and subjected to positivist analysis, treated as dissectible and entirely knowable; and, finally, the reification of the reader into an authoritative subject whose response is invariably valid, a position which runs the risk of levelling out criticism and losing sight of a text's specificity. Against these, Derrida's lesson is that, to account for literature, one must be attentive both to the unique nature of a text, which requires analytical rigor and subjective dispossession, *and* to the generative potential of one's own reading position, for the partiality of that position allows the reader to inaugurate the text anew in his or her singular critical reprisal. In other words, criticism can only be productive when it is simultaneously faithful and inventive. Such an attitude towards literary studies, which is also congruent with the flourishing field of 'creative criticism', in the vein of Pierre Bayard amongst others, is present in Derrida's earliest writings on literary criticism. His 1967 essay 'Structure sign and play', a critical account of Jean Rousset's structuralism, both argues for and enacts such an approach to the texts of others.

This emphasis on literary texts' incompletion offsets what might otherwise appear as a 'non-transitive' vision of the literary[3] that also emerges in Derek Attridge and Joshua Schuster's contributions. Indeed, both critics highlight the fact that for Derrida, the literary begins when language interrogates its status *as such*. That is, a text becomes literary when it establishes an undecidable relationship to its referent. Such a definition draws into the literary fold many texts usually excluded from it. However, in identifying literature with writing whose relationship to reality is tenuous, the risk run is that literature may be seen as an independent, transcendent sphere, to which an essence may be ascribed. This is precisely what Yue Zhou's essay's conclusion does, serving, in the context of this collection, as an example of — or a warning against — what can happen when Derrida's literary critique is isolated from his deconstruction of essentialisms and his attack on metaphysics.

By contrast, Joshua Shuster's essay counters any attempt to section off the 'literary' into an autonomous realm by examining what Derrida describes as the precarious nature of the literary address. A literary text's life depends on it encountering readers willing to accept the work of deciphering its singularity,

an encounter which also implies potential profound alteration of the reader. Reading, just like writing, might then create 'a permanent revolution'[4]: simultaneously a new event *and* a durational experience, at once unique *and* occurring within in a repetitive cycle. The practice of literary criticism, it follows, is where new futures might be imagined. Yet if revolution is a potential horizon for reading, it is a revolution which contains its own elegy within its spectral structures.

As they teeter on the brink of a definition of the literary and suggest that criticism might project alternative futures, the essays dedicated to Derrida's consideration of literature discreetly but surely testify to the continuing attraction the Romantic conception of literary autonomy exercises in Derrida's thought, in which the potential for a text to produce profound effects beyond itself lies, as in Friedrich Schlegel's *Atheneum*, in the amplifying refractions of the critic's mirror. This conception of literature proves oddly persistent, in spite of Derrida's own dismantling of such ideals in his *oeuvre* more generally. It lives on as ghost, of course, and on the mode of impossibility, but it lives on nonetheless. In other words, there is still much that cleaves within the deconstructive cleft.

Notes

1. Interview with Jean Birnbaum, published in *Le Monde,* August 19, 2004. My translation, my italics.
2. This, of course, is his argument in *Uylsse Grammophone* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), in which he contrasts philosophical (metaphysical) and literary approaches to the linguistic sign, using Husserl as an example of the former, and Joyce as an example of the latter.
3. This term is used by Dominique Viart to distinguish literature and critique of the mid-twentieth century from the contemporary. See Dominique Viart et Burno Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent,* Paris: Bordas, 2005.
4. Derrida writes '*une révolution interminable*' (interminable revolution). In translating this expression as "a permanent revolution", Pascal-Anne Brault and Michael Naas introduce a clear nod to Trotsky, which might not be so far off the mark. See Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: the last interview*, New York: Palgrave, 2007, 31.

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