

BLOOMSBURY STUDIES IN CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

Deconstruction without Derrida

Martin McQuillan

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Introduction: Other Deconstructions

Il faut l'avenir

This collection of essays all involve in one way or another deconstruction without Derrida. Notably each of the chapters revolves around reading a philosopher, theorist or literary critic associated with deconstruction other than Derrida: Jean-Luc Nancy, Paul de Man, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler. They also address those to whom deconstruction might have something to say: Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek. However, it would be foolish to persist too long with any determination to deconstruct without Derrida because all of these readings remain close to the text of Derrida and more often than not explicitly pass through writing by Derrida, be it on touch, or the death penalty or Derrida's own account of these other 'deconstructors'. Perhaps we might say that the 'without' of the title of this book points to a curious relation that deconstruction must always have, and has always had, with Derrida: a belonging that cannot be a possession. To deconstruct is always to be both with and without Derrida. One could never claim the name of deconstruction outside of an affiliation to Derrida. Equally, this thing called 'deconstruction', if there is any and it is one (as Derrida might have said), is not reducible to Derrida and must always be 'done' without him, in his complicated absence, as it were. The 'without' here points to the doubleness of a reading practice that takes us inside the text of Derrida and simultaneously forces us to travel alongside it in an extraneous manner. The 'out' of our 'with(out)' must do the same sort of work that the 'hors' does in a text such as 'Outwork' [*Hors Livre: Hors D'oeuvre*] that opens *Dissemination*, or, in the '*hors-texte*' of the *Grammatology* that enters into English as 'there is nothing outside the text' but which would be better translated as 'there is nothing text-free'. There is no deconstruction that takes the name of deconstruction seriously, which would be Derrida-free even if it were, unlike the chapters of this book, entirely devoid of reference to Derrida. Deconstruction as a term will always tie us to the history and fate of the proper name and to the future of the expanded text that is structured around it. Deconstruction without Derrida

would be as much an oxymoron and a challenge as, say, psychoanalysis without Freud, or Critique without Kant. In decisively structural terms there will be no deconstruction without Derrida.

This much is obvious to anyone who has spent any time familiarizing themselves with the sorts of arguments that Derrida himself makes with respect to the proper name or the history of philosophy. However, when this book is published, it will have been 8 years since the untimely death of Jacques Derrida in 2004. Since that time there has been nothing but deconstruction with Derrida. When one surveys the theoretical landscape of 2012 and examines the state of philosophy or the Humanities across the global academy, one might well ask the question: what has deconstruction been doing during this time? This is a difficult question to answer because we must first acknowledge that 'deconstruction' is not a method or a school to be identified in this way. However, let us not be too ornate in such a dematerialization of deconstruction. As in the title of this book, 'deconstruction' has always carried the double meaning of those institutional readers of Derrida who meet and speak around the proper name. My question is then, what have those readers and friends of Derrida been doing since 2004? The answer might involve at least a couple of strands. First, there is the publishing history of deconstruction since 2004 in which the death of Derrida was followed by a series of memorial texts that either attempted a personal estimation of a well-known relation to Derrida or an immediate measurement of the Derridean philosophical legacy. In this sense, the corpus of Derrida's writing has given us much to think about in relation to mourning and legacies and these books all remain close to the text of Derrida as a prime instance of the work of the 'without'. Subsequent to this outpouring of *thanto*-confessional writing on the part of Derrida's friends, there has been the necessary organization of the archival inheritance. Derrida's literary executors, his family, Éditions de Galilée and Chicago University Press have arranged for the editing, publication and translation of Derrida's written seminar, some 14,000 pages over more than 40 years of teaching. To date, 2 volumes on 'The Beast and the Sovereign' have appeared, with volumes on 'The Death Penalty' and 'Perjury and Pardon' to follow. The aim is to produce a continuous, annual flow of publications by Derrida in French and English for decades to come.

Such work is of course both inevitable and necessary; it will sustain a community and enlighten the published text of Derrida in ways that will be surprising and invigorating. It is a project in the truest sense of that term, one whose protocols and published outcomes are set in advance and await their inexorable and inevitable conclusion. I will probably be long gone by the time

the final volume appears in whatever form passes for print by that time. However, the second possible answer to the question relates to the institutional space of deconstruction. In this respect, the picture for deconstruction is far less rosy. I would venture to say, that it has been with remarkable speed that deconstruction as a topic has fallen off the theoretical agenda for the wider readership that sits outside the immediate affiliations of deconstruction. This is not to say for one moment that deconstruction has nothing to say to the present concerns of Theory and Modern-European/Continental philosophy, on the contrary almost without exception the interests of Theory and philosophy today are derived (mostly unacknowledged and in a more often than not misunderstood way) from the text of later Derrida (the animal, sovereignty or political theology would be good examples here but there are many others). Rather, what has happened is that others have moved quickly to fill the gap of pre-eminence left by the death of Derrida and the waters have quickly closed over the head of deconstruction with only a few ripples of dissent. This is partly due to the ludicrous mediatic models of celebrity that inform both publishing and academic culture. One effect of the death of Derrida has been to see academic publishers seek the next big thing to come out of Paris. Seemingly unaware that the Parisian intellectual scene is not quite the powerhouse it once was, this search has resulted in the uncritical promotion of not the hottest news from Paris but the last surviving Frenchmen connected to the *soixante-huitards*, much in the manner that the Irish Republic used to choose its Presidents on the basis of the last man alive still to have a connection to the Easter Rising. Perhaps, it is time for the likes of Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière to have a proper reception in the Anglophone world but their work is hardly new and there are good intellectual reasons why they have been at the back of the queue for translation and reception. Other figures more obviously sympathetic to deconstruction such as my colleagues Etienne Balibar and François Laruelle also fall into this category. However, these four named individuals have a combined age of 292. Is this really the most avant-garde work that Paris has to offer today? Others who have made careers out of unacknowledged borrowing from and futile polemics with Derrida, such as Giorgio Agamben and Slavoj Žižek, have also been promoted in the running for the title of world's most publishable thinker. At the same time currents and eddies of this 'new thinking' have come to dominate the scene, powered by the dissemination and desterrance of the Internet, some of which looks worthwhile (the work of Quentin Meillassoux and Peter Hallward for instance), some of which would seem to be best left to the bloggers (so-called Speculative Realism would be a case in point).

Now, deconstruction and the deconstructors cannot be held responsible for the vagaries of the publishing industry or the eccentricities of others' thinking, but one thing is reasonably clear in all of this, at least on my side of the Atlantic: that deconstruction itself and the text of Derrida in particular has been quickly relegated to a side show in the carnival of Theory today. This might not be a concern in itself, one should never mistake the noise of mediatic spaces for the work that is really going on in our universities, nothing fades faster than fashion and celebrity. However, the very real risk for deconstruction here is that few beyond 'the Family' are reading Derrida and if deconstruction has no readers, it has no future. Accordingly, I would go further than this to say that the difficult position in which deconstruction finds itself today is a result of it having no recognizable institutional home. Without such a home, how will the graduate students of today and their students tomorrow find their way to and properly understand the text of Derrida? This will need a little unpacking.

It would be too easy a formulation to say that it is thoroughly appropriate that deconstruction has no home; it is after all the initiator of dissemination and the undoer of logics of inside and outside. Derrida, like Groucho Marx, will have warned against wanting to belong to the club willing to have him as a member. However, the history of deconstruction is not only a history of well-established institutional homes, but one in which these homes have been in the most canonical and elite of institutions. The Yale School may not have been a school but it certainly was at Yale, where individuals with considerable institutional clout such as Paul de Man and Hillis Miller, also latterly at University of California, Irvine (UCI), gave shelter to deconstruction and to Derrida, who was only ever a 'visitor' there, from the considerably less hospitable rue d'Ulm. Deconstruction in America did not thrive in spite of Yale, it thrived because of Yale. Perhaps out of deference to a deconstructive idea of the proper, deconstruction has been far too quick to give up the need for institutional structures that would support it through the difficult times of retrenchment and repurposing in the Humanities. If anyone doubts this, they need look no further than the place Theory plays in the departments of French and Comparative Literature at Yale where the legacy of their most significant faculty is now all but entirely absent. Despite the generation of extraordinary graduate students produced at Yale by de Man, Derrida and Miller, it is now as if deconstruction had never happened there. Certainly, it is beginning to look like a small aberrational moment in a much longer history of traditional and complacent humanism. With the evisceration of the University of California by policy makers of every colour, UCI no longer has the appearance of a safe birth for any established scholar or discipline, let alone something as institutionally

challenging as deconstruction. In 2011, UCI closed its French department where Derrida had held his joint appointment. If the Grande Écoles were ever sympathetic to Derrida they now have their own problems to contend with as Anglofied market reform sweeps its way through the fifth arrondissement. The recognized centres for Theory in the United Kingdom, such as Cardiff and Sussex, have long since succumbed to the mainstream of literary history and criticism, partly ruined by a culture of research audit, partly emaciated by their own inability to appoint faculty members outside of their existing graduate cohort: as if they had learned nothing of the hybrid nature of cultural production or the autoimmunity of the institution. Philosophy departments everywhere are in the frontline of instrumentalist budget cuts in western universities, there now remains only four recognizably 'continental' departments in the United Kingdom, at least three of which are not in the rudest of health. While Derrida would be the first to say of institutional belonging 'don't count me in', he did speak frequently enough of the need to provide properly philosophical spaces for the teaching of philosophy in order that the discipline might have a future *as a discipline* within the academy. His own sometime homes at the Collège International de Philosophie and the Centre d'Études Féminines now, as in truth they always have, face a future as uncertain as a UK philosophy department. The risks of all this to deconstruction are obvious and will require some swift and inventive remedial work if we are to continue producing readers of Derrida for tomorrow.

However, I do not think that the situation with regard to graduate student readers of Derrida is necessarily as bleak as this scenario would lead us to suppose. On a fairly regular basis the less regular Derrida conferences that exist are able to field a couple of hundred participants, mostly graduate students who have come to the text of Derrida through a variety of disciplinary routes and experiences (e.g. art schools, so-called practice-based research, and the wider theoretical Humanities). The problem is that in my experience this generation of readers of Derrida are mostly ill-equipped to deal with the demands that the text of Derrida places upon them. They either lack the necessary training to read Derrida or lack access to the programmes that would give them that training. This is partly due to the diffuse, diasporic nature of Theory across the Humanities but also due to the fact that these programmes and this training increasingly no longer exist. The risk for deconstruction in this is that it's only means of sustenance is to live on in the embrace of a Cultural Studies or Media Studies that may widen the horizons of deconstruction but which lacks the philosophical rigour to maintain it as an intellectual force within the academy.

There will be those at this point who may think that for political, even ideological, reasons I just have a bee in my bonnet about 'Elite institutions'. The opposite is true, I am all for elite institutions, academia is by definition an enterprise based upon selection. However, the point is that the elite institutions are not elite enough; as in the case of Yale, above, they have replaced an intellectual exploration at the frontiers of the humanities with the promotion of the dead hand of mainstream scholarship, for reasons that are themselves entirely ideological and political. Perhaps, we live in an epoch of the transition of authority and we should no longer look to these so-called elite institutions to nurture critical thought but deconstruction and philosophy more generally should never give up on the need to have viable and properly supportive spaces in which the most rigorous, imaginative and challenging of thinking and its transmission can take place.

Nor is it the case that our elite institutions are no longer attracting graduate students in the humanities. They are, it is just that the theoretical agenda as discussed in these institutions has drifted away from deconstruction. It is also the case that there remains plenty of affiliates of deconstruction with berths in elite institutions. If deconstruction is to reclaim the ground it has lost in the graduate imaginary since the death of Derrida then it will have to engage with and challenge that agenda. This is not some lame call to arms that deconstruction should be more political. I have written about that and demonstrated the political content of deconstruction many times before. Rather, while the work of the archive, translation and commentary on Derrida is essential, deconstruction must also look outside of itself in a more concerted and perceptive way. It needs to address the issues and thinkers of the present theoretical scene in order to challenge them, if needs be correct them (something deconstruction does quite well), occasionally where necessary and appropriate to agree with them (something deconstruction does not do well), and to demonstrate an alternative to the ever-hastening foreclosures of thought that they may represent. This is a risk that no one in deconstruction seems willing to take at this moment. I could point to several dozen books on the Derridean legacy and several on the need to return to literature or to Kant or to phenomenology and so on. Nowhere do I see the book from an authoritative voice in deconstruction that responds to Badiou, Agamben, Žižek and so on. Without a concerted effort to rise to this challenge, deconstruction runs the risk of watching itself become increasingly irrelevant in the thought lives of today's graduate students while simultaneously vacating the scene to a violent mode of thinking that Derrida himself would have recognized well as yet another foreclosure in metaphysics

and which in its own way is just another example of the resistance to Theory and to the reading of texts.

Deconstruction without Derrida is a much more scary prospect than sitting in the seminar listening to Derrida's latest philosophical account. It is however a necessary stage in the process of mourning, one that would be adequate to the memory of the philosophical enterprise that coalesces around the proper name Derrida. *Il faut l'avenir* as Derrida would have put it. This future for deconstruction will be complex and diverse drawing together multiple and perhaps parallel strands of inquiry, which nevertheless pass through the text of Derrida and each other. However, it must respond in an open and unprogrammed way to what has arrived in the form of an immediate future for philosophy and Theory after Derrida in order to shape a tomorrow in which deconstruction remains of relevance to readers and students with their own concerns and agendas.

What follows in the second half of this introduction is a reading of the one deconstructive book that arguably in recent years has simultaneously managed to have a significant impact on a general theoretical audience and has also won plaudits from within deconstruction for its rigorous treatment of Derrida, Martin Hägglund's *Derrida Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life*.¹ The success of Hägglund's book surely owes much to its difference in tone from the assembled thanto-confessional writing on Derrida. My concern with Hägglund is less his polemic against the uses and abuses of Derrida in US Divinity Schools as the fact that to my mind his reading of autoimmunity only tells half the story and this has consequences when he pushes that argument through into a consideration of politics. This is something that in the context of my comments above ought to be attended to. Despite the rigorous attention that Hägglund pays to the text of Derrida, he is less effective in mobilizing his reading towards the concerns of the present that have a massive legibility in the work of those contemporary thinkers to whom, I have suggested, deconstruction will need to respond. In a telling comment towards the end of the volume he writes of the possible justification for a commitment to democracy, 'to look for such justification in Derrida's work is to misunderstand the level on which his analyses operates' (171). Again this is only half the story, when one thinks of militant texts such as *Spectres of Marx* or *Papier Machine*, which explicitly take on immediate political problems (their immediacy does not negate their mediated condition). At this stage of the game, a gesture such as the one we find here in *Radical Atheism* seems to me to be symptomatic (both precious and complacent), at once immunizing the text of Derrida from criticism and absolving the author from the need to move beyond a certain Derridean gambit

(only one of many Derrida offers across a range of diverse texts and occasions). If deconstruction is to avoid the trap of an extended work of mourning that has seen it frozen in time as a productive force in the Humanities, it will have to move beyond this comfort zone: not to 'provide answers', no philosophy ever does, but at least to engage with the present terms of the debate. At the moment deconstruction is not even in the room taking part in the conversation. In contrast to a more lyrical idiom of deconstruction, Häggglund has been heralded for attempting to take the next step but to my mind he does not go far enough in staking out a critically alert deconstruction that will be of relevance to readers today and tomorrow.

The desire of Martin Häggglund

Je passe à juste titre pour athee

Derrida, 'Circonfession'

Martin Häggglund's 'radical atheism' arises out of an understanding of the trope of autoimmunity in the late texts of Derrida. If I may be forgiven for offering a synopsis, the argument runs something as follows. Traditional atheism limits itself to denying the existence of God and consequently of eschewing immortality without questioning the supposed desire for God and immortality. Accordingly, says Häggglund, this traditional atheism still thinks of mortal being as a lack that we desire to transcend. A 'radical atheism' on the other hand understands that with mortality comes the experience of temporal finitude, which initiates both the desire to live on, or, the desire for mortal survival as Häggglund puts it, as well as the ruin of the possibility of immortality. Without death there would be no desire for survival, with death comes the transformation of everything that is desirable (all that is incorruptible and inviolable is ruined by the corruptible and violable from within). In this sense, 'radical atheism' as a variant of autoimmunity might be summed up as: be careful what you wish for. Once we understand this aspect of Derrida's thought Häggglund argues, then it will be appreciated 'how the source of precious happiness always has to become the source of radical loss' (161). Thus driven by a desire for mortal survival as an experience of finite time, the radical atheist will not merely denounce the absolute immunity of salvation and immortality promised by religion but will question that desire for immunity as the location of a contradiction that can allow the religious idea of salvation to be read against itself as infinitely divided and corruptible. If 'only

finite existence can be threatened by death' (197), to wish for immortality is to desire an absolute death of non-mortality. Therefore God and immortality are not only impossible they are also undesirable. Häggglund makes this point repeatedly over some 200 pages, in which he takes on the mantle of Oolon Colluphid the fictional bestselling author of 'Well That About Wraps It Up for God' in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (written by that other initiator of the phrase 'radical atheism' Douglas Adams). Häggglund sees this autoimmune logic at play in much of Derrida from the promise that is always breached by perjury to justice that is always ruined by the law and so on (autoimmunity being a trope that begins to appear in Derrida after *Spectres of Marx* as another term in the chain of non-equivalent substitutions that begins with *différance*, writing, and the supplement).

Superficially Häggglund's argument has a certain appeal. He is convincing in his retort to John Caputo, Kevin Hart and Richard Kearney over their theological appropriation of Derrida (one that Derrida himself was not innocent of encouraging, as anyone would, wishing to cultivate a new audience for his work as the high water of deconstruction in literature departments began to recede). However, much time could have been saved with a return to the 1968 'Différance' essay in which Derrida states '*différance* is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological – ontotheological – reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology – philosophy – produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return'.² I have much to say about Jean-Luc Nancy and atheism in chapter three of this book so I shall not offer an extended commentary on that here.

However, I have concerns about Häggglund's reading of Derrida almost exclusively through the figure of autoimmunity, which he works into a form of unpredictable violence, which while half correct is not quite the deconstruction that I would wish to affirm. My first question to Martin Häggglund would be: are you sure? There is a tone of irrepressible certainty that dominates the book, one that is quite at odds with the topic under discussion. At the 'Other Testaments' conference in Toronto in 2002 during a roundtable Derrida was asked to gloss his comment in 'Circonfession', 'I rightly pass for an atheist' [*'Je passe à juste titre pour athee'*], did this imply (the questioner wondered) that there was some doubt about the matter? Derrida responds that all true believers must run the risk of being 'radical atheists'.³ Belief in God, he says, must go through all sorts of atheistic steps (such as the critique of idolatry) in order to go so far as possible in the direction of atheism as a test of belief in God. Without such exacting